

'The narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis is a perfect example of misogyny.'

In the critical examination of this statement, one must first define terms in order to accurately contend with the reasoning and argumentation behind its proposed truth. Importantly, 'misogyny' is here pre-modified by the attributive adjective 'perfect'—defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as 'complete and correct in every way, of the best possible type or without fault'.¹ Therefore—in scrutinizing the above statement—one must not only consider the presence of misogyny within the narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis; one must also assess the degree to which it is present.

Derived from the ancient Greek *miso* ('hatred') and *gyne* ('woman'), misogyny is an etymologically simple term to define. However, one cannot historically uproot the term without bringing up the fertile ground from which its contemporary usage was cultivated. Politicised and popularised by the 1960s second-wave feminist movement, the historical definition of misogyny has been undeniably reframed by an academic, ideological, and institutional shift towards social justice and theories of interlocking systems of oppression—for example, the ever-growing influence of 'intersectionality': the analytical framework and ideological lens of Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (1989). Modern framings of misogyny have expanded upon its terse originary definition to describe it as the 'law enforcement' branch of a patriarchal system—one which has 'the overall function of policing and enforcing its governing norms and expectations'.² In its contemporary form, misogyny is no longer precisely about hating women; '[i]t is about controlling them'.³

However, despite a deliberate expansion of the term's reach, the weight carried by the etymological definition is still leveraged even by contemporary academics who encourage an intersectional understanding of misogyny⁴—the blunt brazenness of the word invokes an affective and hard-hitting response that terms like 'sexism' simply cannot. Regardless—as the Western cultural landscape surrounding race, gender, and sexuality has changed over recent decades—misogyny has become a rhizomatic term within the academic, political, and social spheres; its meaning has been proactively loosened from the Greek-derived singular definition and broadened to cover an alleged diverse application across modern society.

In order to assess the degree to which misogyny is present within the narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis—in so much as the function and usage of the term is ideologically charged—one finds oneself instantly positioned with no choice but to concede ground on the linguistic battlefield; that is to say that from the outset, the statement is already set in place to be examined through an ideological lens. Therefore, one

¹ Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2023) <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/perfect> [Accessed Monday 6th March 2023].

² Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) p. 78.

³ Kate Manne, 'The Logic of Misogyny', *Boston Review*, 11 July 2016.

<https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/kate-manne-logic-misogyny/> [accessed Thursday 2nd March 2023].

⁴ Gail Ukockis, *Misogyny: The New Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

cannot accurately contend with the statement without first consulting the proponents of the ideology from which the word's contemporary usage developed. Accordingly, this essay seeks to examine the commentaries and critiques of feminist scholars to investigate the degree to which 'the narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis is a perfect example of misogyny'.

In 1978, American feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible published *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. In an attempt to redeem Scripture from the patriarchal society in which the Hebrew literature is set, Trible's work—widely considered ground-breaking in feminist biblical scholarship—challenges patriarchal readings and seeks salvation through new interpretations. The foundations for this reformist approach are laid five years prior within Trible's 1973 journal article *Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation*; within which, she identifies a 'hermeneutical challenge' to 'translate biblical faith without sexism'.⁵ Taking this line of reasoning, Trible attempts to redeem Genesis from patriarchal readings and places confidence in the idea that the text itself 'negates patriarchy in crucial ways' and 'does not legitimate the oppression of women'.⁶

Within Trible's critique of Genesis, she contends with the idea that female subordination is scripturally inherent. For example, God's creation of man first (Gen. 2:7) and woman last (Gen. 2:22) has for centuries instilled the predominant interpretation that men are superior to women. In Trible's rebuttal to this belief, with reference to Creation (Gen. 1:27–28), she points out that humankind is created last but given dominion over all previously created living things. Therefore, in continuity of this principle, she rejects the claim of female inferiority by positing that woman may in fact be seen as the culmination of Creation.⁷ In further response to the patriarchal dogma surrounding Genesis, Trible addresses the belief that the existence of woman is derivative. She draws a parallel between woman being formed from man's side (Gen. 2:22–23) and man being formed from the earth (Gen. 2:7). She asserts that—despite this fact—no one suggests that man is therefore subordinate to the ground.⁸ For Trible, these pre-existing notions of female inferiority are a matter of education and interpretation that can be expelled through a feminist reading of Genesis.

