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INTERPRETING EVE

IN THE BEGINNING, according to Genesis 1, God created and ordered and sorted and classified the world and all that is in it. When it came to human beings, this activity of creating and sorting included, among other things, sexual differentiation—male and female, man and woman, Adam and Eve, the same yet different. Of course, exactly how men and women are the same and different and what this means for our day-to-day activities has been a topic of debate since the beginning of time. Do men and women have different intellectual, spiritual, moral, or emotional capacities? Are men especially suited for leading and women for serving? Are men and women equal or did God create women to be subordinate to men? Is gender difference an indication of God's intentions for the roles each is to play in society, church, and marriage? Or are the characteristics and roles associated with gender culturally conceived and passed along? At the center of this debate about the nature and role of women, at least in the Christian tradition, has been the biblical character Eve, the archetypal woman of Genesis 1–3. Not simply one woman among many, Eve came to represent all women, her characteristics, role, and behavior defining the very essence of what it is to be female. As Eve was Woman, women were Eve.

But what exactly does the Bible say about Eve? And what conclusions can we draw from the depiction of Eve in Scripture about the nature of women? Answering these questions has been the task of biblical commentators and church authorities—the great majority of whom, through much of Christian history, were male. And though it would be wrong to suggest that these early interpreters were of one mind about Eve, a dominant interpretive tradition soon emerged in which the broad contours of Eve's constitution and

character were construed quite negatively. Influenced by Greek philosophy and Aristotelian thought,¹ the majority of early interpreters concluded that Eve was an inferior and secondary creation who bore primary responsibility for plunging the world into sin and strife. As all women were Eve, this interpretive tradition provided divine sanction for a system of patriarchy and male headship that made women subordinate to their fathers, husbands, and brothers and denied them the right to own property, to pursue formal education, to marry freely, to vote for civic leaders, to participate in public affairs, to choose a profession, and to share in ecclesiastical leadership.

Men, however, were not the only ones interpreting Eve. From as early as the fourth century, women have been reading the story of Eve for themselves, incorporating their reflections into poems, tracts, devotionals, children's Bibles, dialogues, advice, and prayer books. Excluded from ecclesial structures of influence and authority and barred from the academy, theirs was the work of the lay person, theology on the ground that flowed out of the realities and struggles of daily life as women found themselves confronted with church pronouncements and cultural attitudes that diminished their personhood. Though widely circulated in their own day, over the course of history, women's readings of Eve have been lost, buried, or forgotten. This book is an attempt to recover their voices and to supplement the more familiar history of male perspectives on Eve with women's interpretations. At the heart of this work, then, is a simple question: What did women in history think of Eve? Did women see Eve as an inferior and secondary creation? Did women hold Eve primarily responsible for introducing sin into the world? Did women accept the guilt and shame of Eve's sin?

For a large majority of women writing on Eve, the answer was no. Though some women interpreters assumed the legitimacy of the dominant reading of Eve, a great many offered considerably more sympathetic if not positive portrayals, resisting in subtle and not-so-subtle ways the image of Eve and the accompanying assumptions about women that emerged from the dominant tradition. In women interpreters, then, we discover a legacy of Eve that is much more than male headship and female subordination, inferiority and

¹Aristotle held, for instance, that women were "defective" or "mutilated" males. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 2.3.737a.27-28, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols., ed. Jonathan Bames (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1:1144.

guilt for original sin. It is also—or often, by contrast—a legacy of women discovering that they have been created in the image of God, of women finding in Eve an ally and a resource for promoting greater rights and freedoms for women, of women discovering, like Eve, worth and empowerment in their relationship to the divine.

WOMEN READING EVE

Readers may be surprised to find out that women in history engaged in biblical interpretation, and such a response would be appropriate. For much of history, social expectations and educational limitations discouraged women from reading, writing, and publishing on Scripture.² The few women who did write on and circulate devotional, theological, or exegetical material for public benefit tended to be wealthy or culturally well-connected and often well-educated despite the lack of access to formal avenues for education.³ Many of these women received private tutoring in classical literature, philosophy, and languages or were self-taught (or both), having access to extensive libraries that included Greek literature and philosophy as well as the theological works of the church fathers. Additionally and perhaps more significantly, they often had male advocates who encouraged them to write, endorsed their work, and saw to its publication or circulation.⁴ Until the nineteenth century, then, which saw an increase in women's access to education and a growing acceptance of women writing children's Bibles and devotionals, women's interpretations of Scripture were relatively rare. The women who did publish their work before this time were truly exceptional, often possessing extraordinary intellectual gifts. Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–1678), who produced a Dutch paraphrase of Genesis 1–3, for instance, was proficient in fourteen different languages—including Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and Syriac—and often corresponded with other learned colleagues (male and female) in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and French.

