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The Genesis Paradigms for Female Roles, Part I: Genesis 2-3

The early chapters of Genesis challenge our ability to be open-minded in dealing with biblical texts relevant to gender. Perhaps more than any other part of the Bible, those chapters have influenced western notions of gender identity and roles. But we must remember that Genesis 2-3 antedate by a millennium or more the religious traditions that have appropriated those texts as normative statements about human nature. That is, the earliest Jewish and Christian communities used the Genesis stories, as they used many other parts of the already ancient and sacred literature of Israel, to help them deal with their own sociological and theological concerns.

The leaders of nascent postbiblical religion interpreted and emphasized certain features of Genesis 2-3 as they established their own views of creation and gender, of sex and sin. The church fathers and the early rabbis were interpreters of new religious developments emerging from the biblical past, and their views became authoritative and normative. Consequently, we tend to see those pivotal texts of the Hebrew canon through the interpretive eyes of the early Jewish and Christian sages. So fixed in our minds are the explanations of postbiblical tradition that we are hardly aware that the commonly accepted translations and expositions of Genesis 2-3, among other biblical passages, may not accurately or fairly represent the meaning and function of these texts in their original contexts.

No book that was to become part of the canon of the Hebrew Bible was composed after the second century BCE. The authoritative early Jewish and Christian texts—such as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, the New Testament and the Mishna—nearly all postdate the material in the Hebrew Bible. They are, of course, important in a consideration of any biblical passage. Yet, as we have already suggested, the

exegetical contributions of early Judaism and Christianity tend to tell us more about the particular needs of the latter groups than about the meaning of a text at the time when it first emerged as an authoritative statement destined to be included in the sacred literature of western religious tradition.

Consequently, to be truly open-minded we must consider the possibility of differences between the meaning of texts in ancient Israel and the meaning in post-Israelite biblical religion. The rabbis and fathers of the early Christian era were an extremely active and prolific group of people. They accorded the Hebrew Bible a place of central importance in their search for religious values during the turbulent times in which they lived. The hermeneutic perspective of the faithful has often been obvious and self-consciously achieved in recent epochs, but the extent to which the ancient commentators were themselves aware of how the challenges of their own world affected their understanding of a particular world is debatable. While the ancient sages may have been quite unaware of how they reshaped earlier meanings, it is incumbent on us to identify their exegetical shifts.

When it comes to matters of gender (for which certain biblical texts have held such a powerful place in the millennia following their formulation), the imperatives for identifying viewpoints not inherent in the text become especially compelling. The function of the passages for ancient Israel is assumed to have been the same as for the later observers, so all pervasive has been the force of those later authorities. The attitude engendered by the Judeo-Christian tradition are so well entrenched in contemporary religion that they constitute powerful barriers to an understanding of the antecedent functions of certain texts in Israelite life. We are simply not aware that we often look at Israelite texts with post-Israelite eyes.

An analogy from the natural sciences is apt in helping us comprehend how powerful the barriers of religious doctrine can be. Historians of science have long wrestled with the problem of why it took so long for scientists to discover certain aspects of the physical world. Why was there such a dearth of scientific discovery in the centuries between the early awakening of scientific inquiry in the classical world and the breakthroughs of modern science in the Renaissance? The answer, at least in part, lies in recognizing the constraints of Christian theology on the inquiring scientific mind in the Byzantine and medieval periods. Arthur Koestler, in describing the enormous breakthrough of a scientist such as Kepler, asserts that "some of the greatest discoveries . . . consist mainly

in the clearing away of psychological road-blocks which obstruct the approach to reality; which is why, *post factum*, they appear so obvious."¹

The barriers caused by the Judeo-Christian tradition must be identified and removed before the original force of the texts can speak in a voice uncomplicated by later voices. The theology of later generations had access neither to historical tools nor to a social scientific awareness necessary for understanding and therefore were susceptible to creating misrepresentations of the past. In some ways, the problems of misrepresentation caused by the views of later authorities is akin to the obstructionist role of theologians in their opposition to the scientific endeavors of Galileo and others. Galileo bravely criticized the church authorities with the observation:

Let us grant then that theology is conversant with the loftiest divine contemplation, and occupies the regal throne among the sciences by this dignity. But acquiring the highest authority in this way, if she does not descend to the lower and humbler speculations of the subordinate sciences, and has no regard for them for they are not concerned with blessedness, then her professors should not arrogate to themselves the authority to decide on controversies in professions which they have neither studied nor practiced. Why, this would be as if an absolute despot being neither a physician nor an architect, but knowing himself free to command, should undertake to administer medicine and erect buildings according to his whim.²

The ancient Jewish and Christian commentators on the Hebrew Bible stand at times as unwitting and unintentional despots by lending the authority of their religious positions to their statements and commentaries, which thereby achieve canonical form or force of their own. These statements did not, could not, use the methodology of the "lower and humbler speculations" of philology, archaeology, anthropology, or historical criticism; and so the ancients are to be forgiven. But contemporary research can use the "subordinate sciences," and in so doing, hammer away at the enduring psychological barriers developed in the early centuries of the Christian era and perpetuated until the last few centuries. An example of these psychological barriers is the way Eve appears in religious literature postdating Genesis 2-3.

Apart from the early chapters of Genesis, there is in the Hebrew Bible no mention of Eve. Other figures or events, such as the Patriarchs or the Exodus, are often mentioned subsequent to the original narration of their stories. But Eve does not resurface at all in Hebrew scripture and is certainly not a dominant figure in the Israelite canon.

Eve finally appears in extant literature in the second century BCE,

when she figures in a work that is not part of the Hebrew canon. After Genesis 2-3, the earliest writing that refers to Eve is probably Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Ben Sira, which is part of the canon in Catholic but not in Jewish or Protestant Bibles. Ben Sira apparently is alluding to Eve when he says, "From a woman was the beginning of sin, / And because of her we all died."³ In associating sin with Eve, Ben Sira was probably taking a minority position because his contemporaries tended to ascribe sin either to Adam or, on the basis of Genesis 6:1-4, to the fall of evil angels and their cohabitation with women.⁴ Nonetheless, as the first known author to state that sin and death are the negative results of a woman's act, this early sage provided one of the most extraordinarily tenacious interpretations of a biblical narrative.

