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Eve: A Woman Much Maligned

(Genesis 2.4b-4.2a; 4.25)

The Garden of Eden has a terrible litter problem. It is knee deep in our prejudices and preconceptions. No patch of ground is more thoroughly spoiled than that on which Eve walks, and the purpose of this chapter will be to do some clearing up. It will not be as easy as it sounds, for no biblical story has been more mistranslated, more misinterpreted than this one. The mistranslations and misinterpretations have been around a very long time, and have taken deep root in our minds. No biblical character has been more misunderstood or more maligned than the woman of the Garden, the woman who comes at the end of the story to be called Eve. Her story, the little story of a strange Garden where she is made and a man is formed also, where she enters into dialogue with a snake, where God performs marvellous acts of creation and walks in the cool of the day, is one of the most subtle and compelling in the Bible, indeed in all literature. It has had a most powerful effect on people's imaginations, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, and even in these days, when the Church itself neglects the Old Testament so, it is still doing its work, or rather the mistranslations and misinterpretations are still wreaking their havoc. Still the lies that have been told about the woman of the Garden get the better of us, and trap us with their smooth talk as the snake traps her, whispering to us that women are somehow inferior to men, made to be subservient to them, and worse, are dangerous, needing to be kept under men's control. For these reasons alone it is imperative that we look at this story again, and with fresh eyes.

We will have to make a conscious attempt to read the text as if

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we were reading it for the first time. We will need to recover our sense of surprise, and be prepared to abandon things we thought we knew. We will have to look very hard at the words in front of us, or rather, at points, at the words that are *not* in front of us in our versions, but would be if only the original Hebrew were translated correctly. We will have to peer at them harder, perhaps, than we have ever done before, to see what they say and what they do not say. We will have to make a supreme effort to forget what has been done with the story so often in the past, and to put out of our minds the lies that have been told and are still told about the woman. If we do not succeed in doing that, then she is already judged and condemned before we start.

The task will be a difficult one, but at least we are not the first ones to attempt it. In recent years there have been a number of detailed studies of the story of the Garden which have shed bright light upon it, and done much to strip away the layers of misconceptions and restore the woman to the colours in which she was originally painted.¹ We will be paying close heed to those and making much use of them. They will prove invaluable.

In our exploration of the story, and of the few verses that concern Eve in Genesis 4, we will have five main episodes to consider: the introduction to her creation, the act of creation itself, her being trapped by the snake into eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, the judgement of God upon her, and what she does and what happens to her outside and beyond the Garden. We will at first simply call her 'the woman', for she does not receive her name 'Eve' until near the end of the story. Similarly, the man will remain 'the man', for while he is called '*adam*' at the start, it is not clear that the word is being used as a proper name, so we cannot call him Adam until Genesis 4.25.

As we proceed we will reach certain conclusions about the woman (and, of course, about the man). Normally we would not think of anticipating those at this point, but because misconceptions about this particular story are so deep rooted, there is a need for us to do some weeding before we start; we need to shift some of the stinking litter, and clear the air a little, so that when we enter the Garden we can breathe.

So let us now declare a few of the things we will *not* find in the story: the woman's creation will *not* mark her out as inferior to the man; she will *not* be created out of so small and insignificant a thing as one of the man's ribs; in her dialogue with the snake she will *not* emerge as a wicked temptress or dangerous seductress; she will *not* be portrayed as guilty of covetousness, greed or hubris; in

eating the fruit of the forbidden tree she will *not* be attempting to become like God or to usurp his power; she will *not* be condemned as the root of all our troubles, and though she will be guilty of disobedience, the man beside her will be no less guilty than she, and possibly more so; God's judgement upon her will *not* place her in a subservient position to the man, indeed will not speak of subservience at all; she will *not* be cursed, and the damaging description of a woman's period as her 'curse' will find no foundation here – the story will make no reference to the menstrual cycle at all; the expulsion from the Garden will *not* be the end of her story, any more than it will be the end of the man's, and there will be some joy to be found for her outside its bounds, short-lived though that will be.

At points we *will* discover a male bias to the story. It is plain even at its very start that it was written by a man, and things are frequently handled from a clear male perspective. In places this results in what we would now regard as a lack of balance, a certain narrowness of vision, a way of writing that we now cannot help finding unsatisfactory. But such bias, almost certainly unconscious on the part of the storyteller, is a world away from the attempts made by some of the story's translators and interpreters to belittle, malign or condemn the woman. Of that there is nothing in the text as it was written. Instead, it makes room for the celebration of woman, for sensitive and poignant comment upon her trials and tribulations, for the dreaming of dreams on her part, and even, though it preaches it so quietly, for revolution.

Prelude

(Gen. 2.4b–20)

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no shrub of the field was yet in the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up – for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to work the ground – . . . then the Lord God shaped the man from the dust of the ground . . . (Gen. 2.4b–7a)

That is how the story of the Garden starts. We begin not with the dark mass of water of the beginning of Genesis 1, but with a barren desert – and if that desert is to be transformed, then two things are necessary: rain, and someone to till the soil.

