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We Are All Eve: Rescuing the Mother of All Things from Patriarchal Interpretation and its Implications for Modern Christian Women

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WE ARE ALL EVE: RESCUING THE MOTHER OF ALL THINGS FROM PATRIARCHAL
INTERPRETATION AND THE IMPLICATIONS
FOR MODERN CHRISTIAN WOMEN

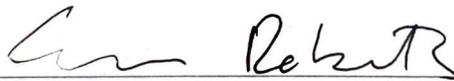
By

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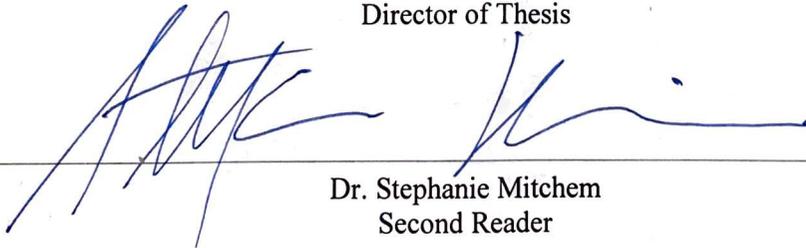
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| THESIS SUMMARY..... | 3 |
| INTRODUCTION..... | 4 |
| CHAPTER 1 : THE CREATION..... | 12 |
| CHAPTER 2 : THE IMAGE OF GOD..... | 17 |
| CHAPTER 3 : THE CHARACTER OF EVE..... | 21 |
| CHAPTER 4 : THE PUNISHMENTS..... | 25 |
| CHAPTER 5 : THE ISSUE OF AUTHORITY..... | 32 |
| CHAPTER 6: THE BIG PICTURE..... | 41 |
| CONCLUSION..... | 45 |
| WORKS CITED..... | 47 |

THESIS SUMMARY

For centuries, the traditional Christian understanding of the Genesis narrative has relied heavily on the patriarchal biases of historic church figures to enforce a gendered hierarchy where women are deprived of authority, voice, and agency. My thesis deconstructs these misogynistic interpretations to provide liberating, alternative readings for the Garden of Eden as well as New Testament verses that utilize Eve's transgression to justify women's secondary status. As a former Christian, I have witnessed the persistence of this oppressive theology, often repackaged as a "complementary" relationship between sexes where women must dutifully submit to the headship of men. Therefore, by building off the wealth of feminist biblical literature, I analyze inaccuracies in English translations, re-examine Eve's character with a strengths-based approach, place the New Testament texts within their proper cultural and linguistic contexts, and cross compare patriarchal verses with biblical indications of female leadership, piety and equality. My research bridges the gap between Christianity and feminism to prove that one can retain their faith while denying the existence of a divine mandate of patriarchy. Moreover, this eradication of misogyny in religion destroys one of the many bases upon which it stands in order to emancipate all women in the modern age, whether they are religious or secular.

INTRODUCTION

In my previous life as a born-again Christian, I encountered multiple women who touted the oppressive logic that men were appointed by God as the natural leaders of mankind. These were bright, college-educated women who stated that they would not support a female preacher because of biblical passages that they interpreted as allotting all authority to men. Although I am no longer a Christian, these statements have compelled me to create this thesis. I hope to show that even for those who maintain that the Bible is the ultimate and only source of perfect truth to guide humanity, there is evidence that the subordination of women is not a divine mandate. Rather, it is a distortion from centuries of biased exegesis. Ultimately, faith and feminism are not incompatible.

Many of the arguments I encountered in my time as a Christian harkened to the Garden of Eden as a justification for misogyny. I have witnessed Eve demonized and sexualized in a manner akin to Jezebel, the Christian Old Testament wife of King Ahab (*Revised Standard Version*, 1 Kings 16.31). The story of Eve's creation and subsequent lapse in judgement has been used to justify everything from the "simplemindedness" of women to the necessity of childbearing. According to the concept of "original sin" formulated by St. Augustine in the 5th century, every woman and man has been affected by the error in Eden, leading to a corrupted and fallen world in need of salvation (Fitzpatrick 465). Therefore, a reexamination of Eve has effects far beyond redeeming a single individual, historical or not. She has become the cultural icon for legitimizing

centuries of female oppression within the Christian world, effectively supporting the idea of male authority and a masculine Godhead.

These biased interpretations of Genesis have been upheld by the historical and systematic exclusion of women from written biblical explication. Before the 12th century, monasteries provided the sole source of education for women in the Western World, conditional on their vows of chastity and poverty. After the rise of universities, formal theological education took place in these male only institutions, depriving women of any outlet for scholarship. When universities were declared too secular after the Protestant Reformation, religious education was once again transported to seminaries that excluded women until the mid-19th century. These historical injustices effectively deprived women of the ability to contribute to the reservoir of Biblical exegesis until the idea of a divinely ordained patriarchy was too far ingrained in Christian tradition (Reuther, “The Feminist Critique” 388-389). It is not that women did not attempt to contribute to this body of work. There is a wealth of evidence that women helped shape scriptural history and transmission; however, their perspectives have not been codified and conserved nearly as well as their male counterparts (Shaner 21).

My aim through this thesis is to continue the reclamation of scripture begun by monumental feminist biblical scholars such as Phyllis Trible and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. I understand that I am not able to definitively answer every scriptural question regarding women’s equality. Rather, I utilize the framework of heterology coined by Georges Bataille in my writing. Although it was originally a scientific philosophy aimed at exploring the possibility of a complete other, in a humanities setting, heterology allows one to return the known to the unknown. It deconstructs and dismisses what has been

“authenticated” about a text to open the door of possible interpretations. It is not searching for a single, “correct” reading, it is exploiting the ambiguous details and exposing a multiplicity of meaning. Because if centuries of White men have imbued the text with their own world views, why must it be restricted from future generations? (Jobling 81). I believe that we must discard the notion that simply because something is new, it is heretical. Traditional interpretations are as equally subject to bias as modern ones; infamous church figures such as Martin Luther and Thomas Aquinas were not infallible individuals with perfect knowledge of the divine.

In fact, this blind reliance on precedent has led to horrific historical errors in exegesis. In the mid-20th century, scholar Bernadette Brooten discovered that the male apostle’s name Junias, mentioned in Romans 16:7 did not appear in any ancient Latin or Greek documents or inscriptions. However, the female name Junia was well attested to in primary sources from the period. This apostle was not referred to as a male or spelled with the additional, masculine ending of the letter “s” by biblical scholars until approximately the 13th century. Therefore, the female apostle Junia’s legacy had been corrupted by misogynistic interpreters who couldn’t possibly believe that Jesus would appoint and distinguish a female teacher of the “good news” (Brooten 142-143).

