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How has Eve's role in the Judaeo-Christian creation myth shaped Western attitudes towards women?

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### Abstract

The story of Eve in the Biblical creation myth has been a subject of much debate among religious critics, scholars, and theologians for many decades. The presumption of most Christians holds Eve responsible for mankind's fall from grace. How has Eve's role in the Judaeo-Christian creation myth shaped Western attitudes toward women? The purpose of this paper is to try to understand and analyze the effect of Eve on Western ideas of gender and social order. This paper investigates how theologians have tried to justify their misogynistic feelings towards women and the discrimination they continuously face. A careful look at how different people characterize Eve will be presented as well as counter interpretations to the notion that puts Eve to blame.

Research into the subject of Eve's role in the Judaeo-Christian creation myth described in Genesis reveals that the primary cause of men's perception of women as inferior stems from their fear of women's sexuality. It is widely believed that Eve represents a temptress, lustful and dangerous to all men for her remarkable power to seduce men away from doing what is right. Furthermore, radical feminist interpretations have provided reasonable arguments to prove that Adam, not Eve was to blame for original sin.

The result of the research shows that Eve has had a significant influence in shaping Western views toward women in terms of gender and social order. Although there have been great improvements towards women's rights and gender equality, the universality of the negative image of women regardless of religion shows how deeply imbedded the story of Eve is in Western ideology.

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How has Eve's role in the Judaeo-Christian creation myth shaped Western attitudes towards women?

“For the past two thousand years, the story of Adam and Eve has communicated social and religious values to Western civilization” (Witcombe). It is also highly controversial because of the negative way it portrays women as the cause of original sin. This is due to the influence of patriarchal and misogynistic societies in which the story was written. The story of Eve in Genesis 2 and 3 has been used in both Christian and Jewish history to validate the subservient role of contemporary women and their confinement to the domestic sphere.

Creation stories, such as told in the Biblical scripture of Genesis found in the Old Testament, are ways in which the people of a culture explain the origins of humankind. They also offer insight into culturally specific perceptions of how people view the world and how they interact with each other. The Judaeo-Christian myth of Adam and Eve portrays the conception that God created man after his likeness and let him have control over all the earth and “all animals, domestic and wild, large and small”(Today's English Version, Gen. 1.26). The story stresses the importance of the male as central to the universe while making the clear implication that women are forever in a subordinate position. This assumption is reinforced by the Bible's references to *man* having control over the earth and all living things, *man* having the privilege to give every animal its name, and God creating a “helper” for the *man*, so that he would not be alone. The Bible's portrayal of male dominance has asserted itself in Western civilization as an unquestionable truth and the negative presentation of women as the helper has become “universally valid” and accepted by many and most Christians (Witcombe).

### **The Creation Myth**

The Judaeo-Christian Bible recounts the story of how the world came to be as God created it in six days. On the seventh day, He rested. God brought light into being, separated water from dry land, created vegetation, the sun, moon, and stars, and most importantly, man to rule over it all. The man called Adam needed a partner so God created a woman out of one of Adam's ribs and called her Eve. The two were made to live in the Garden of Eden and forbidden to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. However, the serpent, the cleverest of all creatures that the Lord had created, persuaded Eve to pick a fruit from the tree telling her that it would "open her eyes" and "[she] would be like God," knowing good and evil (Gen. 3.5). She obeyed and gave a fruit to her husband who was also enlightened and they developed an awareness of their nakedness, sewing loincloths to cover their bodies. When God came into the garden, Adam and Eve both hid from Him, guilty of their wrongdoing. When God realized that they had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, He cursed the serpent and cast out Adam and Eve from the garden and they were lost forever from paradise and from innocence, made to live in the imperfect world outside of Eden.