A century later, the unknown author of a work called the Books of Adam and Eve picked up on Ecclesiasticus' reading of the Adam and Eve story. Written in part as if Eve herself were the author, this pseudepigraphical book leaves no doubt as to the role of Eve in bringing about all the sin and suffering in the world. In passage after passage, Eve recounts and confesses her awful deeds. One sample indicates the tone of Eve's words, as she seeks to relieve the suffering that Adam experiences when God begins to punish him for disobedience. "O Lord my God, hand over to me his pain, for it is I who sinned." And Eve said to Adam: "My Lord give me a part of thy pains, for this has come to you from fault of mine."⁵ A related composition also dating to the early first century BCE, the Apocalypse of Moses, similarly underscores the causality of Eve with respect to sin. The anonymous author of that work has Eve proclaim: "I have sinned, O God, I have sinned, O God of All, I have sinned before Thee. . . . I have sinned before Thee and all sin hath begun through my doing in the creation."⁶

Such attitudes as these, current in the Jewish world in the last few centuries before Christ, entered Christian tradition and can be found in the New Testament in such passages as 1 Timothy 2:13-14: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." Not only is Eve associated with sin; her creation is viewed as secondary and, by implication, of lesser importance.

By the early centuries of the Christian era, instances of such attitudes toward Eve become common in religious literature. The association of Eve and sin with sexuality and lust, already present in texts such as the Books of Adam and Eve and the New Testament, is expanded in both Christian and Jewish postbiblical sources, with the serpent playing an increasingly satanic and phallic role. And of course the more Eve is

identified as the source of sin, the more urgent becomes the need to control, subdue, and dominate her. Eve is seen as representative of her sex, and thus all women are regarded as requiring subjugation to wiser and superior male figures.

As if this situation were not already problematic enough, it led to still another kind of interference with our vision of the Eve of Genesis: the problem of translations. That is, most of us read about Eve in texts that are not in their original language. While translations can and do often accurately represent the texts they render, they can also—often unconsciously—subtly change and distort the original meaning. Because the process of translating the Hebrew Bible began in the same centuries that the interpretive literature just described was being composed, the ancient translations also suffer from the possibility of bias and distortion.

The antifeminist views of St. Jerome, for example, subtly influenced the way he dealt with passages about women in his extremely influential translation of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Vulgate. Commissioned by Pope Damasus in 382 CE, the Vulgate became the authoritative Bible of the Catholic Church. Jerome was a highly competent Hebrew scholar, yet his hostility toward women and his fear of them constituted “such a powerful and all-pervasive influence upon him that the accuracy of his vulgate translation itself has been affected.”⁷ The Vulgate is the standard Roman Catholic Bible and an influence on much of the western world through the influence of Latin on Romance languages. The smallest and most subtle examples of antifemale bias in the Vulgate can have far-reaching consequences. This is not the place to deal with Jerome’s antifeminism, but it is the place to emphasize the existence of bias in translation. The matter of such bias will figure in the discussion of the Eve story in this chapter and will be prominent in the exposition of Genesis 3:16 in the next chapter.

In both religious texts and standard translations dating to the centuries following the formation of the Hebrew canon, interpretations of the Hebrew narrative of Genesis 2–3 became common. The themes of female sin and inferiority were introduced, although they were not, as we shall see, part of the original text. Thereafter, variations on those themes became endless. Western literature and art are replete with expressions of the Eve story cast so as to express the author’s or artist’s own social views. Perhaps the most influential of all has been John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which developed the Eden tale so strongly that many of our present recollections of the biblical story are more faithful to his portrayal of Eve or Satan than to the original Hebrew narrative.

Milton no doubt did not intend to distort the biblical material with which he worked. Yet his own world view worked its way into the characterizations in his poetry: “[Milton’s] hierarchical world view led him to assume that every creature had its proper place in an elaborately descending order from God who is pure spirit, to angels, men, women, plants, and finally non-living creatures. Even within human society, this hierarchy was necessary.”⁸ Consequently, Milton saw both political rulers and husbands as God’s deputies, controlling the state and the family, respectively. Although both Adam and Eve were created in God’s image, Eve was somehow less in God’s image: Adam’s “perfection far excell’d Hers in all real dignity” (*Paradise Lost* 10:150–51).

Eve indeed has “fallen.” But the term “Fall” in relation to the Eve–Adam narrative does not occur in the Hebrew Bible, and its widespread use is a good example of how an interpretive concept has become so familiar that no one notices that it does not belong to the Genesis story itself. In fact, the idea of a “Fall” came into the Christian world through Orphic thought. Classic expression of this idea is found in the *Phaedrus*, where Plato describes heavenly perfections shedding their wings and *falling* to the earth to be implanted and born as humans.⁹ It can only apply if one begins with the notion of an originally perfect human. But that point is debatable for the Hebrew Bible, where the first pair are creatures of earth and not of heaven. Thus, it is more appropriate to drop the term “Fall” from any reference to the story in its Hebraic context. It is used only ironically at the beginning of this paragraph, to highlight the perceptions of Eve as having changed radically—from the perceptions embedded in the ancient Genesis narrative to the clearly derogatory ones that appear almost a millennium later.

The later, derogatory perceptions of Eve thus constitute major barriers to our ability to see the function of the Genesis 2–3 narrative as it existed in Israel before the “fall of Eve,” that is, before the emergence of the influential expositions of Jewish and Christian antiquity. The barriers are considerable but not insurmountable. With the realization that the ancient biblical texts were both responsive to and reflective of their own late second or early first millennium world, and with some knowledge that conditions in that world were different from those in later times, we can discover the Eve that existed before the time of her linkage with sin and suffering. We can recover the pristine Eve. We now set about to do that in this chapter by examining the Eden narrative as a literary piece and as a reflection of the particular conditions of highland life, as described in the previous chapter, to which the agrarian Israelites

had to adapt. Then, in Chapter 5, we will take a close look at perhaps the most troublesome verse of all, Genesis 3:16.