A similarly biased worldview led early 19th century Southern American exegetes to justify the continuation of American slavery through their ability to cherry pick scripture. One of the most popular passages for Americans in support of slavery was Genesis 9:18-27, known as the Hamitic curse. When Ham, the son of Noah, did not help to cover his father’s naked, unconscious body after a drinking binge, Noah curses Ham’s son, Canaan. Noah states that Canaan will be “a slave of slaves...to his brothers.” and he

appoints Ham's brothers, Shem and Japheth to be his masters. Those who wished to uphold the horrific American institution of slavery utilized this passage, along with the fraudulent belief that all Africans were descendants of Canaan to justify their belief that slave owners were carrying out God's will (Evans 40). Another widespread argument was that Jesus Christ's silence on the issue demonstrated support while citing passages such as Ephesians 6:5-8, traditionally attributed to Paul the Apostle, that prescribed obedience of slaves towards their masters (Evans 43).

To counter this point, abolitionists at the time insisted that one must move past a plain sense reading of the text. They argued that it is one's duty as a Christian to commit to intense research of scripture and surrounding historical context to fully understand the word of God, rather than taking it at face value (Harrill 153). This thesis follows the same rationale by emphasizing thematic principles of egalitarianism over singular verses and deep diving into the text to salvage the reputation of Biblical women such as Eve and thereby contributing to the reduced subjugation of women more generally. I hope that one day Christians will be able to look back on the mistreatment and defamation of women with the same disdain as they do with the previous support of slavery; if present-day Christians can acknowledge that previous interpretations of slavery were incorrect or at least historically specific, then why can't the same be said for women?

Considering the historical evils that have been justified through biblical interpretation, scholar Kelly Douglas argues that one should receive their interpretation from the oppressed, rather than the oppressor. She states that marginalized populations have an epistemological advantage in that they can more easily witness the faults in a social system. They are inherently skeptical towards unjust claims of superiority and are

more capable of envisioning a complete revolution in the ways humans exist and interact. The Bible seemingly follows this reversal of hierarchies in verses such as Mark 10:31. The passage states that those who sacrifice for the Gospel will be greatly rewarded in this life and the next, effectively making the “first [the] last, and the last first” (Douglas).

I now invite my readers to leave behind any prior knowledge of Genesis. I believe that you may find, as I have during my research, that the popular narrative about the events of Eden is not entirely faithful to the actual text. There is no mention in the Hebrew text of Eve being formed from Adam’s rib, the forbidden fruit being an apple, or the serpent related in any way to Satan. We have been told a biased account shaped by centuries of scholarly speculation building upon itself until conjecture has become fact. I will, therefore, be reevaluating the legacy of Eve and the events of Eden in order to disprove the notion that the Bible supports a gendered hierarchy with women as the feeble and flawed subordinates.

In my first chapter, titled “The Creation” I explore the origin stories of man and woman in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 to discount the claim that maleness is the original state of mankind. The chapter provides evidence for the existence of a primal androgynous state; woman was not derived from man but rather they both came from a single, mixed gender entity. In doing so, I explore the grammatical nuances that demonstrate Eve was not a byproduct of man’s rib but pulled from his entire side. In sum, I demonstrate that woman was not created for man and from man but as an autonomous being destined for equality.

In my second chapter, titled “The Image of God”, I argue that God does not possess a physical male form to contradict the pervasive line of thought that believes men

are the sole image bearers of God. I discuss multiple biblical metaphors that connect God to the likeness of women as well as passages that warn not to attach any corporeal form to God. Ultimately, God is beyond human comprehension and cannot be confined by the conventions of our language. To demonstrate this linguistic aspect, I explain the grammatical conventions of Hebrew that necessitate that God is referred to as a “he”. It is for these reasons and clarity’s sake that I also use male pronouns to describe God throughout my thesis. Finally, I deconstruct the idea that Jesus’ male body on Earth evidences male superiority to further my claim that these masculine images of God marginalize the female spiritual experience and unnecessarily equate maleness with the divine.

In my third chapter, titled “The Character of Eve”, I redeem the reputation of Eve and humanize her error as this mistake has been used to negatively characterize women for centuries. I demonstrate that Adam was equally complicit in the act, standing alongside Eve while she talked to the serpent and eating of the fruit without coercion. This chapter includes multiple biblical passages that place the blame equally, if not more so on Adam. Finally, I testify to the positive qualities of Eve that are often neglected. She was not a malicious individual set on corrupting her husband, but a naïve, honest woman who never turned her back on God, even after she was expelled from the Garden of Eden. In providing this positive perspective, I counteract the Evangelical argument that all women have been tainted by Eve’s negative characteristics and therefore will always be the lesser sex.

In my fourth chapter, titled “The Punishments”, I examine how Christian tradition has historically exaggerated the sin of Eden to account for the “fall of mankind from

grace”. Moreover, I explain how the punishments doled out by God to Adam and Eve are not as immutable as they have been interpreted to be. They were more predictions than prescriptions and humans do possess the power to change them. Within this argument to minimize the perceived impact of their sin, I present strong evidence that humans were not fully immortal in the Garden. Therefore, their transgression did not singlehandedly create death in the world. Finally, I provide an in-depth analysis of St. Augustine’s doctrine of original sin to refute the idea that their sin carried exponentially greater weight than ones committed by any other individual on a given day.

Finally, my fifth chapter, titled “The Issue of Authority” assesses two texts that feature prominently in the position that I desire to contest: 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2. These texts are frequently used to repress female liberties within the church. 1 Corinthians 11 advocates for women’s head coverings due to the order of creation and the fact that women do not possess the full image of God as men do. Similarly, 1 Timothy 2 states that women are not allowed to speak or hold authority in the Church because of the sins of Eve. However, as Christians claim that both passages were written by the Apostle Paul, I describe how Paul’s practice of permitting and celebrating female authority directly contradicts these texts. As I explore both passages more in depth, I utilize both grammatical and historical knowledge to center them within their appropriate contexts and disprove the notion that they unequivocally support male domination.

I would like to acknowledge now that this thesis operates solely within a gender binary. Since acceptance of a gender and sexuality spectrum has not yet been fully realized within Christian institutions, more so even than gender equality, it is simply too expansive a topic to include within this thesis. I hope, however, to one day complete

more research regarding the presence of LGBTQIA+ individuals within biblical tradition in a liberationist perspective similar to the one I am now completing on behalf of women's equal standing.

CHAPTER 1: THE CREATION

| <u>Genesis 1:26-27</u> | <u>Genesis 2:18-23</u> |
|---|--|
| <p>²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”</p> | <p>¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”...</p> |
| <p>²⁷ So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.</p> | <p>²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.</p> |
| | <p>²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.</p> |
| | <p>²³ Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”</p> |

In this chapter, I argue that the creation of Adam and Eve as described in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 does not mandate a gendered hierarchy. First, however, I should state that I will be interpreting the events from the perspective that Genesis 2, where woman is taken from man's rib, serves as an elaboration of Genesis 1 where both genders are formed simultaneously. Although contested by scholars, this interpretation is commonly utilized by my target audience of Evangelical Christians to reconcile the apparent differences between the two texts.

In the beginning, according to the Genesis 1 account, all matter in the universe was separated into two halves with no implied inequality between them. One would not interpret the separation of light from darkness or water from sky as mandating a pecking order between them (Korsak 455). The two parts of the aforementioned binaries are both essential for maintaining harmony and balance. This standard is not upheld, however, when woman is separated from man in Genesis 2:22.