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There are two reasons why we should think of that 'someone' as male, one inside the text, one outside it. From the way we have translated the passage, there would seem to be no question about it, but in fact the Hebrew is ambiguous. The word we have translated 'man' is 'adam', and there is a play on words in the original text, for this 'adam' is made from the 'adamah, or ground, and there is some justification for Phyllis Tribble's translation, 'earth creature',² or for Carol Meyers' 'earthling', or her playful suggestion of a 'human' made from clods of the 'humus',³ or for Mary Korsak's 'groundling'.⁴ When Genesis first describes the creation of human beings it does so with the words: 'And God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness . . ."' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created it, male and female he created them' (1.26a, 27). There the word for 'humankind' is again 'adam', and quite clearly it does not just mean the male of the species, for the verses end by revealing that the term covers the female also. It can be argued that what Genesis 1 is speaking of is the creation of a single creature, a man-and-woman, and that that is what we have in the Garden story until half-way through, when it is separated into man and woman.⁵ Phyllis Tribble is careful to point out that the Hebrew term 'ish, which means quite definitely man the male, is not employed until 2.23, after the woman has herself emerged.⁶ It is also true to say that we cannot logically talk of 'male' unless there is also 'female', just as we could have no concept of good without evil.

Nevertheless, in 2.25 and from 3.8 to the end of the story the word 'adam' is used to refer unambiguously to the man of the story, and that makes us suspect it is being used with the same meaning earlier in chapter 2, whatever the demands of our logic might be. Our suspicions are only encouraged by evidence from outside the text. In her book *Discovering Eve* Carol Meyers discusses at length the roles that men and women would have played in the households and village communities of early Israel. She argues that the tasks of working, clearing, terracing and ploughing the land were probably performed by men.⁷ So it seems plain that the desert of Genesis 2.5 is desert because of a lack of rain and the absence of male farmers to work the land. At once we are looking at things from a man's (and a farmer's) vantage point. We will have to remember that as we explore what is said about the woman.

But we do not reach the woman quite yet. After the coming of the rains and the remarkable creation of the man, we go straight from the desert to a garden. We might expect the man to have a lot of hard work to do clearing and terracing and ploughing and

sowing, but no. God does the planting, creates a most wonderful Garden all by himself, and puts the man there. All that man has to do is keep the Garden in good order. If he is hungry, he can pick and eat the fruit from all the beautiful trees; when he gets thirsty, he can fetch as much water as he likes from the continuous and huge supply provided by the rivers that flow through the place and go out of it to water the earth. It is an early Israelite farmer's dream! No wonder the verse which speaks of God 'setting' the man in the Garden (2.15) uses a Hebrew verb whose usual meaning is 'rest' or 'take it easy'!

But the man's happiness is not yet complete. He is lonely, and does not have anyone to help him. So God creates the animals and the birds, and brings them to the man to see if they will do. They do not. He identifies them all, but as he searches for 'a helper to match him' (2.18) he finds none.

It is important for us to linger on that phrase 'a helper to match him'⁸ for a moment, partly because scholars have disagreed over its translation, and partly because it supplies the reason in the story for the woman's creation.

Phyllis Tribble argues that the word for 'helper' would be better translated 'companion'.⁹ 'Helper', she says, too easily suggests to us a position of inferiority and subservience, whereas the Hebrew word behind the second part of the phrase, the one translated 'to match him', implies that the creature God is looking for will be on a par with the man, his counterpart not his lackey, his colleague rather than an under-gardener who just deals with the rubbish and spreads the manure. She has a point, and a strong one, and we certainly need to remember that the Hebrew term for 'helper' is itself often used in the Old Testament to describe one as exalted as God himself, and almost always refers to one stronger than the one who needs the help.¹⁰ Nevertheless, as David Clines reminds us, you cannot get away from the fact that the woman is created to help the man, to help him in *his* work.¹¹

In the end both Tribble and Clines are right. The woman is created to fulfil the man's needs. That is made clear not only by the term 'helper', but by the fact that God brings her to the man, in the same way he brought the animals, to see if he thinks she will do. Again it is clear that the story is written from a man's point of view. Clines is correct. But if we jump to the conclusion that as his helper the woman will be the man's chattel, there to minister to his every whim, then we are quite wrong. The passage is not as finely balanced as we would like it to be, and the notion of the woman being created because of the man's need is for us

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disconcerting, to say the least. But the man is here given no licence to dominate or oppress. Tribble is right, and it is not just the Hebrew word behind 'helper', or the rest of the phrase, 'to match him', that proves her to be so. The evidence of the verses that describe the woman's creation is on her side.

The woman's creation

(Gen. 2.21-5)

The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept. Then he took one of his sides and closed up the flesh in its place. And the Lord God built the side he had taken from the man into a woman, and he brought her to the man. (2.21-2)

First, we notice that the storyteller spends just as much time describing the woman's creation as he did the man's in 2.7. That verse was sixteen words long in the Hebrew. If we regard the creation of the woman as beginning in 2.21b, with the words 'then he took one of his sides', and ending in verse 22 with 'he built . . . into a woman', then again we have sixteen Hebrew words. The writer has counted his words and been careful to match the lengths of his two descriptions exactly.

Second, the act of creation is just as intimate and delicate an operation (an apt word to use when it includes a neat piece of surgery on God's part!) as was the man's, and involves considerable effort. In the first one God takes clay, moulds it into the man's body, and then gives him the kiss of life. Now, in the case of the woman, he removes one of the man's sides, sews up the wound, then 'builds' what he has taken into a woman.¹² The woman's creation is even more mysterious than her partner's, but it brings her into just as close contact with the Creator. Both she and the man find their being and their life as a result of God's intimacy, and through his very remarkable manual skill. Something of supreme significance is being said about the value of the human couple, and the features of this passage which suggest that the woman's worth is the same as the man's outweigh the male bias, and almost lead us to forget it is there.¹³

It helps, of course, to have abandoned the usual translation of the woman being created out of the man's rib. The storyteller does not employ an anatomical term. In fact, this is the only place in

the Old Testament where the word is applied to a part of the human body. But it is frequently used of the sides of the temple, or the sides of the ark, or the sides of the tabernacle or altar, and those references must be allowed to determine how we translate it here. It is *side*, not *rib*.¹⁴ God's creation of the woman may defy our imagination, yet his taking a whole side from the man to make her clearly reinforces the sense that her value is as great as her partner's, that she does indeed 'match him', in status as well as in physical form. To speak, without any real justification, of her being made out of the man's rib, is to do her a grave disservice. Translators and interpreters have often assumed that from start to finish the story of the Garden puts her in a subservient position to the man. That is enough to explain the traditional translation, and no doubt lies behind the portrayal of the woman as being made from something as small as a single bone, and one that the man could easily do without. To call it a rib is to undermine the vision which the writer, this counter of words, is trying so carefully to evoke of a mutual and equal partnership between the two newly created human beings.