A New Look at Eden

Since the very beginning of their awareness of the need for feminist hermeneutics, feminist biblical scholars have been particularly concerned with the powerful and, to their mind, detrimental impact of the traditional postbiblical interpretations of the second creation story. With their focus on Genesis 2-3, they join the ranks of the enormous group of scholars¹⁰ who have commented on various aspects of Genesis, including the Eden narrative. The pioneer in modern feminist research of the creation stories is Phyllis Trible, of Union Theological Seminary of New York. Her methodology involves an analysis of the literary construction and characteristics of the Genesis 2-3 text. Employing what is known as rhetorical criticism, she has explored certain stylistic features that have been overlooked or ignored by earlier critics but that provide the major clues to the meaning of the text.¹¹

In the first of a series of analyses of various biblical texts, Trible's study of Genesis 2-3 is a landmark achievement among her efforts to reclaim the Bible for feminists and to provide fresh perspectives on difficult passages. Originally published in 1973,¹² the Genesis 2-3 material appeared five years later in a more developed form as a chapter in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. At the outset she exposes the misogynist references that have dominated our understanding of the text over the centuries. Both the opponents of an androcentric order and its advocates have misunderstood the tale because of the power of traditional interpretations such as those cited earlier in this chapter. Feminists unwittingly rejecting the authority of Genesis 2-3 and acknowledged traditionalists invoking it have together subscribed to at least a dozen gender-related dogmas that they assume to be set forth by the creation account.

What are some of these interpretive readings—or misreadings—that have almost achieved a canonicity of their own? The following¹³ are among the most tenacious and also the most erroneous:

1. A male God creates a man first, which makes the man superior, and the woman second, which automatically means she is inferior.
2. Woman is created as a helpmate, a lower-order companion to stave off male loneliness.
3. Woman tempted man and is thus responsible for all human sinfulness.
4. Woman is cursed by pain in childbirth.

These and other similar assumptions about women and men and gender relations are based on the familiar Genesis story. But careful analysis shows that such statements are not intrinsic to the text. On the contrary, they violate its integrity, rhetoric, lexical choices, and cultural setting.

This is not the place to examine in detail the ways in which feminist scholars have challenged these nearly sacred suppositions. Trible deals with many of them in great detail, and J. Higgins' work is to be recommended especially in reference to the popular misconception of Eve as temptress and source of sin.¹⁴ However, we shall summarize some of the major points that emerge when the barriers of traditional perspectives are removed, and make some observations that place the Eve and Adam tale in the context of ancient Israelite life. Also, in the next chapter we shall examine in detail the troubling verse (3:16) that contains God's punitive charge to the woman and that, erroneously translated and understood, underlies item 4 above, namely the notion that childbirth is painful and cursed. More important, it forms the scriptural basis for the powerful assumption that God mandated male dominance over females. By correcting the translation and explaining the syntax, we shall challenge the traditional androcentric interpretations and offer a more accurate understanding of the text.

To begin with, let us consider the literary identity of the Eden account. Broadly speaking, Genesis 2-3 belongs simultaneously to two genres of folk literature: "creation myths" and "etiologies." Genesis 3 also contains fragments of a third genre, that of "wisdom parable" (see below, pp. 91-92). The simple tale clearly operates on many levels and conveys profound messages about human existence.

The "creation myth" genre represents the tale on its most overt level. The use of the word "myth" does not mean either that these two chapters of Genesis are false or that they are recounting some quaint and antiquated story. Rather, "creation myth" suggests that Genesis 2-3 is a tale dealing with origins; as such it is a tale meant to help human beings come to grips with the nature and meaning of their own existence. In this sense, the biblical creation stories differ fundamentally in purpose from scientific explanations or theories of origins. At the same time, the biblical accounts share with the creation stories of other ancient peoples the quest for an understanding of their own present reality rather than of their actual human origins. Genesis is perhaps technically nonmythological in that it does not relate the escapades of superhuman beings. Yet, it does belong to the genre of ancient mythology in its ultimate concern with the nature and meaning of human existence. It is a true *mythos*, a parable of the human situation. The ancient Hebrew writers, along with

their counterparts in Babylon, Memphis,* Athens, and Rome, crafted tales about people and god(s) that would help them conceptualize their own place in the cosmos.

It follows from this fundamental characteristic of ancient tales of creation that they tend to have a strong etiological flavor. In trying to deal with the realities of their own lives and societies, the largely anonymous contributors to mythic literature understood their present order to be the result of divine actions. From them, the etiology, or "explanation" of how things got to be the way they are, functioned as a sanction for the present order. Etiology helped prescientific people answer the perennial questions about how they fit into the natural and social worlds; and it also helped them to accept the answers. Etiologies thus cannot be read as statements of historical or scientific causality. The Roman historian Sallust, in the first century BCE, aptly characterized such products of the human struggle for understanding: "A myth has never happened. It happens every day."¹⁵

In considering the biblical narratives in Genesis 2-3 as myths of origin and as etiologies, it is helpful to recognize their archetypal value. Archetypes, according to one useful definition, "reveal and define form, showing how a truth of a moment has the same structure as an absolute or eternal one."¹⁶ Prototypes, in contrast, are formative events that happen in time and influence subsequent generations. In the Bible, the Exodus looms large as the ultimate prototypical event: it is reenacted and recounted so that the inheritors of the Exodus traditions can experience the values and meanings inherent in the original event.