It has been argued that the creation of mankind is distinct since man was allegedly created first and from which woman was derived. However, the "man" mentioned in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, before the formation of "woman", has been posited by modern scholars to have been an androgynous being that contained both female and male essences. This theory is not unheard of outside of the Christian tradition. In fact, the Islamic account of Adam's creation explicitly details a primary, mixed gender being from which both were derived in Quranic verses such as 7:189 "it is [God] who created you from a single person" and 4:1, "your Guardian Lord, who created you from a single person" (Wadud 20).

The theory of primal androgyny is further supported by Genesis 1:26 where the term to describe the first “man” switches from the singular to the plural. This phrase, “So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created them”, demonstrates that a singular entity may be being referred to as both male and female, later to be separated in Genesis 2. As further evidence, the Hebrew word used for man in this passage, “a-dahm” is the generic, genderless term for mankind (Korsak 455-456). A similar phenomenon is present in the English language where we acknowledge that “mankind” includes both men and women whereas “womankind” exclusively refers to women. Essentially, the linguistic term “man” does not necessarily exclude the presence of femaleness.

This understanding of Genesis 1 begins to make even more sense when it is stated in Genesis 2 that woman did not in fact come from man’s rib, but his side. The original Hebrew word “sela” refers to the “side” of an object in all 38 other times it appears in the Christian Old Testament. Outside of Genesis, it has never been translated as signifying a rib or bone (Shapira 13). The difference between man’s rib versus his side may seem negligible, however, this small change provides an entirely new meaning to creation. If man and woman were split from one being instead of woman being removed from a smaller part of man, it demonstrates that woman was a part of the divine plan from the beginning, rather than a lesser afterthought.

The perception that woman was formed exclusively from man’s rib is also directly contradicted in Genesis 2:23 where man refers to woman as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”. Hence, she is composed of all the same bodily parts as him. Despite Thomas Aquinas’ other problematic statements in his time, he acknowledged that woman was taken out of man’s side, not his feet or his head to signify that woman was

intended as a companion of man, not as his subordinate or his leader (Benckhuysen 19). Moreover, if man and woman are essentially of the same substance, how can gender essentialists argue that they have naturally different dispositions? How can men be considered “naturally” rational and authoritative while women are seen as feeble and ignorant? Genesis 1: 26-28 paints a clear picture of the commonalities between man and woman, both charged to rule over every animal and living thing in a manner similar to God himself. Therefore, men and women are inherently more similar than they are different.

A similarly sexist line of logic has determined that the term “helpmate” used to describe Eve in Genesis 2:18 denotes a second-class status for women; they are created not to have their own ambitions and agency but rather to aid in the quests of men. A scan of the Bible for that same Hebrew term, however, demonstrates that it has no connotation of inferiority in its use. In Psalm 33:20 and 70:5, God is described as a “helpmate” in his relationship to Israel (Benckhuysen 212). Surely the modern Christian would not concur from this passage that the Almighty, eternal God was created for or submissive to Israel.

In fact, man alone or at least in its androgynous form is definitively viewed as “not good” in Genesis 2:18. Woman was therefore not gifted to man as a servant but instead may be interpreted as the crowning glory that completed the act of creation (Rooke 160). After this act, Adam reflects on his newfound mate with respect and compassion. He acknowledges that they are of the same essence and the narrator of the text states that they will become one flesh again in marriage. In this way, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 act as a window into the perfect state of gender relations. Reciprocity, mutuality, and love were emphasized more than difference, hierarchy, and gender

essentialism. If this was the case before mankind was banished from the Garden, shouldn't modern Christians seek to replicate this relationship instead of giving into ideas of a fallen, irreparable world. Obviously, this world will never be perfect, and heaven cannot be created on Earth, but isn't aspiring to it better than accepting defeat? In the next chapter, I will further address the flawed belief that the natural state of mankind is male through examining the physical image of God and its relationship to gender.

CHAPTER 2: THE IMAGE OF GOD

In this chapter, I disprove the pervasive and damaging school of androcentric thought that posits maleness as the natural state of mankind and divinity. Centuries of infamous scholars have subscribed to the belief that women's physical bodies are inherently defective or deformed. For example, Thomas Aquinas of the 13th century argued that females were the result of defects in the womb leading to physically and mentally inferior beings. Along this line of logic, women could not possibly achieve autonomy, let alone any position of authority. Furthermore, since God is perfect, he could not be female and thus the idea was created that God must be male (Reuther, "Sexism and Misogyny" 86).

Although Greek and Syriac representations of the divine feminine were prominent in the Ancient Era, the image of God as most Christians understand him- an older male- began to gain popularity in 6th to 7th century Byzantium (Polinska 49). In the preceding centuries, the Catholic Church would systemically marginalize all imagery of a female God, resulting in the modern Western way of both referring to and imagining God in a corporeal male form.

In a similar manner, metaphors in the Bible which connect God to femininity are often overlooked to support the common understanding of God as a father, king, or prince. In Isaiah 42:13-17, God's power is likened to both a warrior's cry and a woman's wail as she endures labor (Spencer 8). Similar passages are found in the entirety of the Bible from the description of God as a nursing mother in Hosea 11:3-4 to God as a woman looking for a lost coin in Luke 5:8-10 or a mother hen in Matthew 23:37 (*Revised*

Standard Version). And yet God is not literally any of these things any more so than he is a real father or son. The human language is an incomplete representation of the infiniteness of God described throughout the Bible.

As discussed in my previous chapter, Genesis 1:26 clearly states that God “[made mankind] in our image”. Therefore, God must possess at least some female and male attributes, whether physical, psychological, spiritual, or otherwise. Following this logic, neither male nor female alone are the full “image of God”; he comprises both and yet transcends them. Regardless of when one agrees upon the formation and separation of the sexes, this distinction was made after God and by God; sex and gender are qualities that do not apply to him (Whitehead 26). This idea of an ultimate reality beyond human conception is captured perfectly in the Jewish prohibition of pronouncing the tetragrammaton, YHWH to demonstrate respect and acknowledgement of the mystery of his existence (Setyawan 51).

Some feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Reuther have even made the argument that attaching any corporeal form to God is idolatry (Reuther, “Sexism and Misogyny” 93). In Deuteronomy 4:15-20, Moses instructs the Israelites not to make an idol of anything that resembles Earthly entities, specifically even warning them against recreating “the likeness of male or female.” Similar passages such as John 4:24 and 2 Corinthians 3:17 affirm that God does not possess an innate material form and in Exodus 20:5, God clearly states that doing so will displease him (Spencer 6).

Nevertheless, one will immediately recognize that God is referred to with male pronouns throughout the English Bible which appear to contradict his immaterial nature. This phenomenon is simply a grammatical aspect of the Hebrew language and not a

reflection of characteristics. In Hebrew, masculine pronouns and articles are used for the names of people, heavenly bodies, and natural objects. In contrast, the feminine is used for the names of places, instruments, natural forces, abstract ideas, titles, collectives, parts of the body and artificial beings. Therefore, when read in its original Hebrew, the Christian Old Testament describes God in the masculine term YHWH, the plural Elohim, and the feminine *rûaḥ* when speaking of God's spirit, similar to the natural force of wind (Spencer 7). Any speaker of Spanish, French, Italian or Arabic will recognize this phenomenon in that inanimate objects are given gendered pronouns that do not actually describe the object. Referring to an apple in French as "she" does not make it a female, just as referring to God as a "he" in Hebrew does not mean he possesses a male body; these are just conventions of languages.

