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Of Women, Snakes and Trees: The Bible

Deborah W. Rooke

The LORD God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel'. 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'. 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; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return'.¹

From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die.²

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.³

The Bible is the foundational document for two major world religions, and in its appropriation for western cultural life it has been a major influence for centuries, indeed, for millennia. But it is not a monolithic text; rather, it is a composite, a collection of writings referred to as 'books', which originated over an extended period of at least a thousand years. The books vary in their stances and outlooks,

so to choose a passage from one single book as in some sense exemplifying the Bible's patriarchalism would be misleading. However, the three biblical passages quoted above demonstrate the explanation that the early chapters of the Bible offer for the patriarchal social structures to which its earliest audiences would have been accustomed, together with reflections on that explanation from two much later authors who have taken it up and drawn patriarchal implications from it for their own audiences. In this way, all three main sections of the vastly extended patriarchal moment known as the Bible are represented – Old Testament, Apocrypha and New Testament – and with them the documents that flowed out of Judaism and into Christianity. I shall offer some reflection on each of the passages.

To begin with the Genesis passage, then, this is taken from the longer story in Genesis 2–3 of how human beings were created by the deity and placed in the Garden of Eden, first the man, to till and keep the garden, and subsequently the woman, who is created from the man to be his helper. The outline of the story is well known: the deity forbids the humans to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that is growing in the garden, saying that on the day they do so they will die (Gen. 2.16–17); but the snake tells the woman that, far from being fatal, eating the fruit will make the humans wise like God. So both she and the man eat the fruit, as a result of which they realize that they are naked, and when later on God comes to find them in the garden they hide from him because of their nakedness. God realizes that they have disobeyed him and eaten the fruit, and there follows an exchange between humans and deity about what happened: the man blames the woman for giving him the fruit, and the woman blames the snake for tricking her into eating. This is the point at which the extract above comes in: the snake, the woman and the man in turn are all informed of the consequences of their actions in the imposition of a punitive hierarchy whereby the man and woman are condemned to toilsome gendered labours, the woman to subjection to the man, and the snake to continual enmity with both. This is surely the fundamental patriarchal moment for western culture and the Judaeo-Christian tradition, on which an enormous edifice has been erected over the millennia.

Setting this patriarchal moment in its original context, though, is rather more difficult. As already remarked, the Bible is a composite of texts – indeed, a composite of composite texts – from a range of sources, locations and circumstances in the ancient Near East and eastern Mediterranean. Most scholars agree that the texts cover more than a millennium, from around the tenth century BCE for the earliest Hebrew texts in the Old Testament to the early second century CE for the

latest Greek texts in the New Testament. For many of these texts, authorship and origin are unknown, and it is left to scholars to infer and reconstruct the detailed circumstances of composition from the form and content of the texts themselves, together with such information from broader cultural and archaeological evidence as may be available. The ahistorical nature of a text such as Genesis 2–3 makes it particularly difficult to contextualize, precisely because its lack of fixed historical referents gives it a timeless quality that allows it to function equally well in a variety of contexts. Nevertheless, although the exact compositional date and social setting of Genesis 2–3 are unknown, many scholars associate it with an early phase in the history of the ancient Israelites. The narrative envisages an agrarian lifestyle: the man, and subsequently the woman with him, is placed in a garden to till it and keep it (Gen. 2.8, 15), and sustains himself by eating from the trees in the garden (Gen. 2.16). Later on, when this idyllic scenario is shattered by the humans' illegitimate consumption of fruit from the tree of knowledge, the man is condemned to grow his own food from an uncooperative earth outside the garden (Gen. 3.18–19, 23). Despite the creation of animals in the narrative (Gen. 2.19–20), there is no hint in these two chapters of animal husbandry, or of the nomadic existence that might accompany sheep or goat herding; the situation in view here is of the (possibly recently) settled small farmer. This makes a date of origin in the late second or early first millennium BCE attractive, since this is the period when archaeology suggests that the people who came to be known as the Israelites were establishing themselves in the Levant in just such small agrarian settlements.

The assumption, then, is that we are dealing with a roughly 3,000-year-old narrative, and that it seeks to explain and justify what its originators experienced as the pattern of life: men cultivated crops, which was difficult and demanding; women bore children, which was painful and labourious, and were subject to their husbands; and all human beings had a relationship of mutual hostility with snakes. This pattern is certainly what is presented in the extract above as being divinely ordained. Such an understanding, however, raises the question of how the societal structure pictured in the extract relates to the depiction of human relationships in the earlier part of the narrative when the humans are first created, prior to their disobedience (Gen. 2). Is the final state of affairs a reaffirmation and enforcement of a patriarchy that was intended by the deity from the start; or is it a falling (or a deliberate moving) away from an initially egalitarian arrangement towards a more hierarchical relationship between the sexes? The narrative intention in Genesis 2 is usually understood as being to present males as prior to females in the order of creation, thereby asserting the male's superiority and making a patriarchal stance fundamental to the narrative.

However, some scholars have argued that the original solitary human should be understood as sexless, as an 'earth creature', because the term by which it is designated (*'adām*, human) is a pun on the name of the material out of which it is created (*'adāmâ*, earth). On this reading, man *qua* male is not created until the woman is made, since 'man' (male) and 'woman' (female) are relational concepts that do not exist in any meaningful way without each other: there is no such thing as 'man' without 'woman'. The problem with this reading, however, is that once the woman has been created, the now clearly male original human being is not referred to as *'ish* ('man', as opposed to 'woman', *'ishshâ*), but continues to be referred to as *hā-ādām* throughout the narrative, even when paired with the woman. This implies that *hā-ādām* is conceptualized as male from the start, which means that in Genesis 2 the male is indeed created first and the female is a variation on the male. Additionally, the episode describing the creation of woman (Gen. 2.18–23) is presented from the male rather than from the female point of view, and it is clearly indicated that the female, who fulfils the role of 'helper', is created for the benefit of the male (Gen. 2.18), not *vice versa*.