Our reading of those two verses is supported by the man's reaction to the woman when God brings her to him. The woman opens the man's mouth: we have not heard his voice before. Immediately he breaks into poetry:

'Now this one, this time, is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh!

This one shall be called "woman",
for from man she was taken, this one!' (2.23)

In his commentary on Genesis, Claus Westermann describes this as a cry of joyful surprise, a 'jubilant welcome',¹⁵ and so indeed it is. The man cannot contain his excitement. At last he has found what he was looking for among all those animals and birds that God brought to him before his strange sleep. At last he has found 'a helper to match him'. 'This is the one!' he cries. Notice that it is not her suitability as a helper that he celebrates, but her being the perfect match. He recognizes his side in the woman, and calls her 'bone of my bones', and 'flesh of my flesh'! He greets his other half! He speaks as if he is conscious of what was going on while he was asleep under God's anaesthetic. He knows at once where she has come from. The two of them are made of the same stuff. The woman is not part of the man; she does not belong to him. He could not have his side back, even if he wanted it. She is a

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new creature, with an identity of her own, the result of God's marvellous 'building'. Yet something has been taken from the man to make her. With her he is complete again. He belongs with her and she with him, and that he at once recognizes in his joke about flesh and bones. She is *exactly* what he has been looking for.

Still using the poetic form of speech, the man cracks his second joke. He has already called the ibex 'ibex', and the white-crowned black wheatear the 'white-crowned black wheatear' (see vv. 19–20; the examples are my own). Now, having already shown remarkable insight into the woman's origins, he has another brainwave: 'this one shall be called "*woman*",/ for from *man* she was taken, this one!' The Old Testament writers took great delight in plays on words. We have met one before this, in '*adam*' being created from the '*adamah*'. Unfortunately, they are almost invariably lost in translation. This one, however, still works. The English words 'woman' and 'man' mirror one another, as do their Hebrew equivalents '*ishshah*' and '*ish*'. Strictly speaking, the word '*ishshah*' is not related to '*ish*', but it sounds as though it is, and that was enough for this storyteller, and it is enough for us.

Some commentators, however, insist that to name someone is to assert one's authority over them.¹⁶ They claim that the man was declaring his sovereignty over the animals and birds when earlier he gave them their names. But he was doing nothing of the sort. The creation and naming of the animals is certainly treated from a human, and – since the human being concerned is a man – from a male point of view. Of that there is no question. God makes the animals and birds out of regard for the man's loneliness, as an attempt to provide him with 'a helper to match him'. Yet that itself makes it clear that God brings them to the man not for him to assert his authority over them, but so that he can search among them for a companion. In naming them, all the man does is identify them as possible partners, or rather, since they do not fit the bill, as impossible partners. That little episode ends back at square one with the words 'yet for the man he [God] found no helper to match him' (2.20). So now, when he is presented with the woman and names her, he makes no bid for power. He has discovered what he has been looking for. That is all. There is only playfulness, a playful joy. And to prove it, for the first time he refers to himself as 'man'. He is not content to be '*adam*', to take his identity from the stuff, the '*adamah*', from which he was made. Instead he takes it from his relationship with this new creature standing before him, this woman, this '*ishshah*'. He knows who he is now. He is '*ish*', man!

However, it is not the details of the text of these verses which most clearly celebrate the woman's worth, but the passage's position in the story. Her creation brings this first half of the story to its climax. Indeed, it represents the high point of the whole story of the Garden. The tale curves upwards from barren desert to this mysterious moment of the woman's arrival and the great joy she brings. Almost at once it begins to slide down again, until the couple find themselves banished to fields which will be little better than the barren land from which it all began. The narratives of the Old Testament often build up to a climax in the middle, and this one is no exception. The woman is the brightest jewel in its crown!

We might, however, be genuinely disconcerted by the woman's silence. We will discover, as we look at other texts beyond this one, that we can often perceive more clearly the value accorded to a particular character in a story by looking at how much they are given to say. Here the man has his playful poetry; the woman has nothing. We know what he thinks of her. We do not hear what she thinks of him. The male standpoint is again evident, certainly. No doubt a woman would have written the passage differently. Yet this woman's time for speech will come, and very soon, as soon as the snake has introduced itself at the start of chapter 3. If the storyteller had made the woman speak before that, in immediate answer to the man, he would have risked spoiling the balance of his narrative. He, this storyteller, was an artist of genius, and storytellers of genius worry about things such as the balance of their narratives. In any case, the man of the story does not invite a response. He does not address the woman. The time for dialogue, let alone embrace, has not yet arrived. He simply cries out to the God who has brought her to him, '*This is the one!*', and God himself has no response to make to that, but to depart from the stage of the story for a while and leave the man and woman to themselves.

The narrator too departs from the scene, or rather he brings it to an end. When next the curtain rises, the woman and the man will be on stage once more, but God's place, in more ways than one, will be taken by a snake. Yet before that, to mark the end of this first act of his drama, the storyteller adds a tiny epilogue in two parts. The first part looks beyond the Garden, yet hints at the passion that was found there. The second returns to the newly created couple, and speaks of the mutuality of their relationship, their security and lack of fear.