The physical manifestation of Jesus as a male is also frequently cited in the case for androcentrism, however, Jesus' earthly form was not a true representation of his essence but merely a necessity to live among humans. This idea is supported by Philippians 2:5-8 when Paul states that Jesus needed to empty himself of his divine qualities and humbled himself by "taking on a form of a slave" in order to visit Earth. Moreover, in every instance of Jesus speaking about himself in the New Testament, Jesus utilized the Greek form of the generic or gender inclusive term "ánthrōpos" instead of the Greek masculine term "anēr". The only times Jesus is referred to with male pronouns is when others are describing him, however, this nuance is lost in the English translation (Spencer 6).

The physical representation of God may seem inconsequential; however, a masculine image of God legitimizes a strict interpretation of gender roles that largely

harms women. In the words of Mary Daley, “if God is male, then male is God”. Essentially, men would be the direct representatives of God on Earth and women who defy this structure are subverting a perceived cosmic order of authority (Whitehead 142). The female experience and the ability of women to relate to God is then marginalized as it appears that being a father, warrior and king is more important than a mother, caregiver, and queen (Setyawati 62). Furthermore, masculinity is then linked with the admirable and exemplary qualities of God such as wisdom, strength, power, and righteousness.

Revisiting the Bible while leaving behind a patriarchal image of God allows the reader to examine Genesis without the perceived alliance between Adam and God against the female, Eve. Adam is not the only one who is able to connect with God or who emanates the righteous qualities of God. Eve has equal claim to her relationship with the divine and Genesis must be reexamined as such. She is not a wicked side kick to the central figure of Adam but an integral part of the redemption arc present throughout the entire Bible that includes all genders.

CHAPTER 3: THE CHARACTER OF EVE

In this section, I restore Eve's legacy, painting her not as an evil temptress but simply a complex human being similar to us all. Although countless female legacies have been marred by time and misogynistic prejudice, their reputations are not stagnant. Take for example the figure of Medusa who has recently become a feminist icon when ancient Greek accounts were reexamined by modern, critical eyes. The tale was transformed from a malicious monster, cursed by Athena to calcify every onlooker into a survivor of rape, gifted the protection of snake heads by a sympathetic goddess (Elliot). In this way, we must discard our preconceptions about the character of Eve and start anew to maintain the integrity of Genesis.

This view is not novel or radical outside of Christian tradition; Jewish and Islamic scholars are essentially in consensus that Eve was just one of many flawed individuals in the history of mankind (Shaner 29). In the midst of widespread recognition within Christianity that all but Christ have sinned, it appears hypocritical to criticize the errors of one woman so heavily (Benckhuysen 151). Has not every individual been tempted in some capacity on this Earth? And yet all Christians believe that there is forgiveness and redemption within the Lord's grace.

It is commonly understood in the modern Christian faith that Eve was tempted by Satan in the form of a serpent to eat an apple from the tree of knowledge. She then convinced her husband Adam to partake in this sin from which God delivered the eternal punishments of "original sin" and the two were cast out of the Garden of Eden. Eve is charged with much of the blame for this act and from this story, centuries of scholarship

has developed surrounding the feeble mindedness of women or their powers of seduction due to the perceived nature of Eve. As I stated before, however, this is simply an understanding. Many details which have been codified into the Christian imagination such as the fruit being an apple and the presence of Satan are found nowhere in the actual text of Genesis.

There is also no evidence to suggest Eve was a diabolical, impious figure who was set on destroying the perfection of Eden. In fact, the text reveals the exact opposite, positing Eve as a remorseful and devout woman who made a grave, regrettable mistake. This mistake, however, was not completed alone. The translation of the Bible from Hebrew to Latin Vulgate erased the words “who was with her” in Genesis 3:6 that proves Adam stood alongside Eve while she spoke to the serpent (Benckhuysen 17). He could have stepped in at any time and prevented this, but he was just as equally fooled as his counterpart. Moreover, even in some traditional English translations that do not include the fact of Adam’s presence, Eve did not at any point force or coerce Adam to eat of the fruit. He committed the same sin as her of his own volition, knowing full well the consequences that God stated in Genesis 2:17.

New Testament writers even go beyond this idea of joint culpability to place the blame specifically on Adam. In Romans 5:14, Paul states that sin came into the world through one man rather than one woman and 1 Corinthians 15:22 states that “for in Adam all die”. Although 1 Timothy 2:14 asserts that Eve was deceived, not Adam, it does not negate the presence of Adam’s sin. This can be interpreted as Eve being initially misled by the serpent from which Adam followed or that Adam knew full well the consequences of his actions and was therefore not deceived but acted willingly (Benckhuysen 48).

Either way, there is no evidence within the text that implies the serpent targeted Eve because of her inferior intelligence to Adam. It could be just as likely that the serpent approached Eve first because she was the spiritual leader of the two and after she became convinced, Adam would surely follow (Benckhuysen 160). This view may appear nonsensical or wishful, however, it holds just as much merit as the first interpretation because neither are stated directly in Genesis. The first has simply been reinforced by centuries of patriarchal scholarship.

Moreover, we cannot neglect the fact that the responsibility should ultimately be placed on the serpent, lest we resort to victim blaming. Although Eve was aware of the punishments of eating the fruit, the serpent manipulated her judgement by stating that she would not die but rather be enlightened by the tree's fruit. Having likely never encountered evil before in the perfection of the Garden, Eve's actions are more a representation of her naivety and perhaps gullibility than an attempt to spread wickedness. We must humanize her moment of doubt in God's instructions and her desire for higher knowledge rather than painting her as a power-hungry individual.

Moreover, when God discovers the humans' error and confronts them in Genesis 3:8-11, Eve is the one who appears to own up to her mistake while Adam sheepishly blames his wrongdoings on his wife, despite the lack of force or coercion causing him to eat the fruit. Eve does not attempt to cover up her wrongs and instead acknowledges her shortcoming outright to God, stating that "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate it" (Anderson 23).

Even after their punishments are assigned, as I will elaborate in the next chapter, Eve does not turn her back on God. When she gives birth to both Cain and Seth, Eve

thanks the Lord, recognizing that although Adam participated in the process, it was ultimately God who “granted [her] another child” in Genesis 4:1-25 (Anderson 24). Moreover, this ability to create humans which has been transferred from God to Eve demonstrates that she is now a collaborator in the creation process. In this way, she attains a venerable aspect that once again proves she shares some qualities with the divine and has been made in his image (Rooke 167).

After being bestowed the gift of creating life, Adam names his wife Eve in Genesis 3:20 because “she was the mother of all living”. Eve, however, is her second name and she was first designated with “Isha”, woman because she was taken from “Ish”, man in Genesis 2:23. Ultimately, the order of her names may reflect the importance of her characteristics. She is a human first and a mother second; she is more like man than she is different (Shapira 15).

