

Three Faces of Eve

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

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One of my Divinity School classmates had a wonderfully wacky and witty collection of T-shirts. They amused, offended, and sometimes perplexed us. One of my favorites depicted a cartoon Adam and Eve sitting under the Tree of Knowledge. The serpent is seen slinking down the trunk. Eve (apple in hand) muses: "I can't help thinking there's a book in this." Adam looks like a deer caught in the proverbial headlights!

No doubt about it. As myths go, the saga of Adam and Eve is a gripping read. There's a very compelling "good book" in it, indeed -- suspense, intrigue, subterfuge, betrayal, complex characters, slinky creatures, power plays...and yes, sex!

At the center of the action, we find the great Creator God (Yahweh) and his human experiments sashaying their way through Eden, blissfully and unabashedly naked. (Not to mention, clueless!) Mind you, they both ate the forbidden fruit, so I wonder why Adam has come off smelling so much sweeter throughout history?

Here's my sermon summary in a nutshell: Eve deserves better! She was robbed. This morning, I'm asking you to take a closer look with me at three distinct and interconnected faces of civilizations first acknowledged cis-gender female. They are the face of the temptress, the face of the wise woman goddess, and the face of the homemaker and mother. I believe each of these faces offers us something valuable about women, even if we need to strip off the film of misinterpretation, blame, and shame to find it.

First of all, most liberal Biblical scholars consider everything in Hebrew Scripture prior to Genesis 12, the story of Abraham, to be a form of pre-historical mythology, which is not necessarily a disparaging or dismissive view. Myths were created to explain the world and offer us some truths about the human condition. Some scholars suspect that Hebrew Scripture borrowed the Adam and Eve story from a Sumerian Creation myth involving, you guessed it – a garden, a snake, a man and a woman.

Goddess stories explained the origins of love and wisdom in the figures of Aphrodite and Sophia. Bible literalists prefer the word "parable" (a lesson in morality) to describe the first couple's escapades in Eden.

The myth of Eve is complex, as it defies easy conclusions. Even if the majority of us reject the Eve stereotypes, she continues to bear the brunt for Adam's error; and by extension, women to this day, are left holding the sin bag for all humanity (and we're to blame for the pain of childbirth and dinnertime bickering, to boot).

What I want to know is: if women are so powerful, so responsible for everything, why aren't we in charge of everything, including our bodies? Ask Justice Alito the next time you see him.

Probably the most common face of Eve is the visage of evil temptress. I was fascinated to discover that "sin" is never explicitly mentioned in the excerpt from Genesis we heard earlier. That's a later Christian addition. In fact, the sin of Eve and the fall of Adam lay the groundwork for the entire Christian doctrine of original sin and ultimate salvation in Christ – the second Adam. This original sin theology was elaborated and emphasized by the early church father, Augustine in the 4th century (still a popular resource, in 2022 for homophobic, transphobic and misogynist screeds)

In her insightful book, Adam and Eve and the Serpent, the feminist scholar Elaine Pagels, underscores the usefulness of this concept of temptation and original sin for justifying the church's authoritarian control of ordinary people (especially females).

She asks: "After all, how could you trust folks who were innately evil and depraved to know how to behave or govern themselves? They needed higher authorities to tell them what to do and how to do it."

In particular, Tertullian, an early church father wrote with considerable vitriol about the evil of women. He is also the father of toxic masculinity, one could argue. To him, women (and Eve, above all others) represented sensuality and the flesh, and thus, became a timeless poster girl for sinners who celebrate the body or question divine authority.

"And do you not know that you are Eve?" asks Tertullian. "The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age; her guilt must of necessity live, too. You are the devil's gateway...the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man."

Thanks to Tertullian and his cronies, thousands of women have been burned, stoned, drowned, and disowned for supposedly going against prevailing male-dominated Western religious doctrine. Today's headlines echo this chilling indictment, in the Muslim world as well. Just yesterday, I heard an NPR report that Afghani females must wear a face covering or their male guardians could be jailed or fired.

I suppose I'd ask Tertullian, if he was willing to address so lowly a creature as myself (if he hadn't fainted or croaked from the sight of a creedless she-clergy) why Adam isn't somehow responsible for his own choices? His own sexuality? Was he so henpecked? Why does Adam deserve or warrant such protection?

My colleague, the Rev. Sharon Dittmar answers this query. She argues that the bottom line is our attempt to "to protect Adam (and to protect ourselves) from death. Dittmar writes that "Although Genesis 3 is the mother of all sin stories, it is really a story about sexuality and mortality. The tree of knowledge of good and evil is really a tree of sexual wisdom and awareness."