### **The Fall of Eve**

As the Bible tells it, Eve is the cause of original sin and the source of the world's corruption. If she had not picked from the Tree of Knowledge, mankind would still be living in paradise. Because of her disobedience and inability to resist temptation, she and Adam were expelled from the Garden of Eden. Although she is known as "the mother of all living", she is also well known as the seductress of man and is a cause for man's fear of women's sexuality. According to Christopher L.C. E. Witcombe, Professor of the Department of Art History at Sweet Briar College, the story of Eve gives men a reason to "restrain and restrict the social, sexual, religious, political, and economic freedom of women" and justifies man's ability to

blame women for all the adversity that humans face. While the Virgin Mary is revered for her purity, Eve is the epitome of sexual unrestraint; “she was thought to define a woman’s essential character-instinct ridden, seductive, lacking in wisdom, evil, and dangerous for man” (Great Women of the Bible [8]). All women are believed to be the daughters of Eve and therefore shoulder at least part of the blame for bringing death and evil into the world.

If one is attempting to re-evaluate the beliefs about Eve based on patriarchal and misogynistic thinking, then “the Fall” conception is not one that supports the elevation of women. It is difficult to see Eve in a positive light if one gives credibility to this interpretation. “The Fall” constitutes that eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge produces a fall from God and shows the woman actively involved as the initiator of the cause of the sin. Eve ate of the fruit first and was enlightened. She then gave it to Adam after no harm had befallen her. Believing in “the Fall” interpretation means that Eve’s increased awareness and knowledge was not a positive benefit; the knowledge she unrightfully gained was wrong.

Christian commentators have significantly more to say about the extent to which Eve is held accountable for the fall of man than any known Jewish sources. Eve’s character in Judaism differs greatly from her character in Christianity because her disobedience to God’s command does not play a central role to understanding Jewish beliefs. The Eve in Christianity carries “doctrinal baggage” (Kvam, Scheering, and Ziegler 3), because Christianity is based on following doctrinal rules and statements. Eve is Christianity’s explanation for humankind’s misfortune, sin, and essentially all things evil. Judaism, on the other hand, uses the story of Eve as a rationale for Jewish practices and institutions regarding women.

### **Eve the Helper**

The degrading portrayal of Eve extends to all females and some critics believe is more negatively weighted in the early church than in Judaism. Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan has noted that "...the negative interpretation of woman as embodied in Eve...has caused the spread of stereotypes of misogynous slander that have so embedded themselves in the thought and language of so many nations..." (Anderson 84). Pelikan comments that the Christian faith, which has extensive catalogues on these stereotypes of women and has little to say praising Eve, is in fact more antagonistic towards women. 1 Timothy in the New Testament exemplifies one of these stereotypes:

"Women should learn in silence and all humility. I do not allow them to teach or to have authority over men; they must keep quiet. For Adam was created first, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived; it was the woman who ...broke God's law. But a woman will be saved through having children, if she perseveres in faith and love and holiness, with modesty." (2:11 -15).

This statement shows man's superiority and establishes the role of the woman as solely the helper to the man. How exactly Eve was to serve as the helper is also specifically stated: she will be saved through childbirth. She would "serve" her husband by producing his children. After God banished Adam and Eve from the garden, Adam was sentenced to till the land while God predicted that Eve would bear many children in great pain.

Further evidence to emphasize the subordination of women is seen in Genesis 2-3 in the description of the order of creation—Adam first, then Eve—reinforces man's "naturally" higher status over a woman. Important symbols that are used to explain women's inferiority to men are the rib (from Adam) and the forbidden fruit (sometimes refers specifically to an apple in some translations). Eve was created from Adam's rib and therefore represents only a part, never a

whole; she is part of Adam. The purpose of Eve's creation was so that Adam would not be alone. The descriptions of Eve in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 have been fundamental in shaping what Christians believe as God's will for gender relations and social order. The passage argues that women have no authority over men because they were created last and disobeyed God's orders first. That Eve was the first to defy God's command proves her subordinate role as well as shows "the dangers of allowing woman autonomy to run their own lives" (Kvam, Scheering, and Ziegler 4).