The repercussions of their actions, however, will drive a wedge between the two and increase these perceived differences between the sexes. They will be exiled from the garden and their lives will never be the same. They will learn shame and hardship, thus the initial equality between man and woman will be greatly disturbed for generations to come. Nevertheless, the question remains whether this is ordained by God, or the result of human failing; should we aspire to return to the relationship of the Garden or are we forever doomed by this “original sin”?

CHAPTER 4: THE PUNISHMENTS

| <u>Genesis 3:15-17</u> | <u>Romans 5:12-15</u> |
|--|---|
| <p>¹⁵ “I will put enmity between [the serpent] and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”</p> | <p>¹² “Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned—</p> |
| <p>¹⁶ To the woman he said, “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”</p> | <p>¹³ sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.</p> |
| <p>¹⁷ And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;”</p> | <p>¹⁴ Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.</p> <p>¹⁵ But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.”</p> |

The sin committed in Genesis 3 is commonly interpreted, particularly within Roman Catholic tradition as establishing a curse that will haunt all of humanity. Although the concept of limbo was abolished by the Catholic Church in 2007, it was previously believed that unbaptized babies were sentenced to an eternal existence away from God because the “original sin” of Adam and Eve was not removed from their souls (Britannica). When one realizes, however, that original sin as an ontological inheritance was introduced in the 4th century by St. Augustine, and not found in the Christian Bible, it brings the idea of generational punishment into question (Fitzpatrick 456). Additional details surrounding the punishment, including the tense of the Hebrew verbs utilized by God and hints of mankind’s mortality before eating the fruit of knowledge support the conclusion that Adam and Eve’s trespass may not have been the eternally devastating plague that some denominations of Christianity have made it out to be. Essentially, there is hope coded into the language of Genesis that modern humans will not always have to bear the burden of the first humans and its implications for gender injustice may therefore be void.

I will begin with an analysis of the actual text of Genesis 3 in which God discovers the humans’ sin and delivers his judgement. He starts by sentencing the serpent, stating that there will forever be hostility between it and the woman. Moreover, God states that the woman’s offspring will work to stave off the serpent, forever bruising its head while the serpent bites the offspring’s heel. Therefore, even if womankind cannot directly participate in spreading and teaching righteousness yet (which will be addressed in the next chapter) they are a vital part of God’s plan as they birth and nurture the men that will (Benckhuysen 115). This reciprocal relationship between man and woman is

repeated in the New Testament verse 1 Corinthians 11: 12, “for as woman was made of man, so man is now born of woman”; neither can complete their destiny without the other.

The harmony between the two genders appears to be interrupted, however, by Genesis 3:16 where God declares that a woman’s desire will be for her husband, and he will rule over her. Although this may seem fairly damning from a feminist standpoint, this verse gains a new understanding when it is reexamined in the text’s original Hebrew. The Hebrew text is much more ambiguous and since there is no direct equivalent to the verb in the English language, the original Hebrew phrase “your desire [to be] for your husband” becomes an imperative, “your desire shall be for your husband” in English. Likewise, the sentence “[your husband] shall rule over you” is not in the imperative form in Hebrew but actually the future simple tense, “[your husband] will rule over you”. Read this way, the phrase appears more as a warning or a prediction than a divine mandate. God is not ordering husbands to control their wives; he is simply utilizing his omniscience to state that gender roles will become greatly distorted in the future (Benckhuysen 217).

Another common misconception in the text is the idea that Adam and Eve were fully immortal before they committed this sin and thus, they introduced death into the world. In Genesis 3:19, God states that humans will return to the dust of the ground that they were created from. Therefore, if humans were originally created from this perishable substance, it appears it was always in God’s original plan to continue the cycle of life (Wells 645). The most explicit confirmation that humans were not fully immortal in the garden of Eden is demonstrated, however, when God drives them out to stop them from

reaching the tree of life. Even though they have eaten of the fruit of knowledge, they are only “like” God and have not become fully divine because they have not acquired the ability to “live forever” in Genesis 3:22 (Wells 656).

The belief in mankind’s original mortality may appear contradictory to God’s instruction in Genesis 2:17 that eating the fruit will cause death, interpreted as an end to their immortality; however, this verse can be understood more as a conditional verdict by God and less as an imminent death due to the fruit’s poisonous qualities. The narrative proves that it is not the actual the fruit that causes death because Adam and Eve survive long after eating it. Therefore, it must have been that God was initially planning to execute Adam and Eve for this disobedience, prematurely ending their already mortal lives instead of stripping them of their immortality (Wells 639).

In the 18 other instances that the exact Hebrew phrase of Genesis 2:17 “you will die” appear in the Christian Old Testament, they all signify an immediate death sentence rather than some metaphorical or otherwise “death” (Wells 653). Moreover, God’s ability to change course or even regret his actions is well documented throughout the Hebrew Bible, including Genesis 6:6, Exodus 32:14, and Numbers 14:11–25. Essentially, humans were not immortal in the full sense at any point in the Garden before the punishments. God was planning to carry out a death sentence and later changed his mind to the lesser punishments of pain, childbirth and toiling the ground in Genesis 3:16-19 (Wells 659).

The 4th and 5th century preacher and polemicist St. Augustine of Hippo, however, could not read Greek or Hebrew. He based his interpretations of Genesis off of the flawed Ambrosiaster translation of the Bible in Latin, leading to an overstatement of the effects of Adam’s sin. In formulating this doctrine of original sin, Augustine referenced the New

Testament verse Romans 5:12 to support his belief that sin was passed down generationally because in his eyes, every individual that was to come already existed in a seminal state in Adam while he ate the fruit. Augustine, however, was unaware that his translation of the text into Latin replaced the word “because” with “in whom” in Romans 5:12. Therefore, his version read “so death spread to all **in whom** all have sinned” rather than “and so death spread to all **because** all have sinned”, implying that all have sinned in Adam rather than through their own faults (Toews 84). Along this line of logic, Augustine stated that this inherited blasphemy explained the necessity of Jesus Christ’s death and this belief became the official dogma of the orthodox church during the Council of Orange in 529 AD (Toews 86).

There is considerable opposition, however, to this idea of a biologically transmittable failing, both in the time of Augustine and from a modern perspective. By questioning the infallibility of God’s punishments, these interpretations also offer hope for restoring harmony and equality between the genders as it was in the Garden. In Dr. Stanley K. Stowers’ rereading of Romans 5:12-20, he posits that Paul’s main aim of the text was demonstrating how the actions of one can affect many. Moreover, Paul stressed that the comparison between Adam and Jesus was extremely limited, as stated in Romans 5:15-16, because many more have been saved by Jesus’s death than those condemned by the sin of Adam. Romans 5:13-14 raises the possibility that this is because the sin was only applicable to those “before the law was given”. Therefore, inherited sin reigned only “from Adam to Moses” and the possibility of obedience or insubordination became wholly dependent on the choice of the believer after the revelation of the Torah (Stowers 254).