That is why [explains the storyteller after the man's exclamation] a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his

woman, and they become one flesh. Now the two of them were naked, the man and his woman, but they were not ashamed. (2.24-5)

In each part we have 'his woman'. In neither do we hear of 'her man'. We are still looking at things from the point of view of the male narrator and the man in the Garden, and no attempt is being made to see what they look like from the woman's or from women's side. That said, what the storyteller is doing in the first part of his epilogue is to reflect upon the power of women over men: the attraction women exert upon men can be so strong that it overcomes the emotional ties between them and their parents. The writer is not talking about men leaving their parents' households to get married and join the households of their brides. In ancient Israel descent was traced through the male line, and property was handed on from father to son. That meant that when a woman married, she left the household of her parents to join that of her husband. The storyteller is not trying to deny what he knew was the universal practice. Instead he is commenting upon the extraordinary power of love and sexual attraction,¹⁷ and suggesting with a certain amount of mischief that when a man and woman are united in that love and in sexual intercourse they somehow return to being the one flesh or one creature (the Hebrew term translated 'flesh' could mean that) they once were. When we were discussing God's creation of 'adam' from the 'adamah' we argued that 'adam' should be translated 'man' and not 'man-and-woman', that he should be regarded from the start as male, and not some androgynous creature waiting to be separated into male and female. We would argue that still, but we have to concede that the storyteller comes close to the second view here. He comes close to suggesting the man and woman were created as a single being, that the two 'sides' of this creature were then separated from one another, but that they are joined together again through sexual love.

This brief reflection on such love between men and women contains a hint of passion in the relationship between the man and woman in the Garden beyond what has already been suggested by the man's joyful welcome. Such passion and sexual union may possibly be hinted at again in the second part of the epilogue with its reference to the nakedness of the couple. Yet in chapter 3, when all is spoiled and the couple realize they are naked and are suddenly afraid, what their nakedness signifies is not their readiness for love, but their defencelessness and vulnerability. Here, at the high point

in the story, when the woman and the man are alone with their creator God, they are naked yet feel secure; they are vulnerable, yet are not aware of it; defenceless, yet without any sense of having to defend themselves. They feel utterly safe. But they are not. They have not reckoned with the snake.

The ensnaring of the woman

(Gen. 3.1-7)

We began this chapter by saying the Garden of Eden was strewn with litter. We might just as well have compared it to a minefield. We are about to enter its most dangerous patch. This is the place where so often the woman's reputation gets blown to pieces. This is where writers and artists have turned her into the wicked temptress who leads the man astray in her lustful bid for divine power. We will have to tread with extreme caution.

The second half of the story of the Garden begins with the introduction of a new character: 'Now the snake was cleverer than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made' (3.1). These are ominous words, but not for the reasons that have often been put forward in the past. The snake is just a snake, a talking snake it is true, a storyteller's snake, but still a snake. Christian doctrine came much later to turn it into the devil. It is not that here; it is simply one of God's wild animals. But it is the *cleverest*. Does that mean cleverer than the man and the woman? Alas, it does.

It engages the woman in conversation:

'Did God really say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?"' The woman said to the snake, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but as for the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, "You shall not eat any of it, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' The snake said to the woman, 'Die? You will not die! For God knows that on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' Then the woman saw that the tree was good for food, an attraction to the eyes and a delight to consider, and she took some of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her man with her, and he ate. (3.1b-6)

For the first time we hear the woman speak. Now she, together with the snake, takes centre stage, and the man slips so far back

into the shadows of the narrative that we can very easily forget he is there. Not only has the storyteller swung his spotlight upon the woman, but he has changed his own position. He refers to the man now as '*her* man'; no longer is the woman '*his* woman'. He is adopting her stance.

We may fall to wondering why the snake chooses the woman to speak to. The author does not tell us. Some might say it is paying the woman a compliment, that it appreciates that she is the more intelligent and articulate of the two, or else recognizes her as the more ambitious and the one who will be more interested in what it has to offer. Others might claim it realizes she will be more easily led astray. Neither of these suggestions, however, are borne out by the text. The woman does not turn out to be particularly astute or ambitious, while the man just as readily does what the snake suggests. Quite why it picks the woman we do not know. It just does.

It is clearer, perhaps, why it does not formally address them both: dialogues are common in Old Testament narratives, three-way conversations much less so. Yet there is an interesting feature of the Hebrew of these verses which reminds us of the man's presence, and makes us think the snake is really speaking to the man also, or at least is keeping an eye fixed on him as he converses with the woman. In Hebrew the form of verbs for 'you' singular is different from that for 'you' plural. When the snake says 'you' to the woman he consistently uses the plural form, indeed the masculine plural form. The woman, for her part, answers not with an 'I' but a 'we', and when she quotes God's words she too uses the masculine plural 'you' form. What the Hebrew grammar suggests the narrator makes plain after the speaking is done: the woman gives the fruit to her man *who is with her*.

The dialogue begins with what seems a simple question: 'Did God really say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?"' (3.1). It sounds innocent enough, but we must recall what the story has told us so far about the source of food for the human couple. It has told us of God planting trees 'good for food' (2.9); it has had God saying to the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree in the garden' (2.16) – except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There has been no mention of animals to cook, or of wagons of grain rolling in from prairies outside the Garden. By the terms of the story the couple depend for their very survival on the fruit of the trees in the Garden. For the snake to suggest that God might put all that wonderful fruit within their reach and then tell them not to eat it, is to conjure up a picture of a tantalizing, sadistic God,

who will not have human beings in his Garden for much longer, because he has effectively condemned them to starve to death.