However, some radical interpretations from feminists view Eve "the helper" as a woman more powerful than the man. Jean M. Higgins, a professor in the Department of Religion and Biblical Literature at Smith College, claims that "helper" implies superior strength, thus putting the man in a weaker position. A helper must be the stronger person and have more control than the other who seeks the help. This contemporary view, an exegesis said to be derived from the seventh-century Orthodox monk Anastasius Sinaita, says that Eve was stronger than Adam because she argued with the serpent and only ate the forbidden fruit because the serpent had tricked her. On the contrary, Adam, who God specifically told not to eat or touch the forbidden fruit, took what Eve gave him without any resistance or stopping to think of the consequences—"a perfect demonstration of consummate weakness and a cowardly soul" (Kvam, Scheering, and Ziegler 131).

### **Eve as the Temptress**

The popular belief in Eve's role in the creation myth as the temptress is more based on an individual's own interpretation of the text and influences from his personal background than actual evidence in the Bible. As Jean Higgins argues, Genesis 3 "says nothing whatever about any temptation of Adam by Eve". The crucial line that has caused so many varied interpretations is Genesis 3.6 where Eve "...took of [the Tree of Knowledge's] fruit and ate; and she also gave

some to her husband, and he ate". Christian theologians have taken this verse and characterized Eve from simply persuading Adam to eat the fruit to using wicked persuasion, guile, and tears.

Other versions of beliefs that view Eve as the seductress draw parallels between the serpent and Eve herself. In this view, there were not one, but two temptations in the creation myth: the serpent's temptation of Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge and Eve's temptation to Adam to disobey God's command. The only actual biblical verse that seems to refer to Eve's wrongdoing as a temptress is in Genesis 3.17 where God announces how the serpent, Adam, and Eve will all be punished for violating his warnings. "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree..." shows that God speaks directly to Adam and that He sees Adam's rule-breaking as a result of her cunning persuasion. On the other hand, God does not address Eve directly when he names her punishment. No other instances in the text support or refute the idea of Eve as a temptress; Christian explanations that put heavy blame on Eve are drawn more from what is not said in the Bible than what is actually found.

### **Picking the Fruit: Temptation v. Rebellion**

The climax of the story of Adam and Eve occurs when Eve is tricked by the serpent to take fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. The appeal of the serpent's words was too strong; if he was right, she and Adam would gain knowledge and be like God, knowing good and evil. The act of eating from the Tree of Knowledge is not only important because it leads to the climax, but it is especially significant to Christian theologians because they believe that Eve eating the fruit made it necessary for God to appear in the garden. Eve's disobedience is seen in two different ways: her disregard of God's warning is either a sign of her weak character and reflects the susceptibility of women to temptation or as a way for Eve to assert her independence and rebel against God.

Much evidence exists of the belief that women are “naturally inclined” to have a weak nature and are easily deceived. The writings of Martin Luther state that “... [Satan] attacks the weak part of human nature, Eve the woman, not Adam the man” (“Eve: A Reinterpretation”). Theologian John Chrysostom also uses the words of Moses to show woman's subordinate position as he comments on the purpose of the serpent in God's creation: “[God] made use of this creature like some instrument and through it inveigled that naïve and weaker vessel, namely, woman, into his deception by means of conversation” (Kvam, Scheering, and Ziegler 144).