The problem for the biblical creation stories is that they contain archetypes but are cast as prototypes by virtue of their place at the fore of what is the first great historical tradition ever recorded. The Eden narrative probably circulated as an independent and "pungent description" of every woman and every man. As the Pentateuch took shape, that description was placed at the beginning of Israel's national history.¹⁷ But the distinction between archetype and prototype should not thereby be blurred. To grasp the value of having stories about origins or "first" anything, one must appreciate the literary and conceptual value of "first" meaning "all" or "always."¹⁸ The characters in the creation story present the *essential* (archetypal) features of human life, not the *first*

*Memphis was an important city in ancient Egypt. Located just south of modern Cairo, it was the capital of the oldest Egyptian dynasty and is associated with one of the oldest creation stories; the "Memphite Theology of Creation," which goes back to the third millennium BCE.

(prototypical) humans in a historical sense. The features depicted for the "original" couple are the features thought by the ancient author to be shared by all: our differentiation from God on the one hand and from plant and animal life on the other. The Genesis tale is couched in temporal language because it presents human life, which exists in time, and not because the specific characters existed in time. In a sense the characters are symbolic of their kind.

With this understanding of the nature and role of Genesis 2 (and 3) as a creation story, we can turn to more specific and interrelated aspects of its language and message, notably as they deal with gender. It is important to remember in any analysis of gender in the Bible, with respect to God or human, that Hebrew is a gendered language. To take at face value the gender of a noun or of a verb inflected according to gender is to ignore or preempt those instances in which an inclusive, neutral, or general meaning may be intended. That is, certain words may be rendered as masculine in places where they are not meant to specify gender.

Perhaps the best example is the generic word for "human," *'adam*, which permeates the creation tales and appears frequently elsewhere in the Bible. This word is usually, if not universally, translated as "man." In most cases the gender specific value of the word "man" is thereby erroneously attached to a collective singular Hebrew word designating "human" life, as a category to be distinguished from God on the one hand and animals on the other.¹⁹

To translate *'adam* as "man" in the creation stories is to imply a priority for male existence and also to ignore a magnificent Hebrew wordplay. The word for the stuff from which the first human being is formed is *'adamah*, usually translated as "ground" or "earth." The words for "human" and for "ground" are thus connected phonetically and perhaps also etymologically. Texts such as Genesis 2:7, in their traditional renderings, do not communicate either the generic nature of "man" or the integral connection of humanity with its earthly matrix. Consider the Revised Standard Version's rendering:

Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being.

In order to capture the flavor and meaning of the original text, such verses ought to be rendered something like:

Then God Yahweh formed an *earthling* of clods from the *earth* and breathed into its nostril the breath of life; and the *earthling* became a living being.

Alternately, "human" might be substituted for "earthling" and "humus" (fertile soil) for "earth" in order to capture the pun and the assonance of the Hebrew:

Then God Yahweh formed a *human* from clods of the *humus* and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life, and the *human* became a living being.

After all, English "human" is not the combination of *hu* with *man* but rather is derived from a theoretical Indo-European root (*ghum*) meaning "earth" or "ground" from which comes Latin *humus* (earth) and Old English *guma* (man).

The obvious play on words should not, however, be taken as mere punning.²⁰ Names or substantives were not simply labels; they were also indicators of the very essence of the thing or creature designated. It is highly significant that the first creature is not inherently gendered, even though such distinctions were readily available. The term *'adam* tells us that the essence of human life is not its eventual classification into gendered categories but rather its organic connection to the earth. And the earth in this case is not general, vague, unspecified soil or ground but rather *'adamah*, that reddish brown substance, or humus, that is capable of absorbing water, being cultivated, and supporting life.²¹

At the very outset, human existence is thus portrayed as inextricably related to that which makes life possible, arable land. The agrarian orientation of the Israelites is at work in the shaping of the narrative of creation. Other imagery is present, namely the anthropomorphic idea of a creator God taking lumps of earth and fashioning them into a life form which then is vivified by the divine breath. Yahweh the sculptor is a metaphor drawn from another function served by the malleable clods of earth; such clods, or clay, served as the raw materials for making the ubiquitous and indispensable ceramic vessels and bricks of the ancient world. Yet the primacy of the agricultural imagery is apparent from the very positioning of verse 7 in the narrative.

The creation of the earth creature in verse 7 is the centerpiece of a longer passage (Gen 2:4b or 5 to 2:9) that is full of language of plant life.²² Indeed, let us not forget that Genesis 2 and 3 have a garden as their setting. Perhaps we are so familiar with the designation "Garden of Eden" that we fail to appreciate the role of growing things—plants and trees—in its organization and meaning. Scholars have long noticed the distinction between the opening of Genesis 1, with primal chaotic water everywhere (Gen 1:2, 6–7, 9–10), and the beginning of the second creation account in Genesis 2, without rain but with orderly rivers lying

to the east. The watery chaos of primeval existence in the first account is just one of several features Genesis 1 shares with Mesopotamian epics of creation.

But the second account bespeaks a Palestinian setting and a yearning for a place where waters flowed continuously: an "Eden," a place or an environment in which the constant fear of drought would be lifted from the anxious shoulders of the Israelite farmers. Life was not possible, according to Genesis 2:5, without two critical elements: rainfall and human labor. Let us look more closely at that verse.

- a. No bush of the field was yet on the land
- b. Nor had any grains of the field yet sprouted
- c. For God Yahweh had not sent rain upon the land
- d. Nor was there an *earthling* to work the *earth*.

[emphasis and translation mine]

The vocabulary of these lines is grounded in the agricultural world of ancient Israel. In line a, "bush of the field" is a phrase that reflects all growing things. While "fields" can mean either a cultivated or noncultivated expanse, the rather rare Hebrew word for bush apparently means shrubs or plants that grow in the wild.²³ In contrast, "grains of the field" in line b represents field crops, plants that are grown for consumption by people and domesticated animals, plants that were the essence of life for agrarians.

