



The Whole Eve

By Tammi Schneider, PhD

Eve is a complicated character, not only because of what the Bible says about her but because of how she has been treated over time, including modern scholarship. Eve's problem is that because she has been responsible for the "Fall" for so long it is difficult for scholars and others to treat her as anything else. Despite this there are numerous passages about Eve that deal with many of the same issues other women in the book of Genesis and in the world face and only by examining passages referencing Eve can we see her full picture.

Traditional scholarly takes on Eve tend to move in two directions. In general, when scholarship that pre-dates the influence of Feminist scholarship in the academy and/or is theologically motivated, addresses the character of Eve, the focus is on sin and temptation and how Eve is responsible for the "Fall." More recently scholars, heavily influenced by Feminist scholarship, have been keen to relieve Eve of the burden of being the one who causes "the Fall." The problem is that when minimizing Eve's guilt scholars find little more to say about her. In both cases, the apple is Eve's defining moment.

Is this a fair reflection of the biblical text, and of Eve's character?

In order to flesh out Eve's character more thoroughly, it is necessary to go back to the text itself and look at the language used to describe her. In Genesis 1-3:20, she is referred to simply as "the woman," or "wife" (the word in Biblical Hebrew for woman and wife are the same) and does not yet have a name. Her actions are mostly limited to seeing and talking. Her major action is that she eats from the forbidden tree and offers it to her husband (Gen 3:6). Her actions (and later association of prime responsibility for them) are problematic in terms of the narrative: when God commands Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree in Gen 2:16-17, the 'woman' (or Eve) had not yet been created.

It is only in Genesis 3:20, well after the "apple incident" where she is named "Eve." According to the text, the man named her this because she was the mother of all the living" even though at this point in the story she has not yet given birth. Thus it is only in 3:20 where Eve becomes a full-fledged character, immediately preceding their departure from the garden. It is also interesting to note that the text says that only the man is driven out of the garden (a masculine singular entity) though apparently Eve joins him. It is only once they are out of the garden that Eve carries out actions in the text.

Why scholars lose interest in Eve at this point is not clear, because many of her subsequent actions do not differ radically from those of other women in Genesis—other than her being the first to do them. In other cases Eve's "spin" on them may be the offensive component. In Genesis 4:1 the man (presumably Adam) knew his wife Eve and she conceived and, according to the text, Eve claims she gained a child with the help of the Deity—making no reference to Adam. It is interesting to note that here Eve bears a child with no reference to pain, despite God's words to the contrary in the garden, and as other women do later in Genesis. She also bears Abel (4:2).

Eve makes a noteworthy comment regarding the birth of her third son, Seth, an incident much less often referenced (4:25). Her comment follows the death of Abel by his brother's hand, and after the line of Cain is established. It appears after significant events both concerning the history of the world, from the perspective of the Bible, and for Eve's family. The text notes Adam knew his wife again and she bore him a son and named him Seth meaning, "God has provided me with another offspring in place of Abel, for Cain had killed him."

Here Eve recognizes the role of the divine in her ability to bear another child and references her dead son. Thus, Eve, when celebrating the birth of her son (who will continue the line of humanity in the biblical analysis) also reminds the reader that she is also a mother still mourning. The death of Abel means that Eve sadly becomes not only the first woman to bear a child but also the first to lose a child, whom she surely missed. Despite this, nowhere does she blame, rebuke, or reprimand Cain: she has, after all, already lost one son.

It is hard to believe the first woman to have a child, lose a child, and have another child following her son's murder by his brother is not touching for people who view the Hebrew Bible as a religious document and those who view it as great literature (or both). That the first woman with little power and great heartbreak would speak so movingly should not be dismissed. It's time to read Eve in all her aspects: her change from the un-named woman to Eve, and both her offering the fruit of wisdom to Adam, and her offering the first children to the world in the Genesis story.

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