Augustine also encountered opposition to his interpretation of Romans 5 within his lifetime, particularly from the British monk and theologian, Pelagius. Pelagius believed that each individual was hand crafted by God rather than coming from the loins of Adam, therefore “original sin” was not passed down biologically. Pelagius supported this belief with the reasoning that if baptism cleansed one of sin, then the child of two baptized children must be able to break this metaphysical line of descent. Thus, he understood Romans 5:12 as stating that mankind reproduced sinfulness by imitation, not biology (Toews 76).

Following this logic, modern Christians are not divinely bound by the consequences delivered to Adam and Eve for eating of the tree of knowledge. As stated previously in the chapter, analyzing the grammar of the text in its original Hebrew reveals that the sentence “[man] shall rule over you” was more of a premonition than a command. Therefore, one is able to break the cycle of unjust male domination at any point and perhaps is even mandated to. In this alternative reading, joint weakness at the moment of creation led to a distortion of the ideal state of the world, not that God attempted to reassert patriarchy after Eve usurped her husband (Rooke 169). Modern technological advancements are already liberating men and women from the physical punishments bestowed on them; epidurals and other medicinal developments have eased the trials of childbirth just as mechanized agricultural equipment and refrigeration have taken away the toils of obtaining food (Roded 56). Therefore, it may not be a stretch to theorize that patriarchy too can be mended.

The acknowledgement that mankind may not have been fully immortal in the Garden also assists in redeeming the legacy of Eve. She was not the catalysis for a

monumental curse over all of humanity and Genesis does not attempt to resolve the question of sin's origin; the serpent has no clear motive or relation to the Christian figure of Satan. Therefore, just like the Jewish understanding of the chapter, Eve was simply one of many sinners, along with Adam, depicted in the course of the Bible. This belief in the fall of mankind is a Christian theological invention that is not supported by the text (Toews 88).

Unfortunately, more of Paul's writings than just Romans 5:12 have been utilized by scholars in their campaign to uphold a misogynistic exegesis of Genesis. Without a critical eye, these texts may seem to support the belief that women's creation has made them too feeble minded to preach, prophesy or hold authority. In the next chapter, however, I will expose the true intentions of Paul and follow the same rationale of this one to prove that Genesis 1-3 does not advocate for women's subordinate status.

CHAPTER 5: THE ISSUE OF AUTHORITY

| <u>1 Corinthians 11:3-9</u> | <u>1 Timothy 2:11-15</u> |
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| <p>³“But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God...</p> <p>⁵ but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonors her head—it is the same as if her head were shaven....</p> <p>⁷ For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.</p> <p>⁸ (For man was not made from woman, but woman from man.</p> <p>⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.)”</p> | <p>¹¹ “Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness.</p> <p>¹² I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent.</p> <p>¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve;</p> <p>¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.</p> <p>¹⁵ Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”</p> |

During my time as a Christian, I found these verses to be particularly infuriating and I began to believe that the apostle Paul must have had a personal vendetta against women in order to write these words. This belief, however, was formulated before I understood the historical legacy of Paul. The more I began to research his life and

teachings, the more I realized that his supposed belief that women should remain silent and submissive was in complete contradiction to his actions. As I explore the true intentions of Paul in this chapter, I will undermine the assumption that the creation story, referenced in both texts, justifies female subservience in any manner. I believe these passages are crucial representations of how Genesis is more than just a story; it has been utilized for centuries to support a patriarchal organization of one's home, church, and society as a whole.

The Bible has several mentions of Paul appointing female authority and religious figures that appear at odds with his words in 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2. In Philippians 4:2-4, Paul asks the recipients to assist two women, Euodia and Syntyche who "have labored side by side with [him] in the gospel", inferring that he accepted female colleagues. Similarly, Paul acknowledges the female Junia as an apostle in Romans 16:7 and commends her service in the ministry beside him. In that same chapter, Romans 16, Paul also praises the female deaconess, Phoebe, a clear example of a woman teaching and holding authority. Furthermore, Paul mentions female leaders of household churches including Lydia in Acts 16:14 and Nympha in Colossians 4:15 (Peppiatt). Ultimately, it appears Paul had no qualms with women in elevated positions over men during his lifetime. After learning these points of reference, I began to explore the two sets of verses with a renewed respect for Paul and an awareness that their true meaning could not have been as misogynistic as previously thought.

I would like to preface this discussion with the acknowledgement that secular religious scholars are nearly in consensus that Paul is not the actual author of 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy along with several other epistles. These writings have been attributed to

an anonymous author decades after Paul's death, writing under his authority due to the change in style, vocabulary, and content. Despite this, I will be analyzing the text as if it was written by him due to the insistence within most Christian communities that his style changed over the twenty years of his apostolic career or the justification that the actual author is not as important as the idea they were divinely inspired.

I will begin with the book of Corinthians, which is one of seven epistles definitively written by the apostle Paul in my attempt to redeem it from the deeply entrenched misogyny the text has been imbued with. 1 Corinthians 11:3 states that a woman's head is her husband while the head of Christ is God. This parallel appears to denote a graduated hierarchy that begins with woman as the lowest entity and ends with God as the highest. A modern trinitarian understanding of the relationship between Jesus Christ and God, however, complicates this interpretation; God cannot be elevated above Jesus because they are simply two manifestations of the same Godhead.

Therefore, one must revisit the text in its original Greek to reexamine the Greek word "kephalē" which has traditionally been translated to "head". The word "kephalē" actually possesses several meanings, including one's physical head, the source or origin, the ruler, the completion of or the crown. Therefore, if there is a parallel relationship between God and Christ as man and woman, the only interpretation that makes sense in both contexts is the completion of one another. With this understanding, man and woman are composed of the same essence and equal in being just as God and Jesus Christ are. Any other reading of this verse from a trinitarian point of view would neglect the full divinity of Jesus (Peppiatt).

Moving onto 1 Corinthians 11:5-9, the text appears to advocate for women's head coverings when praying or prophesying because they do not possess the full glory of God as men do. This instruction, however, demonstrates firstly that it is possible for women to prophesy. Whether prophesy is interpreted simply as predicting future events or as being granted the status of a prophet, the mention that women must have their head covered when doing this signifies that this is not a privilege restricted only to men as is often believed (Peppiatt). Equally important is the fact that nowhere in the Christian Old Testament is there an explicit prohibition on women prophesying and the label of prophetess is attached to five women throughout it, including but not limited to Miriam in Exodus 15:20, Deborah in Judges 4:4 and Huldah in 2 Kings 22:14 (Benckhuysen 130).

The remaining parts of 1 Corinthians 11: 5-9 may seem irredeemable from a feminist perspective, however, there is evidence that not everything written aligns with Paul's view on gender relations. This section of text is Paul's second response to the Corinthians after he had left their church for Ephesus. Therefore, in the words of theologian Lucy Peppiatt, understanding Corinthians is similar to reading a chain of emails where "only one person's emails remain" while the respondent's are deleted. Complicating this issue is the fact that the Greek language does not possess a symbol similar to the English quotation mark. Any that are in English Bibles have been added by later editors to make sense of the contradictory nature of the text. Thus, Paul quotes the Corinthians when he is about to disagree with or modify their statement.