The next two lines correspond to the first two: the conditions of line c allowing for the situation in line a to be reversed, and the cumulative conditions of lines c and d allowing for the cultivation of life-sustaining crops to take place. With rainfall, general vegetation will appear; and with both humans and rain doing their part, grains will sprout up from the earth. Note also the way in which "land" and "earth" are used. The former (*ereṣ* in Hebrew) is a much broader term than the latter, *'adamah*. Although the word for "land" can mean earth or ground in certain instances, it can also be used in a more cosmic sense, to represent the antithesis of heaven (as in Gen 1:1; 2:1, 4). Even where it does mean ground, it is more inclusive; it can refer to unproductive, barren regions as well as arable places.²⁴ But "earth," as we have already explained, specifies arable soil.

But wait! God does not proceed to put the newly formed human out into the fields to work at growing grain. The reality of human existence in the highlands, as described in Chapter 3, does not yet materialize. Instead it is God and not the human who plants a garden, with fruit-bearing trees. Caught up in the cycle of labor-intensive activity needed

to produce grains in the hill country or to build terraces for hillside vineyards and orchards, what better situation could a highland farmer ask for? It is God who brings fruit-bearing trees to the stage of productivity, at which point the human guardians can tend them and collect the edible fruits. The humans have been spared the back-breaking labor of field agriculture and of establishing orchards and vineyards. Furthermore, a steady water supply assures the fertility of the plants.

The human is created in the middle of these two situations: one without rain or workers and hence without food as expressed in verse 5, and the other with availability of food temporarily established by God in verses 8-9. Because the creation of humanity occurs centrally to this arrangement, this passage is telling us that human existence is inextricably caught up with concern for sustenance. The Israelite highlanders, confronted with the daily reality of intensive labor, were drawn to the idea that life might be otherwise. Hence the narrative unfolds; it holds up the ephemeral state of Eden for a brief glimpse and then brings the humans at last into the real world. Why must this be so? Why must humans experience harsh reality? The narrative provides an etiological response to the precariousness of Israelite life, and Yahweh's speeches in Genesis 3 to the female and male give sanction to the apparently inevitable life-style of the Israelite highlanders (see below, pp. 92-94 and Chapter 5).

Let us return now to our lone human standing in the midst of a garden that provides sustenance and beauty, because both are apparently central to human life. While sustenance alone would be sufficient for animals, recognition of an intrinsic human need for more than mere survival is present in the phrase "pleasing to the eyes" (2:9). Differentiation of humans from lower life forms is already anticipated.

Animal life first appears in 2:19-20, but it does not constitute the completion of human existence. God does not intend for the unity of human life, the "one flesh" of 2:24, to consist of a single individual. Hence God casts the human into a comatose state, a state far closer to original nonexistence than is "sleep." The Hebrew of Genesis uses a word that is translated as "deep sleep" in many versions and is different from the word for ordinary sleep. It was a special term for the unconscious state necessary for the cosmic surgery that will finally bring about sexually differentiated human life.

Gendered life is introduced, and the language describing it establishes the connection between female and male. The relationship between the first two beings, the Woman and the Man (i.e., between any conjugal

pair), is set forth in the phrase "suitable counterpart." The traditional English translation, "help meet for him" (King James Version), has given rise to "helpmate." Close analysis of this phrase is thus essential, and the results are revealing. It consists of a noun, based on the verb "to help" and meaning "one who helps," and a prepositional phrase. The function of the latter becomes clear only by noting the ambiguity present in the former. That is, how does "one who helps" or "helper" stand in relationship to the one receiving help?

Traditional interpretations of this story would have us believe that a helper is an assistant or subordinate, who renders aid to a master or superior. Yet, in the Hebrew Bible the noun "helper" can refer to just the opposite, namely, to a superior, notably God, to whom one turns for help in time of distress. Think of the familiar words of Psalm 121:1-2: "From whence does my help come? My help will come from the Lord." Or, consider the etymology of the name Ezra, which is a shortened form of a theophoric name (containing the divine name) meaning "[God is] helper." Or look at Azariah, which means "Yahweh has helped" (one of the most popular names in the Bible, it is used for more than two dozen different individuals).

The noun "helper" can thus indicate either a superior or a subordinate. How can one resolve this ambiguity in any given case? The prepositional phrase in Genesis 2:18 and 20 provides the answer by telling us which kind of helper is meant. In fact, the answer is neither of the possibilities suggested above: the helper stands neither higher nor lower than the one being helped. The prepositional phrase establishes a nonhierarchical relationship between the two; it means "opposite," or "corresponding to," or "parallel with," or "on a par with."

In Genesis 2 the ring, or cyclic, structure of creation²⁵ is completed by the differentiation of human life into complementary female and male beings. Only now do specifically gendered words appear in the narrative, and only now are the creative acts of Yahweh complete. The creation of humanity in its sexually nuanced form brings to an end the sequence of creation begun when God took up a formless clod of earth and formed a human being. Subsequently God created plant and then animal life. Then the creative sequence is ended when the second human—the suitable counterpart—is formed. Unlike the linear arrangement of Genesis 1, where the creation of humanity constitutes the final, climatic creative act, the Genesis 2 structure has the creation of humanity enveloping the rest of creation, or at least that part of creation over which human beings can exercise control.²⁶

Feminists have long looked to Genesis 1 for affirmation of sexual equality. The verses describing God's final creative act (1:26-27) apparently place male and female on a par with each other:

And God said, "Let us make humanity [*ha'adam*] in our image, according to our likeness. . . . Then God created humanity in his image; in the image of God he created it; male and female he created them [translation mine].

Already in the nineteenth century, *The Woman's Bible* found in these verses a "plain declaration of the existence of the feminine element in the Godhead, equal in power and glory with the masculine. . . . Scripture, as well as science and philosophy, declare the eternity and equality of sex. . . . [with the] masculine and feminine elements, exactly equal and balancing each other."²⁷ Other feminists have followed Elizabeth Cady Stanton's lead. However, in their enthusiasm to find sexual equality in Scripture, they have not properly appreciated the largely biological orientation of these verses in the opening chapter of the Bible. In fact, the parity of male and female in Genesis 1 probably was not meant for anything beyond the pairing of male and female for procreative purposes.²⁸ The structure and purpose of Genesis 1 simply does not address the social world of humans.