Based on a centuries-old 'misogynous reading' that has 'acquired a status of canonicity',⁹ Trible believes that the purveyors of both oppositional perspectives—the misogynist and feminist alike—are essentially starting from the same default position—one that presupposes and thereby fortifies the 'misogynous reading' as canonical. Although the Hebrew texts are set within a patriarchal culture, it is Trible's belief that

⁵ Phyllis Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1973), pp. 30–48 (p. 31) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1461386> [accessed Thursday 9th March 2023].

⁶ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p. 102.

⁷ Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', p. 36.

⁸ Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 101–102.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Genesis insists upon a fundamental equality before God—that the complimentary nature of man and woman forming ‘one flesh’ (Gen. 2:24) necessarily equates to equal status.

For Trible, the problem is not biblical; therefore, Genesis is not irreformable. In order to remove the patriarchal biases within past exegeses, the text need only be re-read, recovered, and appropriated in line with the enterprise of modern feminism.

However, many critics of Trible’s reformist approach deem this egalitarian perspective an ‘interpretive illusion’ of “soft” feminism.

One such critic is fellow feminist academic Pamela J. Milne—contributing author, alongside Trible, to the 1995 book *Feminist Approaches to the Bible*. It is within which Milne refers to “soft” and “hard” feminism in accordance with feminist theologian Beverley Wildung Harrison, claiming a hard feminist approach would instead identify that ‘sexism is to be located in the very structures of our society’; it would instead ask ‘whether the sexism of the Bible and its interpretation is a matter of superficial patriarchal bias or whether it is integral to the very structure of the biblical tradition’.¹⁰

For Milne and the hard feminists, the attempt to recover ‘a sacred scripture that is not patriarchal’¹¹ in texts like Genesis has become a lost cause; they no longer seek to grant such ‘non-reformable biblical texts’¹² a chance of redemption. In fact, according to Milne, the concepts of female inferiority and subordination within Genesis ‘formed the basis for later deprecatory patriarchal Christian theologies of woman’.¹³ Overall, Milne considers the past efforts of appropriation through a feminist interpretation to have been ‘long’ and ‘generally unsuccessful’.¹⁴

Of course, Milne is not alone in her critique of Trible’s assertions. Within *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible’s First Story*, David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell are equally unable to share the interpretive optimism of Trible: they describe an entire social world borne out of Genesis 2–3 where humans are valued based upon gender, women are subsequently subdued, and human sexuality is given but one legitimate expression.¹⁵ The same can be said of Yarra Theological Union’s Anne Gardner. Within *Genesis 2: 4b–3: A Mythological Paradigm of Sexual Equality or of the Religious History of Pre-Exilic Israel?*, Gardner systematically deconstructs Trible’s main arguments in a point-by-point consideration of both strengths and weaknesses. For the most part, Gardner’s rebuttals are concerned with ancient mythological background

¹⁰ Pamela J. Milne, ‘The Patriarchal Stamp of Scripture: The Implications of Structuralist Analyses for Feminist Hermeneutics’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1989), pp. 17–34 (p. 19) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002094> [accessed Monday 20th March 2023].

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹² Pamela J. Milne, ‘Genesis From Eve’s Point of View’, *The Washington Post*, 26 March 1989. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/03/26/genesis-from-eves-point-of-view/dc371184-1f4c-4142-ac2d-d5efee72a0da> [accessed Monday 20th March 2023].

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Gender, Power and Promise: The Subject of the Bible’s First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 38.

material and Hebrew translations more so than feminist interpretation. However, in contradiction to Tribble's egalitarian reading of biblical complementarianism between the sexes, Gardner deems Genesis 2–3 to be 'strongly sexist' and the story of Adam and Eve to be understood as 'a warning to husbands to exercise control over their wives'.¹⁶

Having linguistically set the criteria for the degree to which misogyny is present as 'complete' and 'without fault',¹⁷ it is clear that one cannot unequivocally assert that '*the narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis is a perfect example of misogyny*'. Furthermore, having consulted the proponents of the ideology from which the term's contemporary usage developed, it is clear that feminist scholars themselves cannot unanimously agree upon the degree to which misogyny is present. In the final analysis, one must acknowledge that there is a level of complexity and nuance surrounding this issue that is simply not afforded to it by the phraseology of this statement.

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¹⁶ Anne Gardner, 'Genesis 2: 4b–3: A Mythological Paradigm of Sexual Equality or of the Religious History of Pre-Exilic Israel?', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol 43 (1990), pp. 1–180 (p. 15).

¹⁷ Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2023)

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