The start and end of these quotations, however, is not unanimously agreed upon by religious scholars and Paul may have been referring to the Corinthian's line of thought, not his own, in more places than currently acknowledged. For example, in 1

Corinthians 11: 5, Paul appears to state that women must cover their head because they do not possess the glory of God, citing the fact that woman was made from man and for man in his explanation. This explanation becomes increasingly confusing, however, as Paul later explains in 1 Corinthians 11:16 that “her hair is given to her as a covering” which directly contradicts his earlier statement in verse 11: 6 that an unveiled woman should just cut off her hair; if her hair already acts as a veil, how can shaving her head be mandated as a punishment for not wearing a veil? Ultimately, it is necessary that this text is read as a dialogue between the ideas of Paul and the ideas of the Corinthians or every argument it attempts to make is dismantled in the same breath.

Moreover, 1 Corinthians 11:14 supports this quotation hypothesis in its statement that a man wearing long hair is unnatural and degrading to him because it is strongly believed that Paul had long hair during his time in Corinth. Acts 18:18 states that Paul finally cut his hair after leaving Corinth in order to honor a vow. Therefore, if it was untrimmed for his entire 18 month stay, as scholars believe, it would have been at least nine inches long. Why then, would Paul have been teaching the Corinthians that a man having long hair is disgraceful while intentionally sporting a shoulder length cut? (Peppiatt). 1 Corinthains 11:14, among other verses, must then be recognized as Paul quoting the Corinthians in his letter or one accuses him of hypocrisy.

I propose that the true takeaway from the passage comes in 1 Corinthians 11:11-12, where Paul is finally writing his own ideas. Although the Greek word “plen” is commonly translated as “nevertheless” in this passage, it translates better to “the point is” or “but what I’m saying is”, signaling a change in thought or a contradiction to what was previously stated. The passage reads “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not

independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God". Therefore, 1 Corinthians 11:3-10 was Paul quoting the distorted views of the Corinthians and then correcting them with his own teaching that men and women have gained a new, interdependent status in the Lord. Moreover, the statement that "all things are from God" asserts that the sequence of creation is not as important as the fact that they owe their existence to a higher power, not one another (Peppiatt).

Ultimately, external head coverings are not required for women to pray or prophesy because of the rationale that they are a lesser creation. Women are already covered by their hair, although long hair is not specific to one's gender. Paul makes this decision definitive when he states in 1 Corinthians 11:16 that he "[recognizes] no other practices, nor do the churches of God". Additionally, woman was not made for man; they have a mutually dependent relationship, and both share in the glory of God (Peppiatt).

Moving onto 1 Timothy 2:11-15, the passage appears to advocate for the silence and submission of women due to Eve's later creation and her susceptibility to the serpent's deception. However, Paul's instructions to Timothy, the bishop of Ephesus must be limited in its scope to only the women of Ephesus, not the whole of womankind. This could not have been a universal mandate as it has often been utilized by Evangelical preachers because of the aforementioned recognition that Paul did appoint women to positions of authority during his lifetime. 1 Timothy 3:8-11 even includes qualifications for a woman to become a deacon which serves as evidence of Paul's approval (Celoria 22). Additionally, in 2 Timothy 1:5, Paul commends Timothy's grandmother and mother

for raising him with sound doctrine in direct opposition to his prohibition of woman as teachers in 1 Timothy 2:12.

Therefore, Paul's mandate that women be silent in the church in 1 Timothy 2:11 is speaking only to the Ephesian woman and serves more as an allegory than a literal comparison. Eve represents the women of Ephesus, not because they have been physically created after the men but because they came to the church later; they were "formed" into Christians later. Therefore, they must sit back and absorb the knowledge of the Bible before proselytizing to prevent the spread of false doctrine. This is evidenced by the fact that the Greek verb "epitrepô", translated as "to permit" in 1 Timothy 2:12 is in the present tense; Paul is not stating he will never permit a woman to teach but that he is not now allowing it for the women of Ephesus (Celoria 21).

Additionally, 1 Timothy 2:14 is commonly interpreted as justifying the prohibition on female teachers because Eve was deceived by the serpent. As I stated in Chapter 3, however, the reasoning that it was Eve who was misled, not Adam, does not negate his wrongdoing. He ate of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden as well, therefore, it is possible that Adam was not deceived at all because he knew the consequences of his actions and still decided to follow through (Benckhuysen 48). In summation, verses 2:13-14 are not using Eve's failings to explain why all women do not have the mental capacity for authority. It is simply drawing parallels between Eve and the women of Ephesus to warn them that they must learn from those who came before them in order to prevent theological mistakes (Celoria 21).

Similarly, 1 Timothy 2:15 must be understood metaphorically as the recipients of the letter likely would have, not as our modern eyes do. "Childbearing" was a frequently

used metaphor in the literary and cultural environment of the time to signify producing virtues or vices. This phenomenon is present in several contemporary works such as Philo of Alexandria's *Therapeutae* and Plato's *Symposium*. The cultivation of values is also referred to as childrearing by Psalms 7:14 where the author states that "the wicked man conceives evil and is pregnant with mischief". Similarly, James 1:15 utilizes the metaphor that desire gives birth to sin and sin conceives death (Waters 43-44). Thus, there is a well recorded correlation between childbearing and character bearing; it is not that women must produce actual children to be saved, which would be ludicrous considering the rate of infertility, but that the women must nurture the virtues of faith, love, holiness and modesty they have "given birth" to.

Therefore, women do not have to perpetually pay for Eve's singular mistake. Her creation and actions are not the reason they cannot preach, teach, or lead. This correlation has been drawn by centuries of majorly male interpreters in hopes of upholding their positions of power over women. In the words of Catherine Booth, "why should woman be confined exclusively to the kitchen and the distaff, any more than man to the field and workshop?"; if some men have been exempted from God's original punishment of tilling the land to spread his word, why can't women have the same? (Benckhuysen 136) Along this line of logic, if female preachers or even female professionals are disobeying their original duty to birth children as stated in Genesis, then so are male preachers who shop at the grocery store instead of toiling in the fields "all the days of [their] life". Ultimately, humans are destined to outgrow the original responsibilities designated in Eden due to the complexity of our modern society. Women should not be held to a different standard by

forcing them to follow in the footsteps of the very first woman while men have continually been allowed to branch out past agriculture.

Additionally, the interpretations I have provided in this chapter may seem aspirational or a misrepresentation of the text to fit my own feminist agenda. I would counter, however, that my exegesis is grounded in the historical and cultural landscape of the verses more so than traditionally patriarchal readings. I reference again the article by Richard Harrill that states a liberationist reading is often dependent on moving past the plain sense meaning of the text (Harrill 153). Therefore, if one is a Christian and regards the Bible as the ultimate source of divine truth and knowledge, it is crucial for them to extensively study the text, including the historical conditions, in order to better grasp the will of God. And in the case of both 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2, the more one researches, the more apparent it becomes that these texts are not as simple as they have been made out to be. When one unearths the background of Paul and the literary tradition of the time as well as cross comparing other verses, the likelihood that there are empowering takeaways for women within these sections only increases.