But Genesis 2 does concern social relations. And if *The Woman's Bible* and other subsequent critics misconstrued the language of Genesis 1 as indicating social relations, they have also failed to appreciate that the structure and language of the second creation story presents humans as social beings. In the ideal world of Eden, male and female complement each other. In Genesis 2, before Eve is named—that is, before her symbolic identity as the "Mother of All the Living" is proclaimed (3:20)—a relationship aspect of the first couple's existence brings chapter 2 to a close.²⁹ Verse 24 declares, in a world not yet witness to childbirth or parenthood, that a couple's union supersedes the parent-child relationship. The conjugal bond rather than the parental bond is given priority. Only in marriage are male and female complementary parts of the whole, for the parent-child relationship is an intrinsically hierarchical one in a way that the wife-husband one is not.

Emergence to Reality: Genesis 3 Reconsidered

The traditional interpretations of Genesis 3 are, if anything, more firmly entrenched than those of Genesis 2. Postbiblical interpretations inter-

fer with our appreciation of the meaning and function of the story, and we must seek first to dismantle some of those obstacles. The introduction to this chapter suggests that the focus on Eve as the source of sin is not rooted in an intrinsic component of the Eden tale. It is time now to look more closely at the textual basis for our assertion that the focus on sin and punishment in the traditional exegesis of Genesis 3 is a distortion. Disobedience and its consequences clearly figure in the story of the first human pair; this is the characteristic way for a creation story to suggest that the assertion of independence from any authority is a feature of first (= all) human life. But to allow the theme of disobedience to be of paramount importance to our interpretative eyes is to oversimplify a rich and powerful narrative. Even worse, letting the idea of disobedience dominate our conceptual field means obliterating other features of the story that were equally important, and perhaps even more significant, for the ancient Israelites.

Why then should we seek to put aside the readings that have prevailed for over two millennia? Perhaps the paramount reason is that there is no explicit reference to sin³⁰ in the narrative purported by tradition and theology to be in essence about the beginning of sin in the world. None of the words that are part of the Hebrew vocabulary for sin and transgression are present in the story. Even when God utters the fateful words leading to the banishment of the primeval couple from their idyllic life in the well-watered garden, only the specific act—the eating of the fruit of a tree that was forbidden—is cited. Interpreters may label this act as disobedient; exegetes may consider it sinful. But *God* does not provide such a judgment within either the narration or the discourse of Genesis 3. Nor, as we have pointed out, does the Hebrew Bible ever associate any of the many sins later perpetrated individually or collectively by the children of Israel with the behavior of the woman and the man in Eden.

Not until Cain and Abel, the first naturally born humans, are involved in the act of murder does sin make its strange and fateful appearance, as a demon external to the infamous brothers. Sin then comes knocking—literally "couching"—at the door (Gen 4:7), ready to tempt people in any of their contacts with others. It may be an argument from silence to make much of the absence of sin from the vocabulary of the Eden narrative; but it is an argument that speaks audibly because not even the horrendous deed of the offspring of Eve and Adam is linked with a parental model of sinful disobedience. Even the prophets, whose writings are filled with harangues against the sinful behavior of the Israelites and other nations, never mention Eve or Adam. In their concern for

judgment, punishment, and banishment, the prophets could cogently cite the Eden story. Yet they do not.

The absence in the Hebrew Bible of an intrinsic identification between the acts in Eden with human proclivity for sin thus makes it difficult to look at Genesis 2-3 as a narrative dealing primarily with sin. Similarly, the etiological flavor of the story calls into question the traditional interpretations that focus on the supposed cause-and-effect relationship between the "sin" and the punishment. The very fact that the serpent is held accountable along with the woman and the man diminishes the truly human theme of disobedience to God's word. The participation of the serpent as a creature equally responsible for obeying God's word (which had not been directed toward it) and equally capable of transgression brings the etiological dimension to the fore. Here we have a sample of how people coped with their abhorrence or fear of a certain order of mysterious, apparently self-regenerating, and sometimes dangerous reptiles. No animal could "naturally" be so awesome and awful; it must have "done" something to end up that way. Similarly, humans should not naturally have such difficult life conditions as they did in ancient Palestine, where the tale originated. The etiological workings of the human mind suggest that something must have happened to have produced such a state. The act in question, the eating of a forbidden food, is appropriate for a folk explanation but hardly has the same force as does murder, in the Cain story, as a paradigm for human sinfulness.

If sin is to be removed from consideration as the basic thematic element of the Eden tale, what might take its place? The matter of vocabulary is surely important. We have already pointed out that the absence of certain words is significant and intentional. Similarly, the language that does dominate the narrative conveys meaning. The repetition of words and phrases is a characteristic way in which Hebrew literature provides emphasis for ideas or objects that the writers wish to convey to their audience. The Eden narrative is replete with such repetitions; yet they tend to be overlooked. The failure to take repetitions into account is a shortcoming of traditional interpretation and scholarship that only recently has come to light. The noted literary critic Robert Alter has pointed out that the Hebraic device of repeating words or phrases or even longer units is among the most difficult for western readers to appreciate:

One of the most imposing barriers that stands between the modern reader and the imaginative subtlety of biblical narrative is the extraordinary prominence of verbatim repetition. Accustomed as we are to modes of

narration in which elements of repetition are made to seem far less obtrusive, this habit of constantly restating material is bound to give us trouble, especially in a narrative that otherwise adheres so evidently to the strictest economy of means.³¹

One of the most common types of repetition, as scholars and commentators have long noted, is the reiteration of individual words. The repetition of key words (*Leitwörter*) as a sign of a motif of an episode nonetheless is not always visible to the reader of the Bible in translation. Most English translations carefully vary vocabulary, consistent with English stylistic norms, rather than repeat the selfsame English word each time the Hebrew word recurs. The failure of English translations to capture the reiterative force of the original is compounded by the fact that a single root can recur in Hebrew in verbal and nominal form. Both forms would clearly signify the same root and constitute part of a repetitive pattern, but this distinction is not always true in English. The passage under scrutiny here contains a prime example. In Hebrew, the verb "eat" and the noun "food" are developed from the same root, and the use of both noun and verb in a passage constitutes repetition. In English, "eat" and "food" do not constitute repetition.