²Margaret King, "Introduction to the Series," in *Apology for Women's Writings and Other Work*, by Marie le Jars de Gournay (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xx. King suggests that for women to publish their writing was a breach of social norms, a violation of expectations of feminine virtue and humility because it was equivalent to injecting one's voice into the public arena.

³Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 9.

⁴Taylor and Choi, *Handbook*, 11.

Though denied formal education, then, women's interpretations and engagements with Scripture were quite learned, demonstrating impressive hermeneutical sophistication and close attention to the details of the text. For example, Rachel Speght (fl. 1617), the daughter of a Calvinist minister, wrote a defense of the worth and dignity of women in which she argued for reading Paul's writings in light of the specific historical context and holding his words about women's nature and roles in tension with the egalitarian message of Genesis 1–2. In her effort to promote greater appreciation for women, particularly in the context of marriage, Ester Sowerham (fl. 1617) imaginatively reconstructed the post-fall Adam as a loving and affectionate husband who never blamed Eve for the fall nor regarded her with scorn but instead treated her with the utmost tenderness and respect, recognizing in her the source of his own redemption.

Other women interpreters, like Sarah Towne Martyn (1805–1879), drew attention to features of the text that complicated the dominant tradition, such as the more positive qualities of Eve's curiosity, wonder, and thoughtfulness. In a similar vein, Sarah Hale (1788–1879), highlighting the text's silence about the character's motivations, suggested that Eve was approached by and responded to the serpent not because she was the weaker sex but because she was the spiritual spokesperson for the couple. Still others rejected Eve's archetypal status altogether and challenged the essentializing of women based on Eve. Eve's mistake or bad behavior was hers alone, Aemilia Lanyer (1569–1645) contended, and does not imply that all women are bad or should bear the guilt and shame of Eve's sin.

Not all women challenged the traditional reading of Eve. Some women interpreters used the conclusions of the dominant reading of Eve to promote greater respect and opportunities for women. Bathsua Makin (c. 1600–c. 1675), for instance, conceded that the woman is the morally weaker and inferior sex, as exemplified by Eve. But, she argued, such moral ineptitude is not determinative for women. Instead, it is the grounds and incentive for providing women access to classical education, which, Makin argued, would promote in women greater virtue, moral sense, and fortitude against sin.

PAST WOMEN INTERPRETERS AND MODERN FEMINISM

While women interpreters prepared the theological ground for modern feminism, it is important to remember that they were not feminists in the modern

sense of the word. Even the most feminist-minded women interpreters often stopped short of pressing for full social equality, advocating instead for small steps that encouraged greater respect and freedoms for women. It would be more accurate to say, then, that many women interpreters had “profeminist” leanings—that is, they were attentive to aspects of sexism in the culture and in the tradition of biblical interpretation that diminished women.⁵

This is not to say, however, that their interpretations are simply relics of a time gone by or that they have nothing to teach us today. For one thing, they illustrate creative and close readings of the text, attending to details that in our familiarity with these passages we often pass over. In fact, many women interpreters claimed that their inspiration and impulse to advocate for greater rights and freedoms for women came directly from their engagement with the Bible, noting aspects of the narrative of Adam and Eve that had often been overlooked. Reading Genesis with past interpreters, male or female, can help us become more attentive to the text, then, to what it says and what it does not say and, in this way, to become better readers of Scripture ourselves.

Moreover, through their close readings of the text, women’s interpretations expose the unexpressed assumptions that undergird traditional readings of this narrative, reminding us that interpretation is never detached or disinterested, isolated from our own beliefs, contexts, and experiences. In this respect, their work reminds us of the situatedness of our readings of Scripture, thereby encouraging in us a healthy dose of humility about our own interpretive work. For just as interpretation is not disinterested, it is also not innocuous. Interpretations of Scripture have the power to bring about harm or to effect healing, to tear down or to lift up. Women interpreters understood this and recognized that though Eve had become the justification for their oppression and marginalization, interpreted differently—or “rightly” they might say—she could be the catalyst for their liberation. We need to hear from women interpreters, then, because the differences in the way women experience the world from their male counterparts lends them different insights into the truths of Scripture. And if, as nineteenth-century social reformer Francis Willard noted, we seek to discern the truth of “the Bible’s full-orbed revelation,” we will need woman’s

⁵For a compelling argument in favor of the term *profeminist*, see John Flood, *Representations of Eve in Antiquity and the English Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2-3.

eye and man's eye together.⁶ This book, in recovering the perspective of past women interpreters, is a step toward that truth of the Bible's full-orbed revelation of the biblical Eve and her legacy in history.

A CLOSER LOOK AT GENESIS 1-3

Readers may be wondering at this point how one text can produce such diverse interpretations. The variations in Eve's characterization center on multiple ambiguities, silences, and gaps in the first three chapters of Genesis. For example, Genesis 2 describes Adam as being created first and Eve formed later from Adam's rib to be a helpmate who corresponds to him. While the text offers detailed information about the mechanics of Eve's creation, it is silent about what these details signify, particularly as they pertain to the nature and role of Eve. Does Eve's secondary creation, for instance, denote inferiority? Or, does being created last make her the crowning glory of God's creation? Does being formed from man's rib mean the woman is derivative and thus subordinate to him? Or does it indicate a relationship of intimacy and mutuality between the man and the woman?

Those who claim that the order of creation signifies Eve's inferiority often appeal to the description of Eve as an *'ēzer* "helpmate" for support. In the Hebrew Bible, however, *'ēzer* is also used to describe God's relationship to Israel (see Ps 33:20, 70:5). As such, the characterization of both Eve and God as an *'ēzer* suggests that this word does not denote status at all but rather describes a behavior, the activity of sustaining, upholding, and blessing the life of another. Far from confirming a hierarchical interpretation, then, the word *'ēzer* maintains the ambiguity.

Likewise, while Adam's recognition of Eve in Genesis 2:23 may imply a relationship of authority and dominion over her, it need not be so. Unlike Adam's classification of the animals in Genesis 2:19-20, which involves a specific formula for naming in the Hebrew Bible, Adam's address to Eve in Genesis 2:23 reads more like a moment of recognition whereby Adam discovers in Eve a creature like himself.⁷ The differences syntactically are quite

⁶Frances Willard, *Woman in the Pulpit* (Chicago: Woman's Temperance Publishing Association, 1889), 21.

⁷This is surely the intention of the wordplay in Gen 2:23, "This one shall be called *'iššāh* 'woman' for out of *'iys* 'man' this one was taken."

striking. Both clauses are built around the verb *qārā* ‘to call.’ In the first instance, however, the text uses the active voice of the verb + the noun *šēm* ‘name,’ as in “Adam called the names (to the animals) . . .” while in the second case, the verb *qārā* is in the passive voice without the noun *šēm*, as in “this one shall be called.”⁸ The lack of the naming formula and the use of the passive voice in the second instance suggest that instead of acting upon the woman with authority and dominion, Adam is receiving and rejoicing in this creature God now brings to him to alleviate his aloneness. Like the word *‘ēzer*, then, Genesis 2:23 does little to clarify the biblical witness regarding the status and ordering of man and woman.

Further ambiguities surround Genesis 1:26-28. In these verses, God creates the man and the woman simultaneously. But how does one reconcile this description of simultaneous creation with the testimony of Genesis 2 discussed above? Modern scholars attribute the differences in these creation accounts to two sources, the Priestly tradition (Gen 1:1–2:3) and the Yahwist tradition (Gen 2:4–3:24), with their attendant theologies of God and human beings. Early interpreters, however, upholding the unity of the canon and its witness, sought to harmonize these two chapters and generated various proposals for reading them together, each which had an impact on the characterization of Eve. For instance, some argued that Genesis 1 is a more general account of creation, cosmic and comprehensive in its scope, attributing the existence of all things to the creative and generative power of God. Genesis 2 is a recapitulation that zeroes in on the creation of humanity, filling in details omitted in Genesis 1 and depicting the intimacy of God’s relationship with human beings. This particular formula for harmonizing the accounts privileges the testimony of Genesis 2 on humanity’s origins, thereby upholding the notion of Eve as a secondary creation and reinforcing Eve’s inferiority.

Others, however, asserted that prior to Eve’s creation in Genesis 2, the *‘ādām* “human being” was sexually undifferentiated and only became Adam, the man, when Eve was created. This proposal takes its cues for understanding Genesis 2:21-23 from Genesis 1:26-28, maintaining the simultaneous creation of human beings and subsequently the equality of the sexes.

⁸For other examples of the naming formula (*qārā* + *šēm*), see Gen 4:25, 26; 16:15; 19:37, 38; 21:3; 25:25, 26; 29:32-35; 30:6-24.

How one harmonizes these two creation accounts, then, has a significant impact on one's perspective on Eve and her relationship to Adam.

Turning to the words themselves, more questions emerge. What does it mean, for instance, that man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God? Do the man and the woman image God in rationality, moral sensibility, creativity, dominion, or some combination of these? Do they image God as man and woman together or as individuals? Do they equally bear the image of God or does man image God in a way that woman does not (see 1 Cor 11:7-12)?⁹ And to what extent, if any, was the image of God in human beings lost after Adam and Eve's disobedience? Again, how one answers these questions affects one's understanding of human beings and, more particularly, how one thinks about what it means to be men and women.

Finally, Genesis 3 describes the disobedience of Adam and Eve but is silent on matters of emotions and motives, leaving much room for interpreters to speculate. Why, for instance, did Eve eat of the fruit? Was it because, in her trusting nature and generous spirit, she assumed the serpent to be speaking truth? Or did she sin intentionally out of pride and a desire to be like God? What about Adam? Did he eat out of love for and solidarity with his wife or did he eat for selfish gain? Was he enticed by Eve to eat of the fruit or did he eat of his own free will? And what are we to make of God's response in Genesis 3:14-19 to Adam and Eve's sin? Was God pronouncing judgment on Adam and Eve for their disobedience? Or was God describing the consequences of their sin?¹⁰ Are these words prescriptive, delineating the new norm for humanity in a postlapsarian world? Or are they descriptive of the world in its sinful state as it awaits redemption in Jesus Christ?

⁹Early interpreters read the opening chapters of Genesis and the question of women's nature in the context of the whole canon of Scripture, including or most especially in light of Pauline texts that at first glance, seem to espouse male superiority and dominance (1 Cor 11:7, 14:34; Eph 5:22-24; and 1 Tim 2:11-15). However, as John Thompson notes, even those who affirmed gender hierarchy struggled with the logic of the argumentation and meaning of these texts. For example, 1 Cor 14:34 exhorts women to be silent in church but 1 Cor 11:5 approves of women's praying and prophesying during the worship service. Interpreters also struggled with 1 Tim 2:14 and the implausible suggestion that Eve alone sinned against God and 1 Tim 2:15, which claimed that women are saved not through Christ's death, but through childbearing. By and large, these texts raised more questions for early interpreters than they answered. See John Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 161-84.

¹⁰Note that only the serpent and the land are cursed in these verses, leaving unclear the intention of these words.

Evident, even from this cursory review, is that how interpreters resolve the ambiguities of these chapters profoundly influences their assessment of Eve and, consequently, their understanding of what it means to be male and female. This is not to say that readings of this text are merely a constellation of the interpreter's assumptions about gender as if the text itself has no impact on the reader. Consensus—or at least resemblance—among interpreters on a good number of points suggests that important affirmations can be made on the basis of Genesis 1–3. For example, God created both male and female in his image and gave them dominion over creation. God desired that man not be alone and created Eve to meet the need for community and intimacy that the animals could not. Finally, Adam and Eve both disobeyed God, an act which had disastrous consequences on their relationships with God, with each other, and with the land. These affirmations aside, however, when it comes to the assessment of Eve's character, the text seems reticent to render judgment, leaving that task to the interpreter.

EARLY INTERPRETERS TALK ABOUT EVE

While the text is restrained in its description of Eve, early interpreters were not, readily filling in the gaps and silences and resolving the ambiguities to offer their assessments of the first woman in the Bible. One has only to think of the notoriously polemical remarks of Tertullian of Carthage (c. 160–c. 225) in an address to women.

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of the (forbidden) tree: *you* are 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. On account of *your* desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die.¹¹

Tertullian was not alone in his harsh assessment of Eve. Other early interpreters offered similarly negative portrayals. Ambrose of Milan

¹¹Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, bk. 1, ch. 1, 14, trans. S. Thelwall, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., ed. Cleveland Cox, Vol. IV, *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1885–96), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04.iii.iii.i.i.html>. While Tertullian is well known for this bombastic speech with its harsh judgment on women, less known are the two other texts where Tertullian blames Adam and Eve equally for sin and the three other texts where he blames Adam alone. F. Forester Church, "Sex and Salvation in Tertullian," *HTR* 68 (1975): 85–88.

(c. 340–397), for instance, claimed that Eve demonstrated woman’s moral inferiority and predisposition to sin when she embellished God’s command regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:3).¹² Here, Ambrose holds Eve responsible for misspeaking and misrepresenting God even though the text itself is silent about how Eve came to know of the command or the source of its embellishment.¹³ Ambrose also holds Eve responsible for Adam’s eating of the fruit and rebelling against God, claiming, “He [Adam] fell by his wife’s fault and not because of his own,” for she intentionally made her husband participate in her own wrongdoing.¹⁴ Finally, he concluded that because the text describes God as “building” Eve from man’s rib (Gen 2:22) and thereby forming a human household in the uniting of Adam and Eve,¹⁵ the proper setting for women’s activity is the home. In this way, the biblical text warrants, for Ambrose, the limitation of the woman’s role to the private sphere where women are to engage in “domestic ministrations.”¹⁶ Throughout, Ambrose accentuates the differences between Adam and Eve and expresses these differences in terms of Eve’s inferiority.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) followed Ambrose in his conviction that women and men are inherently different, arguing that woman is man’s “help meet” (Gen 2:18 KJV) in procreation but not in companionship. If God had intended to provide man a companion, Augustine contended, he would have created another man.¹⁷ Augustine further argued that because woman was created second, she is, by nature, subject to and to be ruled by her husband. After the rebellion of Adam and Eve, Augustine suggests that this hierarchical ordering of the sexes takes on a new gravity, becoming God’s means for restraining the increase of sin.¹⁸ Man’s headship plays an essentially negative function, then, to keep women in check and thwart her moral

¹²Ambrose, “Paradise,” in *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, ch. 12, para. 56, 334-37, trans. John J Savage, *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 42 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1961).

¹³Eve was not yet formed when God commanded Adam not to eat of the tree in the middle of the garden. Why Eve thinks the command includes not touching the tree is not clear.

¹⁴Ambrose, “Paradise,” 13.62.342-43. See also 6.33-34.311-13.

¹⁵While few English translations reflect this, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin manuscripts describe God’s creative activity in creating Eve with a form of the verb “to build.”

¹⁶Ambrose, “Paradise,” 11.50.328-29.

¹⁷Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, vol. 2, trans. John Hammond Taylor, *Ancient Christian Writers* 42 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), bk. 9, ch. 3, 5, 7.

¹⁸Augustine, *Literal Meaning*, 11.37.

degeneracy. For Augustine, woman's subjugation to man is a justifiable punishment because of woman's appetite for and inclination to sin, typified in Eve's succumbing to the serpent.

Strongly influenced by Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas's (1225–1274) reflections on Genesis 1–3 again reinforced the notion of Eve as the inferior sex. Like Aristotle, Aquinas held that “the woman is defective and misbegotten,” reflecting a common medieval belief that the birth of a female was the result of a defect at conception.¹⁹ For Aquinas, then, male is the norm and female the aberration. Aquinas further asserted that male supremacy and headship is warranted because man is more rational than woman, woman being “the weaker sex.”²⁰ Reflecting on the popular question of who is more responsible for humanity's sinful condition, Aquinas argued that woman's sin is greater since (1) she was more puffed up with pride, which made her vulnerable to the serpent's temptations; (2) she sinned against both God and her neighbor, that is, Adam; (3) she received the greater punishment, suggesting she committed the greater failing; and (4) Adam was motivated to eat the fruit not by selfishness or pride, but by love and goodwill for his wife.²¹ The Eve depicted in Aquinas's work, then, is a less rational, inferior human being whose excessive pride led to humanity's downfall.

By the Middle Ages, the identification of Eve and the female gender with sin was commonplace, fostered not only by biblical commentary but also by the widespread adoption of the Latin Vulgate as the Bible translation of choice. Rather curiously, Jerome omits from the Vulgate the phrase “who was with her” in Genesis 3:6, making Eve doubly culpable for the fall and responsible for Adam's sin. By implying Adam's absence during the serpent's conversation with Eve, the Vulgate portrays Eve as the seduced who becomes the seducer, beguiling a naive Adam to eat the forbidden fruit.²² By the twelfth century, this association became inscribed in religious art with Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica* depicting the serpent with a female head. In

¹⁹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), part 1 q. 92, art. 1.1, reply obj. 1. See also Flood, *Representations of Eve*, 70.

²⁰Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.92.1.1, reply obj. 2.

²¹Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2-2.163.4.

²²Flood, *Representations of Eve*, 7. For an excellent survey of how translations of Genesis 1–3 reflect gender bias, see Helen Kraus, *Gender Issues in Ancient and Reformation Translations of Genesis 1–4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

effect, this artistic rendering of the temptation equated women—and more particularly, women’s sexuality—with the serpent’s wily ways such that women came to be seen as the embodiment and source of evil and immorality.²³ After the twelfth century, representation of the serpent in art took on increasingly feminine features, reinforcing this view of women for the largely illiterate masses.

Not all early biblical interpreters represented Eve this negatively. John Chrysostom (347–407), for instance, affirmed the original equality of women with men, commenting that woman is “like man in every detail—rational, capable of rendering what would be of assistance in times of need and the pressing necessities of life.”²⁴ She was to share equally with man in esteem and dominion over creation, he claimed.²⁵ Similarly, Gregory the Great (540–604) espoused sexual equality prior to the fall, suggesting that woman’s subjugation to man was not part of God’s original design for male-female relations.²⁶

Assertions of women’s equality, however, were complicated by the rather enigmatic words of 1 Corinthians 11:7. While Genesis 1:27 clearly affirms the image of God in both woman and man, 1 Corinthians 11:7 implies, by its silence, that only man images God, suggesting man’s spiritual superiority and headship.²⁷ To reconcile these two texts, Chrysostom held that woman was originally created in God’s image, sharing with Adam dominion over the earth, but lost the divine image when Eve disobeyed and was made subject to the man.²⁸ In his literal commentary on Genesis, Augustine maintained that the woman, being fully human, images God in having a mind endowed with reason. However, he restricts the image of God in woman only to those

²³Peter Comestor, *The Scholastic History. Petri Comestoris scholastic historia: liber Genesis*, ed. Agneta Sylwan, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Medievalis (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 22.

²⁴John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1–17* 15.11, trans. Robert C. Hill, *Fathers of the Church Patristic Series* 74 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999). Although Elizabeth Clark suggests that a denial of Eve’s original equality is “more central” to his thinking. Clark, “The Virginal Politeia and Plato’s Republic: John Chrysostom on Women and the Sexual Relation,” in her *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1979), 3–6.

²⁵Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1–17* 17.36, cf. Homily 10:9.

²⁶Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, book 21, chapters 22–24.

²⁷Patristic interpreters seem genuinely puzzled by the apostle’s cryptic comments in 1 Cor 11:7, leading to formulations that describe women as simultaneously bearing the image of God and not bearing the image of God.

²⁸Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1–17* 8.3.

aspects of her being which she shares with man and not in qualities or characteristics that are uniquely female.²⁹ In other words, woman images God only insofar as she images man. While the majority of early interpreters held to some formulation by which they affirmed and denied the image of God in women, at least one commentator, Basil of Caesarea (329–379) insisted without qualification that both the man and the woman are created in the image of God and, as such, are equal in dignity and virtue.³⁰

Further support for egalitarian readings of Eve came from medieval interpreters like Peter Lombard (c. 1096–1164) whose *Sentences* affirmed that the woman was to be the man's companion, neither lording it over him nor being his slave.³¹ Lombard's comment was later reiterated by Aquinas, who wrote, "the woman should neither use authority over man, and so she was not made from his head; nor was it right for her to be subject to man's contempt as his slave, and so she was not made from his feet."³² Instead, Aquinas affirmed, woman is made from man's rib to signify the social union of the man and the woman. As a result, it is natural for the man to love his wife because in doing so, he is, quite literally, loving himself.³³ Another more positive reading of Eve emerged in the work of Humbert de Romans (c. 1200–1277), a Master of the Dominican order, who noted that while Adam was created outside the garden, Eve had the distinct honor of being made in Paradise and on account of this, is divinely endowed with dignity and worth.³⁴

Finally, while some commentators held Eve primarily responsible for plunging the world into sin, not all were comfortable with this formulation.

²⁹This is not the case, however, for the man who fully images God. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John Hammond Taylor, *Ancient Christian Writers* 41 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982) bk. 3, ch. 22, no. 34; Augustine, *De Trin* 12.10-12.

³⁰Basil of Caesarea, *Hexameron 10 and 11. Basile de Césarée, Sur l'origine de l'homme*, trans. and ed. Alexis Smets and Michel van Esbroeck, *Sources chrétiennes* 160 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970), 214.

³¹Peter Lombard, *The Sentences, Book 2: On Creation*, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008), 18.2. Lombard also maintained that the Devil approached Eve because in her, "reason was less vigorous than in the man." Lombard, *Sentences*, 21.1.2.

³²Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2.92.3, "I answer that."

³³Aquinas affirms here that because the woman was created from the man, she shares with him a basic human dignity that makes her an appropriate partner for the man in marriage. This does not translate, however, into male-female equality for Aquinas who continued to believe women were the weaker vessel and the lesser partner in the relationship.

³⁴Quoted in Flood, *Representations of Eve*, 76 from Simon Tugwell, ed., *Early Dominicans: Selected Writings*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 330. Ambrose also makes this observation but dismisses locality, the place of one's creation, as a sign of God's blessing or grace. Ambrose, "Paradise" 12.24-25.

Melito of Sardis (fl. 170), for instance, held Adam wholly responsible for the sin in the garden.³⁵ Other interpreters mitigated Eve's guilt by positing Mary as the new Eve whose obedience cancelled out Eve's error.³⁶ For as "death came through Eve, life came through Mary," Jerome wrote.³⁷ Through her humility and obedience, Mary rectified Eve's error by participating in the redemption of humankind, becoming the true "mother of all living." Through this popular Eve/Mary topos, woman became both the cause of humankind's sin and the source of humankind's redemption.³⁸

EARLY WOMEN ON EVE

Though some early interpreters raised concerns and questions that challenged the negative assessment of Eve, the image of an inferior and morally weak Eve dominated and became the established and authoritative reading. It is not surprising, then, that women interpreters absorbed this reading of Eve and reflected it to varying extents in their own work. Fourth-century Latin poet Faltonia Betitia Proba (ca. 320–ca. 370), the first known female to write about Eve, for instance, does little to challenge this negative assessment, largely reproducing it in the poem *Cento Virgilianus*. Here Proba describes Eve as an "impious wife,"³⁹ "filled with "madness,"⁴⁰ and the origin and cause of all ills.⁴¹ In recounting God's handiwork in creating the world, Proba drew heavily on Genesis 1. However, when detailing the

³⁵Flood, *Representations of Eve*, 13.

³⁶See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 100 (Migne, *Patrologiae Graeca* 6.709-12); Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5, 19 (Migne, *Patrologiae Graeca* 7.1175-76). For Irenaeus, Mary becomes Eve's advocate, balancing her disobedience with obedience. "And thus also it was that the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith." Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3, 22 (PG 7.959-60). See also Tertullian, *De Carne Christi* 17, 5 (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 2.828); Augustine, *Sermons* 289.2, trans. Edmund Hill, vol. III/8, (New York: New City Press, 1994).

³⁷Jerome, *Letters*, ed. Charles Christopher Mierow, *Ancient Christian Writers* 33 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1962), 22.21.

³⁸This topos was popular among women interpreters of Eve who also saw in Mary, Eve's redemption. However, establishing Mary as the new Eve, the new paradigm for womanhood, created a standard for womanhood that was impossible to attain. No woman could approximate the virtue of the immaculately conceived, sinless virgin mother. Thus, while Mary provided a more positive expression of womanhood, this topos did little to elevate the dignity and worth of all women. Flood, *Representations of Eve*, 16.

