

EVE, THE MOTHER OF US ALL

May 8, 2011, Mother's Day

Why bother with Eve? In this bastion of liberal religion, why rake up old myths? In this faith community of mostly humanists or humanist leaning Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Pagans, and others, why examine an ancient myth that most of us reject? What relevance does Eve have to our mothers and ourselves?

Two weeks ago I told you that our English language had two primary sources: Shakespeare and the St. James Bible. Today I tell you that Western Civilization, in which we live and move and have our being had two major sources. They are the philosophies of Greece and Hebrew culture, from which our primary faiths developed. Our fondness for rational thought comes from the Greeks. However, the Hebrew culture influences our ideas of *how things came to be* and *how things ought to be*.

We can think of Genesis as composed of stories that answer the question, *why* or *how come?* When the ragtag bunch of Hebrews who followed someone like Moses from Egypt looking for a better land, they and their descendents asked why it was okay to take Canaan, which was already populated with some fairly peaceful people.

The answer involved a long-ago progenitor named Abraham, AND a more recent fellow—Joseph. God promised the land to Abraham; but somehow because of Joseph and his family a lot of the folks ended up in Egypt, slaving for the Pharaoh. But the land really belonged to the Hebrews; therefore it was okay to kill the Canaanites and take it.

The Adam and Eve myth evolved to answer similar questions: How did we get here originally; and, one that still haunts us today—why is life so difficult? Why is childbirth in the human species so painful, and sometimes fatal to the mother; and why is cultivating food and/or earning sufficient money to support a family so exhausting, sometimes debilitating?

The first version of the myth in Genesis in which God created man and woman at the same time answered the first question, and the second version in which Eve's disobedience becomes the reason for all the difficulties of life the second question.

A note: when the Torah developed, and later the Bible, there were often several versions of a story. This happened for many reasons; one was that there was an original story, and then later scribes and writers and scholars thought more about the story and subsequent developments, and decided they could improve on it. However, they often did not take out the original story, but left it in. Most scholars think this is why we have two versions of the Creation Story in Genesis.

Since, in the world of biblical scholarship, simpler usually means older, most scholars (and all feminist scholars) think that the first story is the original one. And all, I mean ALL feminist scholars think that the second story's author was misogynist. Thanks to the author of that second story, women have been regarded as the source of all evil in the Western world for millennia. 6

Let me note also that there are other myths in other cultures with similar stories and results. The story of Pandora from the Greek pantheon also makes woman the cause of all ills. However, it is primarily the myth of Eve that provided (and still provides) the basis for regarding women as secondary and inferior humans in Western Civilization.

Thus, feminist religious scholars spent a great deal of time and intellectual effort to read and interpret Genesis, especially the story of Eve, in a more positive light. Carol Meyers, in her book, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, does a close reading of Genesis 3:16, in which God curses Eve with painful childbirth and names Adam as her master. She gives several translations—the Revised Standard Version, one of the more recent versions translates 3:16 thusly:

I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing;

in pain you will bring forth children,

yet your desire shall be for your husband,

and he shall rule over you.

In doing a close reading, Ms. Meyers retranslates each word from the Hebrew, considers alternate readings, and emerges with this version:

I will greatly increase your toil and your pregnancies;

(Along) with travail shall you beget children,

For to your man is your desire,

And he shall predominate over you.

Ms. Meyers comments:

Genesis 3, as a wisdom tale, addresses the conditions

to which the highland settlers had to adapt. It deals with elementary questions about life and its hardships, about the endless and unremitting efforts it requires. The gnawing questions are addressed as to why life is so difficult and why there is so much labor for simple survival. (Meyers, Carole, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Oxford University Press, New York, p. 96 & 118)

I must confess that although I appreciate Ms. Meyer's work, for she goes on to ask whether it makes sense to regard God's words as prescriptive forever in a very different context, I do not find a great deal of comfort in the outcome of her scholarly effort. Surely there must be a better reinterpretation of the myth. Let us look at some elements of the Genesis story again.

In the Genesis 2 story there is a fairly long passage telling how God created the earth, which is completed by these words: *the Lord God made trees grow up from the ground, every kind of tree pleasing to the eye and good for food; and in the middle of the garden he set the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.* (Genesis 2:9)

Then God warns Adam: *You may eat from any tree in the garden...except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; the day you eat from that, you are surely doomed to die. (Genesis 2:16)*

This is followed by the very improbable creation of Eve from the rib of Adam, his acceptance of her as a suitable companion, followed rapidly by the serpent's temptation, who tells her, *Of course you will not die, for God knows that, as soon as you eat it (the fruit) your eyes will be opened and you will be like God himself, knowing both good and evil. (Genesis 3:4)*

Eve, of course eats, gives some to Adam, God finds out, and expels them from the garden with sentences of hard labor. Then he reflects on events, with these words: *The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; what if he now reaches out and takes fruit from the tree of life also, and eats it and lives forever? (Genesis 3:22)*

Aha! We already know that Yahweh is a jealous god. There shall be no other god but God. Could it be that he did not want any competition? Humans had learned the difference between good and evil. They had, in truth, come to consciousness. They were, indeed, godlike. They could not be allowed to achieve immortality.

Thus Eve, curious Eve, gave us the world, as Barbara Harrison said, the beautiful, flawed world. The gift of knowledge, and seeking more knowledge, brought we members of Western Civilization to the New World. It taught us how the world worked, and how we could interact with it to our benefit. It brought us Mozart and Mussolini. It brought us Rembrandt and Einstein and Madam Curie. It brought us the atom bomb and automobiles. It is a flawed gift.