Perhaps the most prominent theme word in the Eden tale is precisely the word just mentioned: the root *'kl*, "to eat." This root recurs in one form or another more frequently than any other word of these two chapters except "human/man/Adam" (*'adam*). It also figures prominently as a structural element in the story: its appearance in certain places in the narrative sets up correspondences and draws attention to pivotal features of the actions.³² This striking repetition and placement carries its own message; it tells us that the beginning of human existence coincides with a concern for food.

The narrator lives in a world in which he sees the Israelite struggle for sustenance as a dominating concern of daily life. Consequently, the first human (= all humanity) is presented as being concerned with food. The very first words that a living being hears in Genesis 2:16—"And the Lord God commanded the human, saying, 'You may eat freely of every tree of the garden'" [translation mine]—concern the existence of every supply. The storyteller is acutely aware that the existence of a food goes hand in hand with the availability of growing plants for sustenance. The negative equation set up in 2:5, in which no person plus no plants equal no creation (see above, p. 83), is restated in 2:16 in positive terms. A living being now exists and is shown the food supply that can sustain its life.

Original human consciousness, as set forth in the Eden story, thus consists of two vital aspects: the human's ability to hear and comprehend God's instructions and the human's need to know about the source of sustenance. These two features of human life are portrayed as inextricably linked. Eating in this scheme is not simply or primarily a vehicle for introducing the concept of disobedience. It is a central issue in itself. One can sense the profound anxiety about life, and about the food necessary to sustain life, in the pivotal use and frequent repetition of the root for "eat" and "food." The daily, central, interminable concern of the farmer in the highlands of Palestine has shaped the movement, focus, and vocabulary of the Eden narrative.

The classic statement of Martin Buber concerning the way a key word functions in a text is worth repeating, for it expresses clearly the powerful effect of repetition on the reader or listener. Buber, who worked with Franz Rosenzweig on a German translation of the Bible, took great pains to preserve in German the repeated Hebrew words and roots, for he recognized the dynamic quality of recurring terms:

I call it "dynamic" because between combinations of sounds related to one another in this manner a kind of movement takes place: if one imagines the entire text deployed before him, one can sense waves moving back and forth between the words. The measured repetition that matches the inner rhythm of the text, or rather, that wells up from it, is one of the most powerful means for conveying meaning without expressing it.³³

The concentrated repetition of a word both establishes a mood and expresses a theme. The mood in this case is the gnawing concern about the availability of sustenance. And the theme is the integral relationship between sustenance as essential to human life and the need to accept the difficulties of securing sustenance in the Israelite world. The difficulty is recognized in the speeches to the woman and man in 3:16-19, where the inevitability of that cycle of birth, toil, and death is given the sanction of divine will.

This brings us back to the issue of genre. Along with creation "myth" and etiology, Genesis 3 constitutes another sort of literary piece. It belongs to the genre of Israelite literature—wisdom—that addresses the realities of life, the particular difficulties involved in daily life, and the acceptance of those circumstances. The Hebraic wisdom tradition is characterized in part as a literature meant to help the individual cope with life. Biblical wisdom is most apparent in the sayings and aphorisms that are found in Proverbs. The tragic story of Job and the bold skepticism of the Preacher (Ecclesiastes) are the other major examples of

Hebraic wisdom, broadly conceived. But those books do not exhaust the instances of wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible. Embedded in historical, prophetic, and legendary materials are less conspicuous fragments of what can aptly be called wisdom.³⁴

Genesis 3 is just such a fragment. In terms of the structure, literary techniques employed (vocabulary and use of puns and *double entendres*), setting, characterizations, and even its "plot," Genesis 3 follows the form of a parable.³⁵ It might be even more accurate to call it a "wisdom tale," because it does concern the function of a wise agent (the "cunning" serpent) and the conferring of wisdom (3:6). Indeed, many scholars now recognize the background of wisdom in the Eden tale in terms of both its literary form and its existential concerns.³⁶ Unlike the pragmatic, instructional wisdom of a book like Proverbs, the third chapter of Genesis—like Job, Ecclesiastes, and certain Psalms—belongs to the speculative type of wisdom that deals with the meaning of the paradoxes and harsh facts of life.

Now, finally, genre brings us to the matter of gender. The prominent role of the female rather than the male in the wisdom aspects of the Eden tale is a little-noticed feature of the narrative. It is the woman, and not the man, who perceives the desirability of procuring wisdom. The woman, again not the man, is the articulate member of the first pair who engages in dialogue even before the benefits of the wisdom tree have been procured. This association between the female and the qualities of wisdom may have a mythic background, with the features of a Semitic wisdom goddess underlying the intellectual prominence of the woman of Eden.³⁷ Be that as it may, the close connection between woman and wisdom in the Bible is surely present in the creation narrative, although it is hardly limited to the beginning of Genesis. This relationship actually reaches its climax in the personification of Wisdom as a woman in Proverbs.³⁸ It relates probably also to the female gender of the Hebraic word for wisdom, *hokma*.

The Genesis text serves as preparation for what is to come in the portrayal of Woman Wisdom, of various wise women,³⁹ and of women acting wisely. We shall return in Chapter 7 to explore the dynamics of Everywoman Eve's role as wisdom figure. For now, it is important to note that the Eden tale sets forth a primal relationship between woman and the acquisition of whatever it is that the tree of knowledge provides. It portrays the female rather than the male as the first human being to utter language, which is the utterly quintessential mark of human life. And it has the female respond to the overtures of an animal described as the "shrewdest of all the wild animals that Yahweh God had made"

(3:1). The serpent at this point is not a cursed creature. Hence the woman's dialogue with the prudent reptile should be considered not a blot on her character but rather a comment on her intellect.