This disturbing picture does not, however, come into the woman's mind. She catches none of the question's sinister undertones. In her own innocence all she sees is its superficial simplicity, and she gives it a simple, straightforward answer: 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but as for the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, "You shall not eat any of it, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' This is a fair and accurate summary of the words God addressed to the man after he put him in the Garden (see 2.16-17). The woman makes one addition, 'nor shall you touch it'. It is a most significant one, but it does not have the significance that some commentators have claimed for it. Gerhard von Rad, for example, suggests, 'It is as though she wanted to set a law for herself by means of this exaggeration',¹⁸ and Claus Westermann quotes his statement with approval and then adds, 'One who defends a command can already be on the way to breaking it'.¹⁹ Such aspersions are quite unjustified. If the addition to the divine command *were* reprehensible, then we could not justly blame the woman for it. She was not present when God placed the ban upon the tree. The terms of the story would encourage us to think she has learned about it from the man, and for all we know it is he who has told her the tree should not be touched. In fact, however, those extra words should not make for accusation, but for commendation. For they reveal that the woman recognizes the tree of knowledge of good and evil as holy. She knows, as all ancient Israelites knew, that the holy is dangerous, and that holy things are not to be touched. She understands, as the Israelites did, familiar as they were with the story of Sinai in Exodus 19, or of the unfortunate Uzzah touching the ark in 2 Samuel 6, that touching the holy can mean death. She believes, it seems, that God has put his prohibition on the tree of knowledge for the couple's own good. She may not be as clever as the snake, but she is a considerably better theologian, and so is the man, if indeed she is merely quoting what he has said to her.

Yet the snake rejects her theology: 'Die? You will not die! For God knows that on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil' (3.4-5). With those words the dialogue ends. Tragically the woman has no answer to them, but to take the fruit and eat, and give some to the man. The man, for his part, has no argument to put against them. All he can do in the face of this snake's cunning is to eat what he is offered.

Exactly why the serpent supply his reason for accepting the fruit is the same as the woman's worse than hers that.

The story does not supply that it does so in its narratives of Genesis. The motives explicit in the story are special to readers of this.

'Then the attraction to the tree of its fruit and of the snake's it mocked God have denied protect the couple his own knowledge of the tree of knowledge not there to should have man. But still both of them like God - a vision of the couple, it is to the level

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Exactly why the man eats, we do not know. The story does not supply his reasons. Either he does not think at all, and blindly accepts the fruit the woman gives him, or else his motives are the same as the woman's. It is possible, of course, that his motives are worse than hers, though the story does not encourage us to suppose that.

The story does, however, give us the motives of the woman. That it does so is unusual. Old Testament narratives, and the narratives of Genesis in particular, do not generally make people's motives explicit. They usually leave them to our imagination. When they do supply them, therefore, they are asking us to pay them special heed. How ironic, then, and how tragic also, that readers of this story should have ignored them so!

'Then the woman saw that the tree was good for food, an attraction to the eyes and a delight to consider, and she took some of its fruit and ate . . .' (3.6). She has been ensnared by the coils of the snake's smooth words. She should have protested at the way it mocked God's threat of death, and turned it into a lie. She should have denied its cynical portrayal of a lying God who acts not to protect the couple from the dangers of the holy, but to safeguard his own knowledge and power. She should have reminded it that the tree of knowledge was a holy tree, there for God's purposes, not there to be used by the couple like all the other trees. She should have told the snake to get the hell out of it. So should the man. But she does not, nor does he. The snake is cleverer than both of them. Though it does not fill the woman with a lust to be like God – that does not sink in – it does succeed in changing her vision of the tree. In presenting it as something to be used by the couple, it effectively robs it of its holiness for her, and reduces it to the level of the other trees in the Garden.

When we were first introduced to the Garden we heard that 'the Lord God made to grow every tree that is a delight to look at and good for food' (2.9). In explaining the woman's motives, the author recalls that verse by the language he uses. He quotes one phrase from it, 'good for food', and paraphrases another: 'a delight to look at' becomes 'an attraction to the eyes' and 'a delight to consider'. The point is not lost on us. The tree of knowledge of good and evil has now ceased to be anything unusual for the woman, and so naturally she plucks some of its fruit and eats and gives to the man.

There is a mischief and a tragic humour to be found in the contrast the storyteller has created between the vast rewards the snake offers the woman, and the humble gains – no greater than those to be derived from the other trees of the Garden – she seeks

by taking the fruit. Yet that mischief and humour have been entirely lost on the vast majority of translators and commentators. The most natural translation of the phrase recording the third of the woman's motives is the one we have given it, 'a delight to consider'. Yet translators have generally had her finding the tree 'desirable to make one wise', and the commentators have then packed into that phrase all the ambition set before the couple by the snake when it promised that if she and the man took the fruit they would be like God, knowing good and evil. In other words they have interpreted the woman's action as if her motives were stated not in 3.6, but in 3.5. They have accused her of arrogance, of hubris, of wanting to usurp God's power. They have found her a most dangerous creature. They have turned her into the snake. But the text will not allow such misogyny. It is verse 6 that gives the woman's motives, and its terms are *not* those of verse 5. It says nothing about becoming like God. It says nothing about knowing good and evil. Twice verse 5 uses the word 'know'. Verse 6 studiously avoids it. The word it does use, the one we have translated 'consider', can, it is true, mean to 'act prudently', to 'have insight', or to 'prosper', but if we allow it to carry such overtones here the mischief of the writer becomes all the greater. For then we see the woman seeking prudence through a most imprudent act; searching for insight, when with a little more of that she would have seen through the snake's smooth talk; aiming for prosperity, when, as it turns out, her action spells her ruin. 3.6 has nothing to do with hubris, but it can have everything to do with irony, and, for all its playfulness, a most tragic irony at that.