CHAPTER 6: THE BIG PICTURE

I acknowledge that the Christian Bible is an incredibly complex text following the diverse and at times, contradictory actions of millennia of humans. It highlights that few, if any things in life are black and white. Even David, considered one of the most righteous Judean Kings of the Christian Old Testament, perpetrated an affair with another man's wife, Bathsheba, arguably without her consent, and then forced her husband to die on the front lines of battle (*Revised Standard Version*, 2 Samuel 11). Therefore, it is difficult to derive many clear instructions from the text and one must often distinguish between how the world is depicted versus how it should be, a phenomenon commonly referred to as descriptive versus prescriptive narration.

One can, however, attempt to find recurrent ideas to better understand God's vision for mankind. Utilizing this strategy, I would argue that the Christian Bible's condemnation of unmerited hierarchies greatly outnumbers the sections of scripture advocating for it. Therefore, domination, particularly in the realm of gender, is not a natural part of human existence but evidence of a sinful world; hierarchies are a distortion of the initial equality enjoyed in the Garden of Eden and they have historically led to systemic societal ills and horrific human rights abuses. A thematic overview of the Bible reveals that the Christian God continually sides with the oppressed, the underdogs in a manner that supports the argument for female empowerment (Reuther, "Sexism and Misogyny 90).

The Christian Old Testament is a story of YHWH's support for the chosen people of Israel as they endure persecution, enslavement, warfare, and near genocide. Through

YHWH's covenant with Abraham, the once meager population of Israel is able to hold their ground against their more established enemies, the Canaanites, Babylonians, Assyrians and Amalekites, among others. The New Testament parallels this narrative arc by continually uplifting and redeeming previously marginalized populations such as disabled individuals, tax collectors, eunuchs, prostitutes, the impoverished and Gentiles. Even if Jesus's actions are not historically based but rather are attempts by Biblical authors to enhance his legacy, the Bible unequivocally glorifies his ability to break the social taboos and upend the hierarchies depicted in the New Testament (Compton 17).

Furthermore, the Bible is not a monolith of patriarchy; there are various depictions of women subverting or manipulating structures of male authority with God's blessing. In the Christian Old Testament, one can read about a Carmel woman named Abigail who disobeys her husband, Nabal's command not to supply provisions for David's troops, the future King of Israel. While providing the supplies to David, Abigail convinces him not to murder her heartless husband for which she is rewarded by Nabal's natural death and remarriage to the pious David (*Revised Standard Version*, 1 Samuel 25). In a similar show of female heroism, Esther, the wife of the Persian King Ahasuerus, persuades him not to follow through with his plan to massacre the Jewish people throughout the empire in Esther 8. Additionally, the prophetess and priestess Deborah, leads the Israelites, alongside her male colleague, Barak into a victorious battle against the Canaanites in Judges 4 (*Revised Standard Version*). Therefore, the Old Testament provides several positive representations of feminine strength and wifely disobedience to accomplish the divine agenda.

Similarly, Jesus' treatment of women subverted notions of their "proper place" in society depicted in the New Testament. In Luke 10:38-42, Jesus visits Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus in Bethany. When Martha became angered that Mary sits at Jesus' feet instead of assisting in food preparations, Jesus encourages Martha to come learn as well because divine knowledge is more important than household duties, even for women. Additionally, the Bible utilizes several women to spread Jesus' message. In John 4, Jesus speaks to a Samaritan woman by a well who then travels back to her town to encourage her people to welcome Jesus, sensing he is the Messiah (Compton 8-9). Similarly, it was multiple women or a singular woman, Mary Magdalene in all four gospels who were the first to witness the empty tomb after Jesus' resurrection. Although the apostles did not believe them at first, as evidenced in Luke 24:11 and the testimony of women was considered significantly less reliable than men at the time period, it cannot be discounted that if there is a divine plan, then declaration of perhaps the greatest event in Christian history was entrusted to women by God (Reuther, "Sexism and Misogyny" 91).

If all of the evidence presented in this thesis is still not enough to convince you that men and women are equal in the eyes of God, then even the belief that women are the inferior gender leads to their sanctification. 1 Corinthians 1:27 states that God chooses the weakest things to confound the strong and in 2 Corinthians 12:9, God reveals to Paul that "[God's] power is made perfect in weakness". Likewise, Mark 5:5 utters the popular phrase that "the meek shall inherit the Earth" among other blessings for those who are persecuted, despised, and marginalized because they resemble the subjugation of past prophets. Therefore, if one is to subscribe to the archaic ideology that women are the mentally and physically lesser counterparts of men, then by the logic of Matthew 20:16

that states “the last shall be first and the first last”, women are actually exalted by God;
There is no way to lose (*Revised Standard Version*).

CONCLUSION

Thus, women who identify as Christian and subscribe to egalitarian beliefs about gender are not heretics or romanticists. They are following in the tradition of previous visionaries depicted in the Bible, including Jesus Christ himself who frequently opposed the status quo. This work to reclaim scripture from the oppressors must then begin in the often quoted and incredibly mystifying Garden of Eden. When we redeem Eve, we redeem all of womankind who have supposedly been “cursed” by her action. And when we reexamine the creation of man, we find significant evidence pointing to the fact that neither God is male nor that males are the sole image bearers of God. Ultimately, one is perfectly justified in their search for Biblical feminism, and they do not have to forfeit their faith for their moral conscious.

Moreover, this issue goes beyond those who prescribe to the Christian faith. The pervasiveness of religion is felt throughout the world, even in countries that claim separation of Church and State such as ours. Therefore, the biblical justification of woman’s subservience has negatively affected women of all faiths in many majority Christian countries for centuries. The stereotypes of women as intellectually, spiritually, and physically weaker stemming from the Bible have affected crucial areas of life ranging from suffrage to political representation. Thus, it is in the interest of every woman, faithful or otherwise to dispute these harmful myths surrounding woman’s “inherent nature”.

I will conclude by restating my acknowledgement that I am unable to dismantle every argument regarding Biblical sexism in this one thesis. Nevertheless, I believe that

every ounce of theological scholarship on women's behalf has incredible value. Ideally, I would hope that the whole of biblical exegesis develops to empower rather than oppress women. However, I am advocating that at the very least, a feminist interpretation of the Bible is no longer deemed heretica. It is crucial to recognize that every individual, including infamous figures of Christian tradition, is subject to bias created by their social, cultural, and political context. Therefore, my interpretation of the events from a liberationist standpoint should hold equal merit to the traditionally patriarchal exegeses of the aforementioned verses.

Furthermore, women are not the only marginalized populations that have historically and systematically been excluded from biblical interpretation. LGBTQ+ individuals, those with disabilities and persons of color have experienced equally, if not greater persecution at the hands of the Church. Thus, I believe it is in the best interest of every Christian to finally listen to those identities who have previously been given little voice to shape theology in order to better understand the world as God intended it and to prevent the numerous injustices committed when our faith is placed in the hands of sheltered white men from centuries ago.

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