

The legend of Adam and Eve in the Old Testament is a striking example of misogyny that reflects, and arguably reinforces, the patriarchal mindset of both the ancient world and the medieval Christian tradition. At its core, the Genesis account of creation presents a gendered framework in which woman is created after man, from man, and seemingly for man—a narrative that has had far-reaching theological and cultural consequences.

In Genesis 2:18, God observes, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” The Hebrew phrase used here, *ezer kenegdo*, is crucial to understanding the implications of the text. The word *ezer* is frequently translated as “helper,” a term that, in modern English, often carries connotations of secondary status or inferiority. However, in the Hebrew Bible, *ezer* is also used to describe God as a “helper” to Israel (e.g., Psalm 121:1–2), suggesting that the term itself does not imply subordination. Even so, traditional interpretations have rarely highlighted this nuance. Instead, Eve has consistently been cast as subordinate to Adam—a being created not in her own right, but to support and serve the man.

This act of creation, in which Eve is fashioned from one of Adam’s ribs, has been read symbolically for centuries. According to many patristic and medieval interpretations, a woman’s derivation from man indicates her secondary nature and inherent dependence. Because she is formed from man, she is positioned as derivative—an extension of his body and identity. This idea of woman as an appendage to man has been deeply influential, legitimizing male authority in familial, religious, and societal structures.

The implications of this gender hierarchy are further amplified in Genesis 3, where the narrative of the Fall unfolds. Eve, tempted by the serpent, eats the forbidden fruit and offers it to Adam. Although both are ultimately punished, the emphasis on Eve’s role has been theologically loaded throughout Christian history. Her action is framed as the initial disobedience that led to the Fall of humanity. Eve becomes the prototype of female temptation, sinfulness, and moral weakness.

This interpretation gained substantial traction among early Church Fathers. Tertullian, one of the most influential theologians of the early Church, famously wrote to women: “You are the devil’s gateway... You destroyed so easily God’s image, man.”¹ Similarly, Augustine interpreted Eve’s disobedience as evidence of women’s weaker rational faculties and greater susceptibility to sin. These interpretations became doctrinally embedded and were used to justify the subjugation of women within Christian institutions. Women were denied access to religious authority, excluded from theological discourse, and assigned subordinate roles within the family and society.

In medieval Europe, these theological positions translated into concrete legal and social practices. Canon law and secular law often placed women under the authority of their fathers or husbands, denying them the right to own property, receive formal education, or participate in

¹ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, trans. by S. Thelwall, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), III

public life. The narrative of Eve's creation and fall was frequently invoked to affirm these restrictions. Even in ecclesiastical art and literature, Eve was depicted as the archetypal temptress, whose beauty and seduction led to destruction—a trope that reinforced cultural anxieties about female power and sexuality.

From a contemporary feminist perspective, the Genesis narrative is a paradigmatic example of scriptural misogyny. The portrayal of Eve as a helper, created from man's body and blamed for humanity's downfall, has provided a theological rationale for gender inequality. Feminist scholars have argued that the story enshrines male dominance by suggesting that woman is both the cause of sin and ontologically subordinate to man. In this view, the Adam and Eve myth does not merely reflect ancient gender norms; it actively constructs and perpetuates them.

However, feminist theologians have also offered alternative readings of the Genesis text. Phyllis Trible, in her influential work *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, challenges the hierarchical interpretation of *ezer kenegdo*. She argues that the Hebrew phrasing actually implies mutual support and equality.² Furthermore, Trible highlights that the rib taken from Adam is from his side—not from his head to suggest superiority, nor from his feet to suggest inferiority. This detail, she contends, may signify a symbolic equality between man and woman, intended to reflect partnership rather than domination.

Other scholars have focused on the order of creation. While woman is created second in the Genesis 2 narrative, Genesis 1:27 states, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Here, the creation of male and female appears simultaneous and equal, offering an alternative framework in which both genders reflect the divine image equally. Such interpretations challenge the long-standing assumption that woman's creation from man inherently signals hierarchy.