There are two more points to consider before we move on to the next section dealing with the woman's punishment. We have touched upon the first of them already, but because the text has been so abused, we must return to it and give it greater emphasis. We mean the part the man plays in all this.

The immediate answer is, very little. It is not until near the end of verse 6, when we are told that he is with the woman, that we can be sure he is on stage. He says nothing, and he does nothing, except eat. 'Aha!' say the woman's accusers, 'but he eats fruit *which is given him by the woman!* There is your temptress, your dangerous seductress!' Let us be quite clear. The text speaks of no temptation, no seduction. '. . . and she also gave some to her man with her, and he ate' (3.6b). *That is all.* There is no egging the man on, nor reluctance on his part, as is portrayed in so many paintings of the scene; no sticking of the fruit in his throat, no explanation here for that curious feature of the male neck we call the Adam's apple.

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As Claus Westermann puts it, 'it is not a temptation that is narrated here . . . no temptation was needed in the case of the man; he simply fell into line.'²⁰ And in falling into line he is not joining the woman in some great act of rebellion. Like her, presumably, he now sees nothing unusual about the tree and so finds nothing wrong in eating the fruit that is offered him. If we insist on blaming one of the couple more than the other, then we should be quicker to accuse the man. For we know for certain that he received the ban upon the tree from God's own lips. It seems both of them have forgotten that prohibition. He has less excuse for doing so. Ironically enough, pushing all the blame on the woman will turn out to be precisely what he tries to do when God confronts him with his crime.

For the woman's and man's eating of the fruit is a crime, though the rich language of the Old Testament for sin and transgression is not used in the story. An explicit and quite clear divine command (2.17) has been breached. The fruit was not for eating, and the woman and the man have eaten it. Though some who try to rescue the woman from all blame play down or ignore the fact, there is disobedience here. True, the woman may not have realized what she was doing. True, she has been beguiled by the snake, 'bitten' by its clever, cynical, poisonous tongue. The same things can possibly be said in the man's defence also. But there is no getting away from it. There is disobedience here, and a denial of God's authority. The woman ends up putting more trust in a clever snake than she does in her own judgement, or the man's, about the holiness of the tree. Though she does not take in what it is saying, she puts more faith in its words than in the words of God she understood so clearly, and without a moment's hesitation the man follows suit. Their fault lies in their not continuing to respect the holiness of the holy. They are beguiled into treating it as something to be used for their own purposes. And in forgetting the holy they forget their God.

The punishment of the woman

(Gen. 3.8-19)

When we considered the creation of the woman, we had to pay heed to the man's creation also, and when we came to her eating of the forbidden fruit, we could not ignore the action of the man. Now we have reached her punishment, we will, inevitably, have

to say something about the man's. But we will do so in order to illuminate the woman's plight. Our focus will remain on her, as it has been all along.

Before we come to God's pronouncements of judgement, we must look at the more immediate consequences of the couple's disobedience. At once we encounter again the storyteller's playfulness. The eating of the fruit is followed immediately by these words: 'Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew . . .' Exactly what the snake said would happen! If we imagine ourselves reading this for the first time, we expect it to continue with ' . . . good and evil, and became like God'. But instead we are provided with a wonderful example of bathos: ' . . . and they knew *they were naked*; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves' (3.7). All they know is the defencelessness and vulnerability of their humanity, and all they can do to defend themselves is make pathetic loincloths, which God will need to replace with something more substantial when they leave the Garden. So much for becoming like God! So much for the mastery, the omniscience that the snake promised with its talk of knowing good and evil!

The couple's new vulnerability becomes even more evident when God comes on the scene, walking in the Garden in the cool of the day. At once they hide. And God calls to *the man*, to the 'adam. Suddenly, the woman, who has been so prominent since her creation, far more so than her partner, disappears from the narrative. God speaks to the man as if the woman were not there. It reminds us of the snake talking with the woman as if the man was not beside her. At least when the woman replied to the snake's questions she included the man in her speech: she spoke of 'we', and turned the 'you' singulars of God's original command to the man into 'you' plurals. By contrast the man's reply excludes the woman: 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid for I was naked; and I hid' (3.10). It is still as if the woman was not there. He speaks openly of the breakdown that has occurred in the relationship between him and his God. His speech is also, in its excluding of the woman, a more subtle indication of the breakdown in the relationship between him and his partner. That breakdown is made plain by the man's second speech, when he attempts to defend himself: 'The woman you gave to be with me, she, she gave me of the tree, and I ate' (3.12). The man speaks the truth, of course, but he does not only speak the truth, he accuses. He accuses 'the woman' (that is what she is now to him, not 'bone of my bones', but 'the woman'), and he blames God - 'the woman *you* gave to be with me'. No jubilant welcome now, but rejection

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and dark accusation. Too many readers of this story have in the past ignored his accusing God, but have relished his accusing the woman. In doing so they have added irony and tragedy to a tale which already has enough of both.

It is at this dark point that God speaks to the woman. Now that she stands accused by the man, God recognizes her presence, and for the first time in the whole story addresses her: 'What is this you have done?' (3.13a). In reply, the woman also speaks the truth, and also accuses: 'The snake tricked me, and I ate' (3.13b). She, too, passes the buck (the serpent will have no one to blame, and, in any case, will be given no chance to defend itself; we have heard the last from that creature already). But she does not accuse God. Nor does she protest against her partner's accusation, and tell God how willingly, how quickly he took the fruit when it was offered him. The man's speech expressed and added to the breakdown in relationships between him and God, and between him and the woman. The woman's speech expresses and adds to the breakdown in the relationship between her and the snake (God will recognize that in his judgement on the snake, when he speaks of putting enmity between it and the woman), but it leaves the other more important relationships unscathed. Is there a hint here that if reconciliation is to be achieved, it will depend more on the woman than on the man?

