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CAN THE STORY
OF EVE
(GENESIS 2-3)

Be Interpreted as Feminist?

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Summary of Genesis 2-3 and The Traditional Interpretation.

Genesis 2-3 describes another account of creation, with more detail than Genesis 1. It is generally assumed that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2-3 have different authors, and Brown observes that the former has a biological focus while the latter focuses on social roles (2017, 256). This is significant from a feminist perspective because Genesis 2-3 assigns gender roles to the archetypal humans as Adam and Eve, thereby asserting that all men and women should fulfil their respective roles.

In Genesis 2, God creates Adam from “the dust of the ground” and places him in the garden of Eden (2:7-8). God observes that it is not good for Adam to be alone, and so creates “a helper as his partner”, as described in the NRSVUE (2:18). God describes Eve’s creation in these terms, **אֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ** - ezer knegdo. Translated in the NRSVUE as “a helper as his partner” (2:18), she is named woman for “out of Man this one was taken” (2:23). Woman is tempted by a serpent to eat from the tree that God has forbidden, and persuades Adam to eat the fruit as well, resulting in their fall from God’s grace (3:1-13). Woman’s punishment is to be ruled by her husband, and she is named ‘Eve’ because she is “the mother of all living,” (3:16, 3:20). Due to the aetiological nature of the Genesis 2-3 narrative, the traditional interpretation has been that Adam and Eve reflect the natures of all men and women after the fall. Therefore, it has traditionally been argued that Genesis 2-3 presents us with evidence that all women, following Eve, have a propensity for evil, and that God ordained for women to be ruled over by their husbands (Gomola 2014, 81).

A Feminist Account of Genesis 2-3: A Misreading.

Feminist theologians such as Phyllis Trible and Reuven Kimelman argue that Adam is intended to be ungendered before Eve’s arrival, so Man and Woman were created at the same time and are therefore equal.

Trible argues that Adam only becomes male when Eve is made, but before Eve, Adam is a groundling of the earth, therefore not man and not gendered (1978, 77). In Hebrew: God formed **אָדָם** - ha’adam (earth creature) from **אֲדָמָה** - ha-adama (the earth) (Trible, 1978, 77) (2:7). However, ha-adam is a grammatically masculine word, suggesting that Adam was gendered even before he was officially conceived as man (Trible 1978, 80). Kimelman agrees on Adam’s non-gendered being, arguing for a translation of 1:27 Adam’s creation. That God created it not him, ‘it’ in the masculine here can be explained through Hebrew’s requirement that ‘it’ have a grammatical gender even when describing an ungendered object (Kimelman, 1996, 12).

Even if one is to adopt the view that Adam is non-gendered before Eve, he becomes gendered in Genesis 3 and comes to represent the archetypal man. Adam is associated with male and thus, understanding Adam as gender-neutral only furthers the othering of Woman. Trible and Kimelman’s interpretation of a genderless Adam is not empowering to women because only Adam is afforded the luxury of neutrality. Eve is only ever incidental to Adam, called “Woman” because she was taken “out of man” (2:23) Eve or Woman is explicitly told that she is to be subjugated by Adam once he is a man (3:16), an understanding of Adam as non-gendered does not excuse the hierarchical attitudes present in Genesis 2-3. Adam names ‘each living creature’ who is formed by God for him, which implies that Adam is superior to the animals (2:18-20). Eve is created after the animals, entering into an existing hierarchical structure.

Man’s superior power over women is established as Eve is one of multiple attempts by God to find Adam a helper. This implies that Eve is not the same rank as Adam but is inferior to him as the animals are. While Man gets to name the animals, Woman, who serves the same role as the animals – helping Adam – is compared to them. Although Eve may maintain some superiority to the animal in that she



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succeeds in fulfilling a role, it can be maintained that she is inferior to Adam as the animals are. Eve and the creatures could not be created or identified without Adam, and therefore their mere existence is dependent upon their utility to him. Understanding Adam, the first person, as non-gendered only categorises women as different, as the Other while men are the default, and this is not equality. Adam is the first human, Eve the second, though they are not made in the same way, signifying their inequality to one another. From Tribble's account, we could conclude that Adam is dependent on Eve for his distinction as male, therefore he is not her superior. However, this would be a misreading because it assumes ha-adam as entirely gender neutral, even though throughout the Old Testament ha-adam is used in the context of a man (Kawashima, 2006, 48). Tribble's interpretation is a minority opinion among Bible scholars and does not take into account the rest of the Hebrew Bible (Kawashima, 2006, 47). Furthermore, Kimelman's assumption requires an assumption that the author of Genesis 2-3 already regarded Adam and Eve as equals, which does not align with the narrative order of their creation - Adam first and Eve second - or the patriarchal context of the rest of the Old Testament. Therefore, understanding Adam as non-gendered is problematic within a feminist interpretation of Eve, as the claim that Adam is ungendered lacks adequate support. Furthermore, even if Adam were ungendered, his supposed neutrality would still position Eve as the Other.

Another argument from the feminist perspective tsela - ,צִדָּה that the traditional translation of 'rib' (2:21) which can also be understood as 'side', implying an equality between Adam and Eve, and therefore Man and Woman. Gomola gives a few reasons for this reading, one being that Adam very clearly owns his 'rib' whereas the ownership of his therefore placing more onus of Eve's creation

on God rather than Adam (Gomola, 2014, 83). 'Side' also implies an equality between Adam and Eve as they are created *beside* each other, making them duplicates rather than creator and created. The BDB translates צִדָּה as either rib or side, although it should be noted that other uses of צִדָּה to mean side, such as Ex.25:12 (side of an arc) and Ex.37:3 (side of a tabern), most often refers to objects *not* bodies. Tribble comments on this, stating that the significance of Adam's rib is overemphasised, as what really creates Eve is divine power, not Adam (Gomola, 2014, 83). These two inferences miss the central theme of hierarchy present in Genesis 2-3. Adam is made from 'the dust of the ground' (2:7), the ground which God makes just prior to Adam's creation (2:4). If we acknowledge that Genesis 2 already assumes hierarchy before Eve's creation, then we can conclude that the substances Adam and Eve are made of imply an inequality between the two. Some may object to the notion that distinction in itself implies inequality between the two. However, as seen in this narrative, the differences between Adam (Man) and Eve (Woman) perpetuate patriarchal ideas that value women only by virtue of their utility to men. This assumption enables the view that the omnipotent God rules absolutely, while Adam's creation from the earth renders him subservient to God, and Eve's creation from Adam's biology renders her subservient to both Adam and God.

God could have just as easily made Eve from the earth, but he did not. Therefore, the specific wording of rib or side matters not, as in both cases the material she is made out of is fundamentally different to and reliant on Adam's prior existence. This order of creation, Eve's reliance on Adam to exist, implies a hierarchy of creation. Gomola makes the point that the substance of a rib is more complex than earth, and in this way, Eve is implied as a superior being (2014, 83). However, when we consider that Adam had to exist first and that he was created with a level of complexity that entails the

possession of a rib, the argument that Adam was created as less complex than Eve begins to lack appeal. Furthermore, it seems that Adam and Eve's creations are analogous to birth, in which case the party acting as mother has an inescapable 'created-from' relationship with its offspring. That is, Adam (Man) has a created-from relationship to the ground because that is what he came from, and spends most of his time on, especially in an agricultural society in which a man would feel connected to the earth. He uses the land for natural resources that will help him survive, and is therefore dependent on that from which he was created. Eve (Woman), on the other hand, is taken from Adam's rib. She is therefore connected to Adam in a way that he is connected to the land, but not to her. He need not rely on Eve for his creation, but Eve must rely on him for hers. This is not a depiction of a relationship between two equals, as Adam is framed as above Eve in the hierarchy. This reading remains the same whether or not Eve is made from Adam's "rib" or "side," and therefore is not feminist.

Lastly, a feminist interpretation of Genesis 2-3 might include a discussion of the term 'helper', עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ- ezer kenegdo, and whether Eve is made for Adam. That is because ezer gives connotations of strength, ezer is 'one that can be relied upon' and kenegdo translates roughly to 'corresponding to' (Myers, 2013, 85; Gomola, 2014, 84). William L. Holladay translates עֵזֶר as "helper" and עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ as "his counterpart", a possessive version of the word root as עָזַר which translates to "opposite" or "corresponding to" (1972, 569, 481). The presence of his here is significant, as it emphasises how Eve's being is made to rely on Adam's existence. Genesis 2:23 clarifies this point, naming her 'woman': אִשָּׁה isha, taken from אִישׁ ish, 'man' (Holliday, 1972, 87, 89). The woman is named just as she is created, in reference to man, "for out of Man this one was taken" (2:23). Myers idea that Eve is being described here as a suitable helper equal to Adam, but it does not seem that a suitable helper described in terms of

Adam's existence is a description of an equal. Gomola concludes that this is the influence of misogynist translations of the Bible (2014, 84). However, this analysis is only concerned with defining Eve before she goes against God's word. Eden is paradise, and in Genesis 3-4 Adam and Eve fall into the mortal world (3:23), Eve's punishment is to be subjugated by Adam (3:16). Eve's role is outlined as part of her punishment, to be ruled over by her husband and for childbirth to be painful (3:16). Eve is mentioned at the beginning of Genesis 4 referred only as Adam's wife whose only action is becoming pregnant twice more, after which her importance in the Hebrew Bible diminishes (4:1) (Myers 2013, 74). So, although the Eve of Eden might have experienced some kind of equality with Adam, she is not afforded that luxury when in the mortal world and she is reduced to the role of child bearer. Although this is the end of both Adam and Eve's narratives, we rarely see female characters after Eve who at any point in their narratives have access to the kind of agency Eve has when she eats the fruit, marking with significance that her narrative ends only as Adam's wife. Therefore, as mortal women outside of Eden are still doomed to be subjugated by men, the depiction of Eve in Genesis 2-3 is not feminist.



Eve as Beauvoir's 'Other' and Adam as the 'Subject'.

The feminist re-interpretations of Eve I have examined above are attempts to interpret Eve as equal to Adam. However, all of these arguments that Adam is ungendered, that Eve is made from Adam's side rather than his rib, or that she is a strong helper equal to Adam- all define Eve through her relation to Adam. A useful mode of examining the role of Eve is presented by Simone De Beauvoir in her examination of the role of woman (Beauvoir, 1948, p.26). Beauvoir argues that women are oppressed because they are regarded as the Other while man is the Subject (Beauvoir, 1948, 26). A woman is defined in reference to man, whereas a man can simply exist

independent of his relations to another (Beauvoir, 1948, p.26). Man is the default, the whole self and the essential but woman is different, the divided self, and the inessential (Beauvoir, 1948, 78). In many ways, Eve epitomises the role of the Other, as she is different from the first man, Adam, and created from his bodily excess. Eve, to be truly feminist, should be able to be interpreted without reference to Adam. Defining Eve only with reference to Adam, whether she is considered equal to or less than him, still Others Eve. To consider that Adam begins genderless, as Tribble argues, solidifies Eve's Otherness.

Beauvoir argues that men are able to access an innate sense of relational impartiality, and that the position of 'neutral' is implicitly only available to men, as they are arranged to be the subject (Beauvoir, 1948, 25). This sentiment of neutrality is evidenced in the reason for Adam's creation without the imposition of gender, that is, the will of an ungendered. When compared to Eve, who is created to fulfil the will of a man, she is not afforded the same neutrality, and therefore, embodies the female Other. Some have argued, like Brown, that Eve's fall from grace is her becoming the Other, and that her transition into being subjugated only begins after she sins (Brown, 2017, 289). However, Eve's Otherness is baked into her very existence as she is made from Adam, and therefore always defined in reference to him. The othering of Eve, the archetypal role model for women, only solidifies the oppression of women. Therefore, Eve in Genesis 2-3 cannot be read as feminist.

Genesis 2-3 is intrinsically patriarchal; therefore, it cannot be read as Feminist.

I have argued that in Genesis 2-3 Eve is the Other in both the traditional and feminist interpretations because she is always defined in relation to Adam. She does not and cannot exist of her own accord. Daly argues 'if God is Male, then Male is God' (Daly, 1973, 54). However, this extends to Adam too.

If God is Male, and creates the primary human Adam as a male, then Male is God, Man is primary, and Woman is secondary (Daly, 1973, 9). Daly also notes that Eve's first sin, the corruption of Adam pits femininity against holiness (Daly, 1973, 48).

Eve as the archetypal woman implies that women have a greater propensity to sin – which is not a representation of womanhood that empowers female readers. Eve, as far as the interpretations this essay has examined, remains not only subservient to Adam but also only defined in relation to him. After the fall, Eve gives Adam two sons and then fades into obscurity, modelling androcentric, or male-centred, gendered norms which reduces women to their role as wife and mother. This is a theme consistently found throughout the Hebrew Bible, in the narratives of women such as Bethsheba, Dena or Tamar; all female characters presented through a male lens. Therefore, it seems that this patriarchal Othering of Eve originates in the biblical narrative itself and is so bonded to her character that this influence is found even in modern feminist explanations of her character.

Conclusion.

To conclude, through no lens can the character of Eve in Genesis 2-3 be interpreted or re-interpreted to be feminist as the original text is rooted in patriarchal ideals. It is impossible to interpret Eve in Genesis 2-3 without reference to Adam, so in this way, Eve remains as the Other and Adam as the Subject. By presenting Adam and Eve as the archetypes of humanity, Genesis 2-3 promotes patriarchal ideas that women are meant to be 'rule(d) over' by men (3:16). To achieve justice for women within the religious realm, there needs to be religious representation in which women are not tainted by their status as the Other and are the Subjects in their own narrative. This is a status which Eve in Genesis is unable to achieve, even after feminist exegesis.

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