And yet, I would not choose to be ignorant. I think I would be terribly bored wandering around an ever-abundant garden with no responsibilities and no books and no art, and only Adam to talk with—and he doesn't seem all that bright!

If only the effects of these founding myths could disappear with their debunking, or reinterpretation. Unfortunately, they do not. Even if we, who regularly debunk myths, can dismiss them, they live on in our society, and in our subconscious.

My mother was a remarkable woman, from a family of remarkable women. She went to a Normal school to learn to teach, and did so during the Great Depression. She married and had five children, and, as I earlier told you, insisted we attend church and Sunday School. She was a product of the Midwest, and had a Methodist upbringing. Her sense of justice was very well honed. And she imparted her certainty of what was right to her children. I still remember some of her teachings.

One affected my life greatly. I do not remember the occasion; I do know that she was talking to another adult friend, and I just happened to be present. Her words echo still, "Well, I just know that it is really the woman's responsibility to make the marriage work."

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That is clearly from an older understanding of marriage than the one we currently embrace—one with echoes of God's chastisement of Eve. It is an understanding that put women in a subordinate place within marriage, and, by extension, the larger world.

As a result of overhearing that comment, I stayed ten years longer than was prudent in a marriage to an alcoholic. I kept trying to make the marriage work. I asked my partner to seek counseling, and agreed to go myself. I cajoled and threatened. Nothing worked. Finally I gave up, but I considered myself a failure at what was my primary, my God-given task.

Founding myths have long-lasting consequences. They live on and on in the minds of the members of that civilization, often hidden beneath rational thought. The Eve as temptress and cause of all ills myth had and still has grave consequences for women. For centuries women were denied pain abatement medicines during childbirth, and Genesis 3:16 was quoted as the reason. In few places does this continue, for which we should all give thanks.

In another section of the Adam and Eve story, God charges them to go forth and populate the world. In the context of the Middle East at that time, having many children made sense. There was a lot of space, and children tended to die before they reached adulthood. This is no longer the case, in my view and that of many others. Yet there are still faiths that cite that passage to encourage large, in some cases, very large families. The consequences of the myth have helped lead to overpopulation, and degradation of our environment.

The damage done to men by this founding myth also continues. Here are the words of God's curse upon Adam:

...on your account the earth will be cursed.

You will get your food from it only by labor

all the days of your life;

it will yield thorns and thistles for you.

You will eat of the produce of the field,

and only by the sweat of your brow will

you win your bread

until you return to the earth;

for from it you were taken.

Dust you are, to dust you will return. (Genesis 3:17)

Thus, if humankind lives a nasty, brutish life, laboring all day, every day, it is only what God intended. And if some men, who managed to acquire wealth and power, ensure that this way of life continues, they are only acting to ensure that God's will be enacted. Yes, men have indeed suffered from this founding myth.

However, the next verse in Genesis, 3:20, reads: *the man named his wife Eve because she was the mother of all living beings*. (The name Eve is thought to be related to a Hebrew verb "to live.") (Note in study Bible)⁶

In our mythology, if not in our anthropology, Eve was the mother of us all. We inherit from her our life and our quest for knowledge. We also inherit the results of that quest, which while ambiguous, are, I believe, positive.

I want to close with a story from Ursula Le Guin. It is called *She Unnames Them*, and appeared originally in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1985. In it Eve decides that unnameing the animals would free them to be more truly themselves. She tells them of her decision, and most of them accept it with indifference or good grace. The yaks are an exception. They must hold a council, and the result was that the designation “yak” was returned to the donor.

Pets were a different matter. The cats denied ever having a name except the one they made up for themselves; and the dogs and talking birds insisted that their names were important to them. However, when they understood that it was only the general, not the particular name that was being unnamed, and that they could continue with Fido or Rover; Budgie Bird or Polly, they readily consented.

Satisfied with her work, Eve approached Adam. She had decided that she wanted to share the experience of unnameing. She would give back her name also.

Quoting now:

I resolutely put anxiety aside, went to Adam, and said, “You and your father lent me this—gave it to me, actually. It’s been really useful, but it doesn’t exactly fit very well lately. But thanks so much! It’s really been very useful.”

It is hard to give back a gift without sounding peevish or ungrateful, and I did not want to leave him with that impression of me. He was not paying much attention, as it happened, and said only, “Put it down over there, okay?” and went on with what he was doing.

One of my reasons for doing what I did was that talk was getting us nowhere, but all the same I felt a little let down. I had been prepared to defend my decision. And I thought that perhaps when he did notice he might be upset and want to talk. I put some things away and fiddled around a little, but he continued to do what he was doing and to take no notice of anything else. At last I said, "Well, goodbye dear. I hope the garden key turns up."

He was fitting parts together, and he said, without looking around, "OK, fine dear. When's dinner?"

"I'm not sure" I said. "I'm going now. With the--" I hesitated and finally said, "With them, you know," and went on out. In fact, I had only just then realized how hard it would have been to explain myself. I could not chatter away as I used to do, taking it all for granted. 6

My words now must be as slow, as new, as single, as tentative as the steps I took going down the path away from the house, between the dark-branched, tall dancers motionless against the winter shining. (Le Guin, Ursula, "She Unnames Them", in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed, Christina Büchmann and Celina Spiegel, Fawcett Columbine, New York, p.331-333.)

Let us not underestimate the power of myth.

Let us celebrate Eve, the mother of us all.

Let us recognize that the acquisition of knowledge is a two-edged sword.

Shalom and Saalat.

Blessed Be and Amen.