Although the idea that Eve ate the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge to show her move away from God is a rather extreme explanation for Eve's actions, the argument is also well supported. In this view, Eve is similar to Lilith, Adam's first wife according to midrashic literature in Judaism, because they both believe in gender equality. Midrashic treatments of scripture allow readers to freely question the text and express their opinions on what the text says or implies. Lilith rebelled and abandoned Adam after she refused to submit to the subordinate position of lying beneath Adam during sexual intercourse. If she had complied, it would have strengthened the already presumed notion held by many that Adam has greater authority over Lilith. Instead, Lilith, who considered herself Adam's equal, left him. God then created Eve, according to midrashic legend, as a replacement. Because Lilith represents a strong woman and a positive figure for standing up to Adam instead of submitting to his demands, as punishment, the misogynistic influence in Judaism portrays her as a female demon after she abandoned Adam and rebelled against God. She was associated with the death of children, gave birth to demons, and symbolized lust. During the Christian Middle Ages, she and her female children would “sexually stalk men who sleep alone at night” (Kvam, Scheering, and Ziegler 163). Descriptions of Lilith increased the fear of the dangerousness of women in Judaism.

### **Is Eve Really to Blame?**

According but not limited to the Western view, Eve is held responsible for mankind's expulsion from paradise and for the introduction of sin, grief, death, and destruction into the world. However, many radical interpretations made by feminist theologians and other religious critics have made a case that puts Adam as the original sinner. One of the most important early Christian commentators, St. Augustine, believes that Adam shared a part in the blame just as much as Eve, but it is the nature in which they sinned that differs greatly. Augustine's interpretation is so influential that it has been used as a reference in developing contemporary Christian thought in the West. Augustine argues that while Adam was not seduced, he refused to be separated from her as she was his only partner and deliberately sinned in order to stay with her. Because of this, Adam is equally responsible for man's fall from Eden. "Adam was not deceived" does not mean that Adam was innocent; his sin was out of free will whereas Eve believed wholeheartedly that the serpent's words were true and out of ignorance, she sinned. For this reason, "... most Christian readers of the premodern era", believe Adam to be the most at fault for the original sin in the creation myth (Anderson 116).

A similar view that puts Adam as the one guilty of wrongdoing attempts to prove that Adam is the first sinner because God's command of not eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge was only meant for him; it did not apply to Eve. "[God] told him, 'You may eat the fruit of any tree...except the tree that gives knowledge of what is good and what is bad'" (Gen. 2.16-17). God addressed Adam alone because Eve was not yet created. Some Christians perceive this to mean that God had never really forbidden Eve not to eat from the tree. As a result, Adam, not Eve, disobeyed the divine command. Phyllis Trible, a feminist theologian, looks at the meaning of Adam's name as it is interpreted in Hebrew to provide further evidence to support this

argument. “Adham” is a term that can mean both man in the singular form or encompass all of man, as in mankind. The Bible supports the interpretation of “adham” as meaning ‘man’ only since it was adham that God commanded not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. In this view, the woman, Eve, consequently had no knowledge of this command and cannot be blamed for her ignorance or mistaken as a sign of rebellion against God.

Adam, as Jean Higgins pointed out, has also been portrayed as the weaker partner when compared to Eve because he put up no fight when she offered him the forbidden fruit. Eve's justification for sinning is more excusable than Adam's because she attempted to resist the serpent's guile but could not; “she wrestled with a demon and was thrown” (Kvam, Scheering, and Ziegler 131). Even if she did hear the command from Adam, Eve could have assumed it be his way of acting condescendingly towards her, making her feel unworthy for not receiving the command from God himself or because she believed Adam was commanding her on his own, trying to exercise authority over her. On the other hand, Adam can find no plausible excuse for his sin because he was defeated by a woman even when God had given him the commandment directly.

Regardless of who was responsible for the majority of the blame, whether it was really Eve, Adam, or the serpent, the most important idea is that all had a share in the cause of the world's corruption, albeit in different ways. The serpent used deception to persuade Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit. Eve then gave her husband Adam some of it to eat for a number of different possible motivations depending on how the text is interpreted: simply for the act of giving and sharing with her husband what she possessed, in an act of defiance against God, or to intentionally lure Adam to sin so that he would share in her punishment if she were expelled from Eden. Adam also ate the fruit for many probable reasons: so as not anger Eve and be

separated from his only companion, because she tempted him to eat, or perhaps because when he saw that Eve had not died after eating from the Tree of Knowledge as God said they would, he needed no persuasion to taste of the fruit for himself. Both Adam and Eve however, when asked by God the reason behind their actions, share a common knack for blaming others instead of taking responsibility for their sins: Adam blames Eve for giving him the forbidden fruit and Eve blames the serpent for seducing her to temptation. The root and source of all their sin was lack of faith in God's word and tendencies to turn away from Him in search of divine knowledge.