The poetic form of the oracles (3:14–19) that provide the climax of the Eden story is another feature that relates this tale to speculative wisdom literature. In the next chapter the poetic nature of the oracles will be examined as part of the literary analysis of God's oracle to the woman in 3:16. For now, the poetic structure of the oracles figures in a consideration of the time frame of the whole tale. We have not yet considered the date of the Genesis 2–3 story and have no desire to enter into a prolonged discussion of the chronology of this or any piece of biblical writing. Most biblical literature is notoriously difficult to assign to a chronological scheme, because most parts of the Bible are the result of a process that took place over the course of generations, if not centuries. Materials from varying ages were thus inextricably merged into a finished product.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the Genesis 2–3 creation story is generally considered to be part of the oldest narrative tradition of the entire Hebrew Bible. Scholars treat it as part of the J (for "Jehovah" or Yahwist) tradition, with "J" being a rubric for the anonymous and gifted author or compiler of many of the most memorable narratives in the Pentateuch. The J source is normally dated to the tenth century,⁴⁰ at the very beginning of the Israelite monarchy. Within the J materials, the poetic oracles of the Genesis 3 narrative have been identified as a special and individual type of document, a truly unique literary unit.⁴¹ Because the fragments of poetic material embedded in the narrative tend to be among the most archaic pieces of Pentateuchal literature, it is possible that the oracles preserve parts of an even earlier form of the Eden story, for which the prose portions are reworked tenth-century versions. In short, on formal or literary grounds, it is entirely conceivable that these poetic oracles of Genesis 3 predate the tenth century and thus belong to the formative period of Israel's existence.

The content of those oracles provides further clues to the life setting. As we have already suggested, all three of the oracles share at least an etiological character. Yet all three need not be lumped together if for no other reason than the address to the serpent includes a curse, but God does *not* curse either the woman or the man. In the latter case, however, the ground itself is cursed in the context of God's words to the man. The earth is seen as not being the naturally productive substance that it potentially could be. Therefore, to cast aside another common misinterpretation of the story, human existence itself is not cursed; but it comes

closer to being cursed in God's address to the man than in the address to the woman.

Analysis of the divine address to the woman is central to our task, but a few remarks about the man's situation will help set the contextual scene that is crucial to our whole approach. The oracle to the man set forth the material basis for human life in the highlands of Palestine. In Genesis 2:15, the human is placed in the wonderful garden "to work it and to keep it" [emphasis mine]. The antecedent of the pronouns (*it* and *it*) is "garden of Eden." But now, in reality, it is not a garden (the tending of which is not viewed as arduous), but rather the accursed ground itself that the man must face. The fruits of tree and vine may be part of the highland economy, but once planted they do not require the unremitting labor that is prescribed in 3:17. Only the growing of field crops—of cereals—requires an annual cycle of labor-intensive tasks: plowing, sowing, weeding, harvesting.

The human meant "to work the earth" and so to bring forth the "grains of the field" (2:5 and 3:18) for bread (3:19) has at last entered the environment where such tasks constitute the core of the agrarian routine. But the earth resists; without significant human intervention only the tough and inedible "thorns and thistles" (3:18) sprout forth. The famous phrase, "by the sweat of your brow" (3:19), has captured for all time the intense labor required to grow cereals in that environment. This graphic phrase accompanies the more abstract word "toil" (3:17). Together they depict the difficult nature of humanity's intrinsic connection to the ground in the Palestinian highlands. The language about sweat and work is not in essence metaphoric, although it certainly has subsequently been applied to a wide variety of situations in which hard work of any sort is involved. Rather, it is realistic language, describing a life that appears perhaps too difficult to the highlanders of Palestine, who know that to the east in Mesopotamia (if not also to the southwest in Egypt), the riverine environments and the flat stretches of arable land provide ecosystems that are somewhat less taxing of human energies.

The content of God's address to the man thus indicates a sensitivity to the exigencies of the real world. The purpose of such a wisdom parable or *masal* was to help the audience to which it was directed accept an aspect of reality that could not effectively be conveyed by more direct means.⁴² Understanding the contextual reality of the Israelites is thus central to interpreting the original message and function of Genesis 3 as a wisdom tale. The tale, and in particular the oracles, must not be lifted from their social and literary context. They must be seen primarily as helping highland settlers cope with life's demands, difficult as they may

be. If that be the case for God's words to the first man, Everyman, with respect to the laborious character of his daily life, so also is it the case for the first woman, Everywoman. We turn now to see what a close reading of the oracle to the woman in Genesis 3:16 can reveal about the lives of Israelite women and the demands placed on them.

5

The Genesis Paradigms for Female Roles, Part II: Genesis 3:16

Perhaps no single verse of scripture is more troublesome, from a feminist perspective, than is the divine oracle to the woman in Genesis 3:16. Ever since the earliest translations of the Bible, which are contemporaneous with the oldest extant extrabiblical sources connecting Eve and Eden with sin and suffering,¹ the verse has been rendered in a way that communicates two persistent beliefs about female existence: first, women are associated with severe pain in childbirth; second, they are portrayed in relationship subordinate to men.

Virtually every translation, from the most ancient to the most recent, provides a reading that conveys both those understandings of God's charge to the woman. The oldest translation, known as the Septuagint, was completed in Egypt in the first century BCE. For Genesis 3:16 it reads:

I will greatly multiply thy pains and thy moanings;
in pain shall you bring forth children.
And thy submission shall be to your husband,
and he shall have authority over you.

The Vulgate (Latin) translation of the fourth century CE renders the first line rather differently, and it makes the third line even stronger, with respect to suggesting male dominance. St. Jerome gives us:

I will multiply your toils and your conceptions; in grief you will bear children, and you will be under the power of your husband, and he will rule over you.²

Similarly, the most recent English versions might vary the vocabulary but they do not significantly alter the interpretation of the Hebrew established by the ancient versions. The new Jewish Publication Society translation of Genesis, completed in 1962, provides the following: