

A Comparison of Two Eves in Christianity

by

Clark Aitkins

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Eve, the first woman in the Bible, is a very important woman in Christianity. She is rarely mentioned in the Bible itself and her entire official story is told in just a few verses at the very beginning of Genesis. Eve is, however, also found in other sacred texts that never made it into the biblical canon. These books were sacred to early groups of Gnostic Christians, a minority branch of early Christianity, and they present Eve as a character that is drastically different from that in Genesis. The Gnostic Eve is not only portrayed as more active and important than the orthodox Eve, but she is also a more respected matriarch.

Today the Eve of Genesis is traditionally viewed as being the cause of sin and pain in the world because it was she who spoke with the snake and first took the forbidden fruit; earlier traditions blamed evil angels or Adam (Bellis 38). Some modern interpreters say that sin is inherited, although this is not actually stated in the Bible (Kugel 71). This connection of biology and sin indicate that the Eve of mainstream religion is to be seen primarily an incubator. She is first and foremost a passive mother who brought her problems on herself and all of humanity. She is focused on the external world of her husband and children.

The story of the Eve of Genesis begins when she is formed from Adam's rib, so that he will have a fit companion (Gen. 2:20-22). He recognizes her as a part of himself and the precedent for marriage is set (Gen. 2:23-24). The serpent then convinces her to eat of the tree of

the knowledge of good and evil, and they become self-aware (Gen. 3:1-7). God discovers them in their new consciousness, grills them, and then curses them (Gen. 3:8-19). Adam then gives Eve her name, Eve, and also calls her “Mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20). God clothes her with Adam, and banishes her from Eden with Adam (Gen. 3:21-24). The last we hear from her, she gives birth to two sons (Gen. 4:1-3).

An interpreter of Genesis, Mieke Bal, sees the knowledge gained from the consumption of the fruit to be sexual knowledge (Bellis 43). Adam and Eve do grow a bit as a result of Eve’s actions, however, their maturation ends with God’s curse. Eve’s learning is brought to a stop by, not only the necessity of painful child birthing, but also by being focused on her husband (Gen 3:16). She lives life strictly for her husband and children, making spiritual introversion difficult if not impossible. Even Adam, though not directly cursed, still has his spiritual life pulled out from under him by being put into a situation that keeps him fighting the physical world in order to survive and feed his family (Gen. 3:17-19). The last thing Eve has to say is how she had her firstborn. Nowhere is learning or spiritual life even mentioned in the Genesis story. Eve’s entire life is centered on satisfying her husband and making babies.

By contrast, some texts of Gnostic Christianity portray an Eve who is more internally focused and active. These texts from the so called Nag Hammadi library date to the third and fourth centuries C.E, but were lost to history until they were discovered in 1945. In compositions such as *The Apocryphon of John* and *The Reality of The Rulers*, Eve is symbolic of spirit and Adam is representative of the psyche, or soul (Pagels, *Adam*, 66). As spirit, she is the force that raises Adam up from ignorance into consciousness and their relationship is the reunion of psyche and spirit (Pagels, *Spiritual Eve* 190-91). She is the beginning of spiritual life and not the beginning of the fall of humanity (Pagels, *Adam*, 67-68). Gnostic Eve represents the human

abilities to concentrate and to learn. She shows humanity the way to transcend physical pain and toil.

In the Gnostic text *The Apocryphon of John*, the Rulers of the world create Adam. In Gnosticism, the Rulers of the world are evil, ignorant and power hungry and the God of Genesis is one of them. The Gnostics believed that these Rulers were subject to a higher God. After creating him, the Rulers throw Adam into the darkness because he can think better than they do. The highest divinity, called the Parent of the Entirety in these texts, sends Life to exist inside Adam and teach him about his descent and ascent. When he comes out of the darkness the Rulers kill him (Wisse 116). They form a new body for him, one which is designed to stay focused on “the ignorance of darkness and desire” (Wisse 117). The Rulers throw him into a paradise this time. The Life that dwells in Adam makes him aware of the Chief Ruler’s desire to control him, and Adam remains disobedient. The Rulers knock him out again (Wisse 117). This time, the Chief Ruler tries to pull Life out of Adam and ends up chasing her. He makes a female form in imitation of Life and enlivens it with some of his dark power, which he takes out of Adam. Life then embodies herself in the form and lifts Adams ignorance and he recognizes her. When the Chief Ruler realizes she has indwelled his female form, he rapes it, but not before Life is able to escape once again (Wisse 118).

Not only is Adam’s second body designed to focus on ignorance, but Hans Jonas interprets the Garden of Eden as also a deception to distract Adam from knowing his inherent perfection (Jonas 92-93). The text itself specifically tells us that Sophia, or Wisdom, is Eve in this story (Wisse 118). Therefore Life is equivalent to Wisdom, not biological processes or physical labor. The text also directly blames sex, sexual desire and reproduction specifically on the Rulers, not Eve.

In another text from the Nag Hammadi collection, *The Reality of the Rulers*, the Rulers are again described as the creators of Adam, but here he is merely a soul-infused body that can only lie on the ground. It is not until the Parent of the Entirety sends the female spirit to inhabit this body that it can stand (Layton 163). The Rulers put him into a sleep called Ignorance and the spirit exits him. She then wakes him and he rises again. It is then that Adam names her “Mother of the Living” and “she who has given birth” (Layton 164). The Rulers then chase Eve in their desire for her. She turns herself into a tree and leaves an image of herself behind, which they rape. This female image is now enlivened. Eve then inhabits a snake and teaches Adam and the female image, abandoning the snake on the ground when she finishes. The female image then feeds herself and Adam from the tree, and they become aware of their lack of spirit (Layton 164).

Up until this point, the story is very similar to the one found in *The Apocryphon of John*, but now the *Reality of the Rulers* adds more. The female image gives birth to Cain and Abel (Layton 165) but the spiritual Eve gives birth to two more of Adam’s children, Seth and Norea. The Rulers, in an attempt to convince Norea to give herself to them sexually, tell her that her mother Eve had come to them (they never mention assault or rape). She informs them that they are wrong, that they had only known the unspiritual female image that Eve had abandoned right before they got to her (Layton 166). She orders an angel of the Parent of the Entirety to rescue and instruct her and because Norea is of a spiritual nature, and not just physical, the angel obeys (Layton 166-167).

Gnostic scholar Elaine Pagels points out that, in this text we particularly see that the marriage of Adam and Eve is a union of soul and spirit. Another way of saying this is that spiritual potential is hidden in normal consciousness (Pagels, *Genesis 1-3*, 414). The spiritual life

is an inherent human potential, but requires guidance, or an introduction, from the divine. This is shown in the symbolism of Adam's ability to stand upright with first, the indwelling of Eve, and then again with the instruction of Eve. Without her, Adam is prone on the ground. This can be viewed as the two bars of a cross with the horizontal bar as the mundane or physical, and the vertical bar as the spiritual. This cross can be seen yet again when the serpent speaks (an ability most strongly associated with vertical humanity) because of Eve's spiritualization, and is then left behind presumably dumb, lying in the horizontal.

In Norea's story, at the end of *The Reality of the Rulers*, we see that Norea is directly related to the divine. Her lineage does not include the Rulers and she proves this to them by commanding intelligences that are of a higher order than they. These higher intelligences obey by rescuing and instructing her in her lineage, highlighting another connection between Gnostic Eve and the pursuit of the spiritual.

It is possible that the original Semitic explanations for the name of Eve have guided the opposing Gnostic interpretations of the female character of Eve. Though the precise meaning of the name Ḥawwāh (Eve) is considered open to debate, it is generally conceded to be originally Hebrew. Genesis makes a pun on her name by calling her "Mother of all living (*ḥāy*)," suggesting a relationship between the name *ḥawwāh* (Eve) and the Hebrew root *ḥāyāh*, "to live." The name Hawwah might also be connected to an Aramaic word for serpent (Wallace 676-77). These etymologies might play a part in these seemingly contrasting interpretations of Eve. The concept of a mother can be taken in two different manners in regards to the act of living. It can refer to the obvious physical and social role of pursuing men and

nurturing children, or it can be taken to refer to the pursuit of knowledge and the rebirth of spiritual life.

Before the Eve of Genesis is produced from of Adam, while she is still an inherent quality inside of him, Adam does as he is told by his creator. He does not break any rules until she is external to him, and only with her guidance. Even then, his rebelliousness can easily be interpreted as mere obedience to Eve. She is the one who strikes out into the unknown in Genesis. The internalized Gnostic Eve is the source of Adam's rebellion in both Gnostic texts and she is the impetus for his striking out into the unknown. The externalized Eve is Adam's instructor, and he recognizes her as such. In *The Apocryphon of John* she "sobers" him. In *The Reality of the Rulers* he names her at the moment of his recognition, stating also that she is the one who has given birth. Of course, there are no babies in the story quite yet, no biological birth has happened. He is obviously recognizing that she is the source of his perception of reality, making the positive symbolic correlation between motherhood, inherent in the name Eve, and spiritual knowledge.

It can be said, with a bit of imagination, that there are two Eves in Genesis. The Eve before her creator's curse is the intelligent verbal one, interacting with the serpent. The self-awareness that comes with the experience of eating the fruit is the very beginning of her growth. Her creator cuts that newly waxing intelligence off at the root by cursing her to be a mother and stay focused on her husband. This second Eve has babies, not adventures. Gnostic Eve also has a counterpart, a female image. The Rulers make it in *The Apocryphon of John*, and she makes it herself in *The Reality of the Rulers*. It is this image, and not Eve, that begins human procreation while Eve plays the spiritual role of instructress to humanity.

In Genesis it is Eve's purpose to marry Adam and give birth to his children and her entire life outside of Eden is dedicated to beginning humanity, certainly an important role. Eve the Gnostic personality does more than this, however. Her role is as an agent of incorruptibility in *The Reality of the Rulers*, or of Sophia in *The Apocryphon of John*, and her mission is to fix the physical universe, or to bring it into the light of spirituality. Her physical image fulfills the role of beginning humanity, and it is interesting to note that her physical image is never referred to as Eve in the stories.

Adam's relationship with Eve is also very different in the Gnostic texts. Adam is brought to life in Genesis by the spirit inherent in his creator's breath. Eve is never spiritualized in this book. She is merely removed from Adam's side in the form of a rib and shaped. In these two Gnostic stories, Eve is the same thing. She is the spirit of divinity itself, but not of the creator. She is the spirit of the highest parent and she is the one who enlivens Adam. The female image of Eve is enlivened by the dark powers of the Rulers. In fact, it is the Chief Ruler who sires Cain and Abel with the female image in *The Apocryphon of John*, and the implication is that his ignorance is the ultimate influence for the first murderer and his victim. In *The Reality of the Rulers*, the father of Cain and Abel is not explicitly stated, but their mother is the female image. The father of the spiritual Seth and Norea is Adam, the student of Eve, and their mother is Eve herself, not the female image. In Genesis, the rather dull Adam and his cursed wife Eve are the parents of Cain and Abel, and the beginning of the troubled race of humanity. Though this may seem to put Gnostic Eve in the troubling role of "the other woman", as opposed to Genesis Eve's role of faithful wife, it could also be said that being the mother for Adam's spiritual love children was just one part of her mission to spiritualize the physical realms. Gnostic Eve answers a higher calling.

In conclusion, the comparison of these two very different Eves found in Genesis and in the Gnostic texts probably display two different attitudes toward women in general. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the first Christian Gnostics were early feminists. There is no solid evidence for those sorts of beliefs in the very little that is known about their practices. These stories trace different attitudes towards spiritual wisdom and the level of importance it held in comparison to mundane existence. Eve is a prism through which the meaning of life can be viewed. From one angle can be seen the cursed Eve, coerced into an economic life of obedience and physical labor and her children will get spiritualized later by a masculine Jesus. From another angle is an Eve of adventure, beholden to nothing but the highest spiritual principles, and she does not stop learning after giving birth. She is the Gnostic heroine in pursuit of knowledge, and is willing to descend into dark painful matter itself for the purpose of instructing others.

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