Just like girls today, Eve matures first and she is the curious one, a bit more “with it.” She’s the philosopher to Adam’s frat boy. Some call Eve the first Rabbi and Adam the first redneck although this is a bit harsh in my view. Eve doesn’t deserve to be bashed, and neither does Adam. In actuality, Eve may have more in common with one of the so-called “creatures” in the Garden of Eden than she does with Adam. This is where Eve’s second (less acknowledged) face as a wise woman goddess and as the merged symbol of sensuality, nature, and spirituality emerges. Did you know that the serpent is an ancient and widely-revered symbol of female divinity and was often the consort of the Earth Goddess?

Perhaps you’re familiar with the famous image of St. Patrick beating the snakes out of Ireland? That image depicts the expunging of Celtic paganism, with its reverence for goddesses and nature in the 4th century, and in its place, the establishment of Christianity with its patriarchal male God and its view of man as rational and women as depraved. The body becomes a vehicle of shame. Conjure up just about any classical painting of Adam and Eve after the proverbial “Fall,” and they are hunched over and grasping at fig leaves to cover their sexuality.

It’s tricky, for fundamentalists in particular, to make the leap from Eve as corrupter to Eve as a sensual wisdom goddess. Our society and religious culture remains steeped in a brew of sexism and patriarchy that’s simmered for years. Strong, sensual women take the hit. There’s something suspect about them unless they fit a stereotype and stick with it – Barbie girl, tomboy, sex kitten, power player, *housefrau*.

You’d think we would be over this nonsense by now, especially in an age when defining a woman has become more complex and nuanced – cis gender, trans, gender queer, gender fluid, womyn, to name a few. But, the nonsense runs deep. During a recent vigil in response to the leaked Supreme Court document about Roe v Wade, the NYT ran a photo of a baby boomer woman holding a sign that read: “I can’t believe we are still protesting this >>>>>>(expletive deleted).”

You may recall the rabid news coverage of Hilary Clinton’s hair, makeup and footwear choices back while she was Secretary of State. Hilary plays with the big boys, and for most of her amazing career, she survived by cutting off her metaphorical hair.

You may disagree, but I sense that, until recently, Hilary has had little latitude to display a face of sensuality or softness. And, then, she makes the front page as she is chided for going make-up free, growing her hair, ditching the contact lens, and going barefoot.

Her response: "I feel so relieved to be at the stage I'm at in my life right now. Because you know if I want to wear my glasses I'm wearing my glasses. If I want to wear my hair back I'm pulling my hair back. You know at some point it's just not something that deserves a lot of time and attention. And if others want to worry about it, I let them do the

worrying for a change." In other words, she earned this freedom by rising to the top in a man's world...but it took years.

Hilary was able and most willing to display her maternal instincts. It may be entirely voluntarily, but some women may feel compelled to toss a shroud over the third face of Eve – that of Mother, nurturer, and/or partner. Others may feel that it is the only face they are empowered to wear, while, increasingly, contemporary women can and do choose to forego motherhood entirely without being pitied or shunned by society.

Do you remember that perfume commercial for Enjoli (the 8 hour perfume for the 24 hour woman!) in which the quintessential 1980's power babe "brings home the bacon, fries it up in a pan, and never lets you forget you're a man? " The only thing missing is burp the baby and wax the floor. The advertising industry must have picked up on the angst women felt to hit this mark.

I found a funny joke that makes a valuable point about what we do and do not expect from women, beginning with Eve. In it, Adam was walking around the Garden of Eden feeling very lonely, so God asked Adam, "What is wrong with you?" Adam said he didn't have anyone to talk to. God said he was going to give him a companion and it would be a woman."

"He said this person will cook for you and wash your clothes, she will always agree with every decision you make. She will bear you children and never ask you to get up in the middle of the night to take care of them. She will not nag you, and will always be the first to admit she was wrong when you've had a disagreement. She will never have a headache, and will freely give you love and compassion whenever needed." Adam asked "What would a woman like this cost me??" God said an "arm and a leg." Adam said "What can I get for a just a rib???" The rest is history.

Well - Not so fast. Maybe you've heard of Lilith? She's Adam's mythical first wife from Jewish legend. Apparently, she was created as Adam's equal, simultaneously from the same dust, and she took their equality literally. She wouldn't defer to him and when God tried to play marriage counselor, Lilith wouldn't listen to him either. As a result, she was banished and Eve was created.