### **Feminist Interpretations Counter to “the Fall”**

Still other theologians hypothesize that God, as a part of His plan, meant for Adam and Eve to leave Eden after gaining the knowledge they needed to live and survive in the world. Eden was a temporary location, according to Mary Korsak, “...a womb-like incubation for humankind in its infancy” (“Eve: A Reinterpretation”). Adam was supposedly created to till the soil, but the Garden of Eden had no need for his skill or for tending as there is no mention of Adam's doing so in the text. This leaves room for interpretation that he must eventually leave the Garden to serve his purpose where it is needed.

Radical interpreters also question the nature of Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit as having a positive or negative effect. Judith McKinlay posits that God created woman so that she would give Wisdom to the man. The dominant and widely accredited notion however, is that the wisdom Adam and Eve gained from eating from the Tree of Knowledge is false, wrong, and a sign of man trying to break away from God. But McKinlay's interpretation considers that it was always the “divine intention” for the woman to eat the fruit and for man to know what is good and what is evil in the world (“Eve: A Reinterpretation”).

### **Recognition of Women**

It is evident that there exists a tremendous diversity of contemporary opinion on the role of Eve in the Judaeo-Christian creation myth and how much she is to blame for the misfortunes that have befallen mankind. However, while Eve has had a significant impact on how Christians view the roles of men and women in society, there have been many other important women in the Bible that go unmentioned or unrecognized for their decisive roles: Mary Magdalene, Delilah, Bathsheba, Rebekah, Hannah, and Elizabeth. These women's lives were overshadowed by tragedy and suffering, an unavoidable consequence of living in a patriarchal society. While there were some exceptions to the rule—some women proved the dominant perception of women's inferiority correct—women during the Christian era were at a total disadvantage and in some ways, still are today.

### **Conclusion**

It is clearly evident that the creation myth as told in Genesis has seriously contributed to Western understandings of gender and social order. Studies of Genesis 1-3 have been used to substantiate the subordinate position of women by many Christian theologians, both radical and conservative. The story of Eve has caused many to blame Eve for mankind's misfortunes, calling her a temptress, weak, dumb, ignorant, and references to text in the Bible only seem to give divine justification for this negative view of women which encompasses all religions and cultures. The dominant attitude of women as subservient to men has affected many aspects of women's lives. The universal woman has been discriminated, judged, and suppressed because of man's fear of her sexuality and its potential power. However, contemporary Christian thought has sought to rehabilitate Eve and hold Adam guilty for original sin. While the position of women in society today has vastly changed from what it was in the Christian era and early

history, women still suffer discrimination in the modern day world; the effects of Eve's decision to eat of the forbidden fruit.

My attitude has changed tremendously because of the research and information I have gained in studying this topic. Although my opinion in highly debatable religious subjects remains indifferent; I do not take a side or fight passionately about the extent, for example, that Eve is to blame for original sin; I have always believed that she was the first to disobey God and therefore it is because of her that women bear the brunt of misogynistic blows in today's society. However, as I have been exposed to radical reinterpretations of Genesis 1-3, I have become less confident in my original standpoint that Eve was to blame. Feminist theologians present very arguable cases and have found their own justifications in the Bible next to more hierarchical, patriarchal-supportive text. I now believe that Adam and Eve, as well as the serpent share an equal part in man's fall from paradise but the nature of their sin is what separates them. It is only up to the individual to interpret whose sin was more serious and judge for himself on who they care to place the blame.

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