

Trinity College Cambridge

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Telling Tales: Stories from the book of Genesis

Adam and Eve – A Telling Tale

Genesis 2: 15–17; 3: 1–20

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The tale of Adam and Eve comes second in the Bible, but is surely the most telling tale and the most told. It has become a story about the origins of so many things: human beings, animals, agriculture, sexual reproduction, the pain of periods and childbirth, language, marriage, and, above all, sin.

The pervasiveness of this tale is illustrated in the terminology used by geneticists for the most recent matrilineal ancestor of all human beings alive today: mitochondrial Eve, and the most recent patrilineal ancestor: Y-chromosome Adam. Mitochondrial Eve lived about 200,000 years ago, but Y-chromosome Adam much more recently, perhaps only about 100,000 years. Of course, because it's to do with the ancestors of all current living humanity, Y-chromosome Adam ought to be called Y-chromosome Noah. And since we don't know the genealogy of the unnamed wives of Noah and his sons, the biblical identity of their most recent matrilineal ancestor remains a mystery. But it's not likely to have been Eve.

As for the origin of sexual reproduction, the first living organisms on earth appeared about 3500 million years ago, but it took over 2000 million years for sexual reproduction to evolve. If you want to find a common ancestor for all sexually reproducing organisms, you go back not to a Garden with God separating the first human into a man and a woman, but to a single celled organism called a eukaryote, and probably an event involving a pox-like virus.

Whether or not Eve and Adam are the mother and father of all humanity, the tale of Adam and Eve has a good claim to be the mother and father of all tales. But how well do we really know it?

Frequently Asked Questions:

Was the woman really formed from the man's rib?

Not necessarily. The word translated 'rib' is usually used to mean 'side'—the side of the ark, or the sides of the tabernacle or altar. So a better translation is 'he took one of his sides and closed up the flesh in its place; and the Lord God built the side into a woman'. So Eve wasn't made from a spare part of Adam, but what went on was more like dividing one body into two.

Before that, was Adam male or ‘male-and-female’?

Some Jewish traditions reconcile the Adam and Eve story with Chapter 1 by suggesting Adam was originally hermaphrodite or androgynous. On the other hand, the work of tilling the ground was traditionally man’s work. So probably male.

How many words in Hebrew describe the creation of the man?

Sixteen.

How many words describe the creation of the woman?

Sixteen.

Was the fruit an apple?

No. Apples only get an occasional mention in the Bible. They are far outnumbered by grapes and figs.

Does a man leave his father and his mother and cleave unto his wife?

Nowadays, yes. But when this was written, wives joined their husbands’ households, so this was an amazingly radical idea. It doesn’t say ‘a woman leaves her father and mother and cleaves unto her husband’—because that wouldn’t have needed to be said. What it does say is that, if you are married, your life partner becomes your closest relative.

Menstruation used to be described as ‘the curse’ (of Eve). Is it mentioned in this text?

No.

Did the snake talk to the woman behind the man’s back?

No. The man was with her all the time, even if he left it to her to do the talking. And when the serpent said ‘you’ he used the plural form. Not the singular.

Did the woman in some way deceive the man?

No.

Who was the only one who knew first hand from God that the tree was holy, not to be touched?

The man.

Who should have known better, and who should have intervened when the snake told the woman the fruit was OK to eat?

The man.

Who did everything they could to put the blame elsewhere?

The man, who blamed God: ‘The woman, the one you gave me, she gave me the fruit.’

Who was completely honest?

The woman: 'The serpent tricked me and I ate.'

What was the real reason they ate the fruit?

It was 'good for food and attractive to the eyes and a delight to consider'. That is what the Vulgate and some modern translators have. All the snake had to do was to take away the notion that it was in some way special. Once they stopped worrying about touching or eating it, it was just something nice to eat. They had no idea this was an act of cosmic significance. It isn't even clear that they could have understood the second part of the snake's speech ... or they heard it simply as 'Don't be ridiculous, of course you won't die.' And, since it turned out they didn't die, can we be sure that God *really* used exactly those words in forbidding Adam to eat it?

When they ate it, did they become like gods, with the knowledge of good and evil?

Listen carefully: 'And the eyes of both were opened, and they knew ... they were naked.' Not only didn't they die, but the only knowledge they gained was of their frail and vulnerable humanity. And two other things happened. Their perfect relationship, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, became what we would recognise as a 'normal' human relationship, not without a bit of bickering and mutual distrust. And secondly, they gained the ability to have a conversation with God—because only previous conversation in the Bible is between the woman and the snake, but now the woman and man converse with God. So they ultimately improved their relationship with God.

What did they really do wrong?

God's commandment not to touch or eat of the tree was an Old Testament way of saying that it was holy, because holy things are not to be touched. But they put more faith in the words of the snake, with whom they had had a conversation face to face, than in the words of God, with whom they had not. The man and the woman forgot the holy and in doing so forgot God.

In conclusion

The commentator Trevor Dennis has written¹: 'The Garden of Eden has a terrible litter problem. It is knee deep in our prejudices and preconceptions. No biblical story has been more mistranslated, more misinterpreted. ... No biblical character ... has been more maligned than the woman of the Garden who comes ... to be called Eve.'

Like the snake, this is a cunning tale which has beguiled us down the millennia. Like the snake, this tale has a long winding tail which has tangled in so many aspects of human life and thought. St Paul developed the doctrine of Jesus as the New Adam. The Church Fathers treated Mary as the New Eve, the mother of the second Creation. But perhaps it is time for us to find a new tale of Adam and Eve.

¹ Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* (SPCK, 1994). Much of the material of this sermon is drawn from Dennis's Chapter 1, 'Eve, A Woman Much Maligned'.