So we arrive at God's judgements, and at a verse which has caused the woman, and women ever since, more trouble than any other in this entire story. Carol Meyers devotes a whole chapter of her book *Discovering Eve* to it, and subjects every single word of its Hebrew text to the most minute analysis.²¹ Our translation and interpretation owe a great deal to her work, though we will depart from her at one crucial point.

God underlines the formality and the solemnity of his judgement by slipping into poetry:

'I will increase, yes increase your toil and your pregnancies;
in the midst of toil will you have children.
But for your man shall be your desire,
and for you he will be irresistible.' (3.16)

The judgement on the man in the next three verses speaks of back-breaking work in the fields, of an unremitting battle waged against a cursed and recalcitrant soil and its thorns and thistles, in order to grow enough food to eat. It has long been recognized that those lines present a brilliant summary of the typical plight of the Israelite hill-farmers, and the problems they had to contend with.

What Carol Meyers has demonstrated is that the verse concerning the woman equally well sums up the plight of those hill-farmers' wives. In the village communities of early pre-monarchic Israel, households made up of extended families, or multiple family groups (such as brothers living together with their families), or a mixture of both, were virtually independent and self-sufficient units. Within the household some tasks were shared among the women and men, some divided between them. Overall the women played as important a part as the men in keeping the households going and in helping them to flourish. The women's life, like the men's, involved a great deal of drudgery, and their work was made more difficult by frequent pregnancies, with all the dangers and almost inevitable grief those brought with them. The average lifespan for a man was forty years; that for a woman thirty. Large families were counted a great blessing, and the survival of the households depended on them. Yet women must have longed for some rest from their work and their pregnancies and child-rearing. But if they decided to have no more children, their desire for their husbands, especially their sexual desire, got the better of them.

This, almost certainly, is the background to and the sense of God's judgement on the woman. We have to jettison parts of the usual translations of the verse, together with the interpretations of it which have held sway for so long. The verse is not about the pains of childbirth, and, more importantly, it is not about any subordination of women.

Far too often these lines have been seen to provide men with a licence to dominate women, a licence, what is more, issued by God himself. It has been used to keep women in their place, a place largely defined by men. Or else both men and women have found its notions abhorrent, and in rejecting it have sometimes rejected the whole story of which it is a part, or even the whole Bible, as hopelessly patriarchal. That is why it is so important to get it right. That is why Carol Meyers is justified in spending over twenty-six pages of her book discussing it.

For the first half of the verse, the majority of translators and commentators offer something akin to the NRSV's

'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children . . .'

But a single Hebrew noun lies behind that translation's 'pangs' and 'pain' in this verse, and its 'toil' in the next, when it deals with the judgement on the man. There it has

'cursed is the ground because of you;
in *toil* you shall eat of it all the days of your life . . .'

That 'toil' quite clearly refers to back-breaking work. There is no good reason to think the Hebrew term means anything different in the case of the woman. Further, Carol Meyers has shown that the Hebrew word translated 'childbearing' by the NRSV (and by other versions) does not mean childbirth, but pregnancy, and that the one in the second line usually rendered as 'bring forth', or in other versions 'give birth to', does not refer specifically to the birth process, but to the business of 'having children' in the sense of becoming or being a parent.²² These first two lines, then, do not offer comment on the pains of labour and childbirth, but represent, in terms even more pithy than those used to describe the lot of the man, a sharp and sensitive summary of the hardships endured by the women in the villages of early Israel, and quite probably by very many of them throughout the biblical period. With a few brilliant strokes of his pen the writer captures those aspects of their lot that could so easily break their spirits and which eventually broke their bodies.

Having done that, he explains in the second part of the verse how women are trapped in their life of unending toil, unable to break free and find rest. In the case of the man, his drudgery will never come to an end, because of the curse laid upon the ground he works. In the end it will kill him. For the woman, what will trap her is the strength of her sexual desire for her husband. Her life is to be made especially arduous by continual pregnancies and continuous child-rearing. There, in the view of this storyteller, will lie the chief source of her 'toil'. But if she wishes to stop having children, her sexual drive will get the better of her. In the passionate love poetry of the Song of Songs the same very rare term for 'desire' is used once (7.11). There it refers to the love of the man for the woman, and is presented as a cause for huge celebration, like the woman's passion for him. Here in the Garden we had a similar view of sexual desire hinted at in the verses immediately following the woman's creation and the man's welcome of her (2.24-5). But now we are shown a darker side of it. The Song of Songs expresses the elation of those who have fallen passionately in love, and Genesis 2.24-5, and 2.23 also, echo that joy. Now Genesis 3.16 reflects on the harsher aspect of long-established married life, and upon the consequences of their continuing sexual passion for women who had no access to contraception.

It is, of course, in our translation of the last line of God's

judgement upon the woman, in our 'for you he will be irresistible', that we depart so far from the usual translations, and where we even leave Carol Meyers behind. The familiar versions have 'he will/shall rule over you' (RSV, NRSV, NIV), 'he will/shall be your master' (NEB, REB), 'he will lord it over you' (JB), or 'he will dominate you' (NJB). Carol Meyers has 'he shall predominate over you'.²³ All of these translations, with the exception of Carol Meyers', presuppose that the storyteller, or rather the poet as he is at this point, is referring in general terms to the subservience of women to men. There are at least two reasons why that is not so. The first is supplied by a verse in the Cain and Abel story which follows in the very next chapter of Genesis, and the second has to do with how Hebrew poetry works.