³⁹Faltonia Betitia Proba, *Cento Virgilianus*, lines 170-71.

⁴⁰Proba, *Cento Virgilianus*, 203.

⁴¹Proba, *Cento Virgilianus*, 264.

formation of humanity, Proba appealed to the narrative in Genesis 2. This led her to dismiss, in large part, the testimony of Genesis 1:27 and assign the image of God, who she renders as physically male, only to Adam.⁴² Throughout, Proba emphasizes Eve's secondary status and her responsibility for sin, reiterating and reinforcing the dominant reading of Eve.

Aelia Eudocia Augusta (c. 401–460), the wife of the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II, followed suit. Eudocia brought her classical education and her Christian faith together in a Homeric cento that included stories from the Old and New Testament. Like Proba, her portrayal of Eve was rather unflattering, comparing Eve with Clytemnestra, the destructive wife of Agamemnon who intentionally plotted her husband's demise. Eudocia further blames Eve for the population of hell: "she [Eve] wrought many evils for men; she cast many strong souls to Hades's abode, wrought hardship for all, caused trouble for many."⁴³

Later women interpreters, however, would challenge aspects of the received tradition to offer their own, more redemptive readings of Eve. Appealing to comments and ideas of early interpreters like Chrysostom, Basil, Gregory, and Lombard, they began to destabilize the conclusions of the normative interpretation, even if only in small ways. A good example of this is the work of the twelfth-century medieval mystic Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179). In her *Scivias*, Hildegard spoke rather consistently of women as the weaker sex who, by nature, are subordinate to men.⁴⁴ However, she also portrayed a more dignified and sympathetic Eve than that of her male contemporaries. For instance, like Basil, Hildegard maintained that women, being fully human, are also full image-bearers of God.⁴⁵ Later, reflecting on Eve's participation in the fall, Hildegard suggests that Eve yielded to the serpent's seductions not out of willfulness or pride but because of her softer nature. For Hildegard, Eve was not so much a rebellious sinner, but a victim of the devil, violated by the serpent.⁴⁶

⁴²Proba, *Cento Virgilianus*, 120.

⁴³See Mark D. Usher, *Homeric Stitchings: The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 13-15 (lines 85-97).

⁴⁴Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias*, bk. 1, vision 2, numbers 10-11.

⁴⁵Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 72.

⁴⁶Rebecca L.R. Garber, "Where is the Body?" in *Hildegard of Bingen: A Book of Essays*, ed. Maud Burnett McInerney (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 103-32.

Additionally, like some earlier commentators, Hildegard invited her audience to consider Eve not only in terms of her sin, but also in light of Mary's obedience and humility. She argued that Mary, as the second Eve, not only redeemed what was lost through Eve but came to embody Eve's original and, as such, her truest nature. According to Hildegard, then, Mary points us back to the prelapsarian Eve as a model for both men and women of the restored humanity, that is, a model for what humanity is by their baptism into the church and what they will yet become. Because of Eve's association with the female sex in general, Hildegard's rehabilitation of Eve offered women a more constructive way of thinking about what it means to be a woman.

These early women interpreters reflect something of the struggle women had with Eve. To affirm the received tradition was to denigrate their own sex and accept the many implications and limitations placed on women because of Eve. This, however, became an increasingly untenable position. As such, even Proba and Eudocia—who wrote of Eve in rather disparaging ways—implicitly challenged the received tradition by composing and circulating their *Centos* and thereby assuming a public voice. Similarly, Hildegard, though not interested in overturning the tradition with respect to worldly matters, gave Eve (and by association, all women) pride of place in the divine reality. Thus even women who in their writing accepted the received tradition of Eve pushed back in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. By the early fifteenth century, women's struggle with Eve and the received tradition took on new urgency with the circulation of misogynist texts that attacked the worth, dignity, virtue, and even humanity of women. Beginning with Christine de Pizan in *Letter of a God of Love* (1399), women began publishing defenses of women in growing numbers, which, among other things, offered alternative readings of Eve. As the centuries unfolded, women would revisit the story of Eve again and again in their efforts to challenge cultural and ecclesiastical norms in favor of what they believed to be a more biblical understanding of gender. It is to their work we now turn.

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