So, Eve isn't Lilith, she's a slightly more obedient helpmate ; but she still isn't the Enjoli woman or Yahweh's description of the ideal dame. Better than that, I reckon – she represents a more balanced female, a cis gender one, it's worth noting again – the merger of spirit, mind, and flesh creating life. Significantly, Eve is only given her name, which means life-bearer, *after* they are expelled from the garden. Eve can now usher in life as well as death, and as such, she (as the symbol of womanhood) bears the brunt for our finitude, too. Oy!

In the peculiar vision of Church Fathers, Eve must have tricked Adam, must have seduced him. He wouldn't have tasted the fruit if he knew it would lead to death, or would he? As the Rev. Dittmar argues: "Might Adam and Eve both be responsible for their

choices. Maybe it was really boring being innocent, childlike immortals in a garden that met all their needs except the need for freedom and growth?"

It's just too simplistic to make Eve the villain by claiming that she and Adam (and humanity by extension) could have lived happily ever after in the "kindergarten of Eden" if the first female had obeyed Yahweh. Life might have been easier for them, but they would have had to give up so much. Eden would have devolved into a numb utopian gated community. There would be no deep feeling, no laughter or tears or triumph or disappointment.

"The grass would grow high around the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil until it disappeared from view, for there would be no one to tend it." But Eve didn't let that happen, and this recognition makes her a heroine. She was willing to take the first steps towards adulthood. And for this, Unitarian Universalists consider the Eden story as one of Original Blessing of free will.

Yahweh and the serpent each tell the coddled couple portions of the truth. Yahweh explains that by eating from the tree of good and evil, they will die. He's right – knowledge issues in mortality (although Adam lives to be 930 years old!) It's a myth, right? The serpent fills in the important blanks and the couple decides to take their chances: "You will not die (meaning that particular day), for God knows that when you eat your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing goods and evil."

Not to mention guilt. Such a thing did not exist before that fateful bite. No shame, no guilt, no Jewish mother stereotypes or jokes. I can hear it now, echoing through history, "It's alright, Cain, I'll just sit here in this dark tent, while you go off to the land of Nod!" On this topic, I think I'll leave the dysfunction of the first family for another Sunday.

Eve wears at least three faces, and if we examine and blend them with clear eyes and care, we can reclaim and esteem her as a role model for all gender identities. Whether she truly existed or not, Eve as symbol and metaphor brought knowledge, curiosity, courage, sensuality, and the fullness of life to humanity. And, yes, she ushered in the reality of death, which some would argue motivates a full life in the first place. If we gaze with love and appreciation at her visage we can detect the angles of mature womanhood, as well as all the challenges of partnership, parenthood, pain, pleasure, pride and regret.

She is the epitome of what the author Chelsea Wakefield calls the Luminous Woman ... "one who has archetypal fluency and is not trapped by narrow definitions of herself. Her depths inform her that she is much more than her titles, social standing, appearance, talent or role. She does not shrink from life or life's challenges, she embraces her destiny as it unfolds. The luminous woman is not afraid of her shadow. She has made peace with her dark emotions and her past. She is not overly identified with her wounds. She has gathered their gold and moved on. She is not shame bound. She lives in women of all ages – the maiden, the mother, and the crone. Any woman can be luminous."

We know the challenges, though...In her famous poem, "Ain't I a woman,?" Sojourner Truth asks, "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down, all alone, together women ought to be able to turn it right side up again." So, friends, turn up – for vigils and in the voting booth.

I can empathize with the poet's frustration, living as she did in far more repressive times than we encounter today. The last thing I want you to take away from my sermon this morning is a rallying cry for women to unite against men. On the contrary, my hope is that men, women, and non-binary folx will unite to construct a balanced portrayal and deep appreciation of all genders, as we protect reproductive rights *and* the right to Viagra.

My dream is that all of us along the gender spectrum will be liberated by freeing Adam and Eve from the boxes where they've bumped up against the limits of stereotype and shame for millennia.

We can take back the Bible and reshape the meaning of Genesis as the story of human striving, moral freedom and personal responsibility. We can challenge the use of damning and limiting Scriptural based paradigm of women in the public arena. We can re-myth Eve as change agent and say, "Thank you." We can re-myth Adam as a collaborator and say, "You were wise to follow."

In the quiet of the garden, we can hear Eve speaking to us and encouraging us to lift all of our faces to the sun. "I found God in myself and loved her fiercely. I have lived for thousands of years as someone I never was," she laments. "I have survived and so must you. Be who you are, be luminous. and be proud."

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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