We have already remarked that 'the very rare' Hebrew noun used for 'desire' in the third line of 3.16 also occurs once in the Song of Songs. In fact the only other place we find it in the whole of the Old Testament is in the Cain and Abel story, and in a pair of lines which play with this second half of 3.16. Genesis 4.7 tells of God's warning to Cain when he is in danger of being overcome with anger for his brother and is plotting to kill him. The latter part of it reads:

'If you do not do good,
sin is crouching at the door.
For you will its desire be,
but you must master it.'

The Hebrew word we have translated 'master' here is the same as the one that lies behind our 'irresistible' for 3.16. In his speech to Cain, God is quite clearly speaking of a powerful force that Cain must resist; he must not allow it to get the better of him. In the Garden story at 3.16 the woman's sexual desire is presented as a force comparable in its power to Cain's desire to kill his brother, but in her case there is no command to get the better of it, instead a prediction that she will not be able to do so. It will be too strong for her, as in fact Cain's murderous hatred will be for him. Her husband will 'master her', not in the sense that he will overrule her and demand sexual intercourse of her when she is reluctant (that is Carol Meyers' interpretation²⁴), but because she will find him quite irresistible.

That explains why the woman's punishment does not refer to any subservience to the man. The way Hebrew poetry works makes plain that the verse *cannot* have such meaning. Throughout the Old

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Testament its poetry is generally made up of pairs of lines, or rather of pairs of half-lines. The genius of the poetry lies in the ways in which these pairs are combined with others, and also in the subtle movements within the pairs themselves. A second half-line will carry forward the thought or the image introduced in the first; it will clarify it further, perhaps, intensify it, look at it from a different angle. A good example is provided by the first part of 3.16 itself:

‘I will increase, yes increase your toil and your pregnancies;
in the midst of toil will you have children.’

The second line, or half-line in the Hebrew, picks up the language of the first, and by that very repetition adds emphasis to it, but also carries the thought further, and moves from pregnancy to parenthood. The movements are small and subtle. There is nothing dramatic or ostentatious about them, nor do they introduce any thoroughly new thought. That is precisely how Hebrew poetry works within its pairs of half-lines, with small crescendos, subtle variations on a theme. Of course new thoughts, new themes can be introduced, but only by moving from one pair of half-lines to another. It is *virtually inconceivable* that within a single pair of half-lines an Israelite poet could shift from considering the sexual desire of women to any notion of their general subservience to men. That is far too large a jump to make within such a small space.

Once we understand the movement of Hebrew poetry, we have to say that it is all but impossible to read the last part of 3.16 the way it has been read for so long. If we then ask why such a misreading should have held sway all this time, we can only suggest the answer lies in the layers of misogyny that have been heaped upon the text. The notion of the woman as the wicked temptress has so dominated interpretations of the story that translators and commentators have been only too glad to see 3.16 as talking of her being kept in check and under man’s control.²⁵

Ironically enough, even if our reading of the verse is quite wrong, and our versions and the general run of commentators are right, even if we accept something as blunt as the Jerusalem Bible’s translation of the last half-line, ‘yet he will lord it over you’, the passage still gives no encouragement to those who would seek to keep women under the authority of men. Indeed, *quite the reverse*. For these lines, together with those where God pronounces upon the snake and the man, are meant to encapsulate what is *wrong* with life. They are meant to ‘explain’ why life for snakes and for

human beings is so very hard. They occur towards the end of a story which dreams a fine dream of what life could be like, at least for human beings if not for snakes, if only they could manage to remain obedient to God. On one level such a story is designed to help people come to terms with their lot. But outside the book of Ecclesiastes the Old Testament is decidedly short on fatalism, and much longer on prophetic passion and the call for change. Genesis 2-3 is meant to stir the will, as well as the mind and the emotions. It is meant to help men dream of a life where work is a matter for celebration and not for cursing, and to strive towards a society where that is possible for all. It is designed to enable women to long for a life which is not dominated by drudgery and continual pregnancies and the rearing of small children, and to work for a society in which those longings are fulfilled for all. No one would wish God's judgement on the man in 3.17-19 to mean that all attempts to turn the drudgery of men's labour into fulfilling, self-satisfying work are against the will of God, and to my knowledge no one has done so. No one, therefore, should try to turn God's judgement on the woman, however it is translated and understood, into a justification for the unnecessary hardships women have to endure. Far from supporting the *status quo*, these verses on the woman's and man's plight quietly preach revolution.

There are three other features of 3.16 which invite brief comment before we move on: its length, the way it is introduced (or rather *not* introduced), and the absence of any language of curse.

First, it is much shorter, indeed only half the length of the judgement pronounced upon the snake, or the one delivered upon the man. If we still wish to find the woman the true villain of this piece, then we may think this fact rather curious.

Second, it lacks any reminder in its introduction of what the woman has done. The snake is told, 'Because you have done this . . .' (3.14); the man is reminded (for the second time, the first being in 3.11) that he has disobeyed a divine command (3.17). But God does not point to the woman's own disobedience, he does not underline the gravity of her act. It is as if he accepts her as one more sinned against than sinning, as one who was tricked into taking the fruit, as indeed she was and as she said she was. Again, she hardly emerges from this part of the text as the evil temptress of the familiar stereotype.

Finally, while the snake is cursed, and the man is condemned to working cursed ground, the judgement on the woman contains no curse at all. Her punishment lacks a dimension, an awesome dimension, that both the snake's and the man's have. She, indeed,

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