Moreover, some theologians have reevaluated the Fall narrative, suggesting that both Adam and Eve share equal responsibility for the transgression. In the biblical account, Adam is present when Eve speaks to the serpent, and he willingly partakes of the fruit without protest. This suggests a shared moral agency rather than a uniquely feminine fault. Re-centering the narrative around mutual responsibility can destabilize the traditional reading that casts Eve as the primary source of sin and shame.

Despite these reinterpretations, the dominant historical reading of the Adam and Eve story has had a lasting influence on Western conceptions of gender. The image of woman as subordinate and morally suspect remains embedded in many religious and cultural institutions. In contemporary debates over gender roles in churches, families, and public life, echoes of the Genesis narrative still surface. Denominations that oppose women's ordination or leadership roles frequently cite the creation order and the Fall as theological justification.

The influence of the Adam and Eve narrative extends far beyond its original scriptural context. Its legacy permeates Western literature, art, politics, and public discourse, often in ways that

² Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

subtly—or explicitly—reinscribe patriarchal norms. Even in secular settings, the myth's motifs remain powerful. For example, the image of the “temptress woman” continues to appear in media, literature, and film, where female characters are frequently framed as seductive threats to male virtue or stability. This recurring trope, rooted in the characterization of Eve as the origin of sin, reinforces the perception of female agency as inherently dangerous or morally suspect.

Moreover, the theological implications of Genesis continue to impact real-world policies and gender dynamics, particularly in religious communities. In several Christian denominations, women remain barred from positions of spiritual leadership, with 1 Timothy 2:12 and the Genesis narrative cited as justification. The notion that women are theologically subordinate persists, despite advances in biblical scholarship and changing cultural attitudes toward gender equality. As Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon argues, myths are not mere stories but powerful narratives that frame and reinforce the structures of social life.³ The Genesis myth exemplifies this function in its deep and enduring influence on gender ideology.

However, there has been a growing movement—especially since the late 20th century—to critically interrogate and reclaim these texts from a feminist perspective. Feminist theologians, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, advocate for rereadings of scripture that foreground justice, equality, and mutuality.⁴ These scholars argue that the divine cannot be limited to a patriarchal construct and that sacred texts must be interpreted through lenses that resist oppression and exclusion. Ruether, for instance, insists that theology must align with the lived realities of all people, especially those historically silenced by dominant interpretations.⁵

Some contemporary literary works and films have offered subversive portrayals of Eve as a symbol of wisdom, rebellion, or liberation rather than sin. Such reinterpretations aim to reclaim the narrative as one of agency and awakening. For example, in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, biblical texts are shown to be weaponized by a theocratic regime to justify female subjugation—a chilling reflection of how foundational myths like Genesis can be distorted to support systemic oppression.⁶ Atwood's use of biblical imagery is a powerful critique of religious literalism and its role in perpetuating patriarchal control.

Adam and Eve story remains a site of struggle. On one side are traditional interpretations that reinforce male authority and female submission; on the other are critical voices seeking to liberate sacred texts from these constraining frameworks. Engaging with this narrative through a

³ Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds), *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2000).

⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

⁶ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985).

feminist lens not only reveals the deep roots of institutionalized misogyny but also opens possibilities for transformation.

This is not to say that the Genesis story must be discarded. Rather, it must be read with awareness: awareness of its historical context, of its interpretive legacy, and of its role in shaping the lived experiences of women. Critical re-examination of such texts does not undermine faith but strengthens it, by aligning religious tradition with principles of justice, dignity, and inclusivity. As Braun and McCutcheon observe, the study of religion must attend not only to what texts say, but to how they are used and to what ends.⁷

In sum, the Genesis account of Adam and Eve functions as a foundational myth that has legitimized patriarchal ideology across centuries of religious and cultural history. The portrayal of Eve as created from man and blamed for humanity's fall has shaped perceptions of women as derivative, subordinate, and morally weaker. These themes have deeply influenced Christian theology, legal codes, and cultural narratives, embedding misogynistic assumptions into the structures of society.

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⁷ Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds), *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2000).