Thus, the account in Genesis 2 of the creation of the garden, of humans, and of animals gives a definite, if implicit, hierarchy. The human, conceptualized as male, is created first, and then the animals are created as his companions and helpers, although they prove unsuitable for the task. Finally the woman is created from the human as the ideal helper, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, of the same substance as the man but fulfilling the auxiliary role for which the animals were originally intended. This gives the implied order of precedence as man-woman-animals, or more accurately, God-man-woman-animals.

However, a resistant reading that refuses to follow the patriarchal grain of the text reveals just how arbitrary the hierarchy is. Nowhere does the male demonstrate any innate superiority to justify the presumed order of precedence. He is the first created life-form, and he assists God in naming the animals that are created for his benefit as well as defining the woman as woman (Gen. 2.19–23); but it is the woman who appears to have greater aspirations than the man in that she is the one who is persuaded by the snake to seek godlike wisdom by eating the forbidden fruit (see Gen. 3.4–6). She is attracted not simply by aesthetic and gustatory pleasures but by the hope of knowledge; and the man puts up no resistance to her whatsoever. Given that the man is later punished for listening to (that is, obeying) the voice of his wife instead of the voice of God (Gen. 3.17), his failure to countermand her suggestion indicates a failure in his supposed duty as authority figure in their relationship. It may also suggest that he is constitutionally unfit to be the authority figure; it

certainly suggests that his maleness gives him no intrinsic ability, and therefore no natural right, to dominate the woman. The only thing that gives him the right to dominate her is that God has made her to be his helper, rather than the other way around. Here we see the ultimately arbitrary nature of patriarchy unmasked. In protesting so vehemently against the reversal of hierarchy that puts the snake over the woman and her over the man to the exclusion of God, and in making no attempt to endow the man with any significant attributes or characteristics beyond his maleness, the text unwittingly demonstrates that what it assumes to be the natural order of precedence is by no means natural but constructed. The penalties for the transgression are a strong explicit enforcing of the original implicit hierarchy, including God's position at its head, its constructed nature being amply demonstrated by the need for such reinforcement.

It seems, then, that throughout the narrative the ideal human society envisaged is one where male primacy, set in place by God, is aided and supported by women. However, such an arrangement is not a foregone conclusion. Genesis 3, with its tale of the snake, acknowledges the existence of differing sources of authoritative wisdom which result in a different hierarchy (here, snake-woman-man-God), and so it attempts to delegitimize some of them in favour of its preferred *status quo*. This can be seen from the fact that the snake is actually correct when it tells the woman that, despite God's words, the humans will not die if they eat the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3.4–5). Although most interpreters preserve the deity's integrity by reading God's threat of immediate death on eating the fruit (Gen. 2.17) as metaphorical or symbolic – after all, the Judaeo-Christian God cannot lie – the narrative makes equal if rather different sense when read as patriarchy claiming control of power by controlling access to knowledge. In support of this reading, it is noticeable that when God questions the humans over what they have done and then allocates the penalties detailed in the extract quoted above, the snake (unlike the humans) is given no chance to defend itself. Once the woman says that it persuaded her to eat, it is roundly cursed and set at permanent odds with the humans to prevent any further inter-species cooperation. Although Christian tradition in particular claims that the snake represents evil and is 'the devil in disguise', in the first-millennium BCE ancient Near East snakes had many positive connotations, including associations with wisdom, healing and rejuvenation. Breaking the link between humans and snakes thus means that neither the knowledge nor the immortality that God has denied the humans can become available to them

from this alternative source. Equally noticeable, though often overlooked by the patriarchally orientated reader who accepts the hierarchical stance of the text, is the fact that the woman is not actually cursed. Both the snake and the man have penalties that begin 'Because you have done ... cursed ...'. The woman, on the other hand, is simply told without any preamble that God will increase her pain in childbirth and put her under her husband's domination. Although clearly punitive, this consequence is presented neither as the direct result of her actions nor as a curse. This can be seen as God's grudging acknowledgement that the woman has uncovered the truth, along with his desire to prevent her from interfering any further with the hierarchy that he has established. In sum, the message of Genesis 2–3 is that other configurations of authority are possible, but that – whatever benefits they bring – they ultimately lead to negative consequences. In order, therefore, to avoid such consequences the original authority configuration must be preserved. The difficult circumstances that are now experienced by men and women in relation to their life-tasks should be a reminder to them of what happens when authority structures are disrupted. In other words, the events in the garden and their results are a moment of contestation of patriarchy that shows it to be vulnerable. The end result is to reaffirm it, though at the price of revealing its essentially arbitrary nature.

But what of the notion of death that appears in the man's penalty (Gen. 3.19)? Is that not the punishment that was threatened for eating the forbidden fruit? And is that not indeed the woman's fault, as evidenced by God's accusatory words to the man? Certainly later readers saw it thus, as evidenced by the second and third passages quoted above, and by centuries of subsequent Christian tradition. However, to accuse the woman of *causing* by her actions a death that would not otherwise have afflicted humans at all is unwarranted, given that when such preconceived interpretations are abandoned it can be seen that the text itself does not set out to level such an accusation. First, in contrast to the punishments visited on the snake and the woman, both of whom are punished in their actual person (Gen. 3.14–16), God does not curse the man himself, but the ground on which the man is to work (Gen. 3.17). It thus makes better sense to read the comment about the man returning to dust (Gen. 3.19) not as part of his punishment – he dies because he is cursed – but as a reminder of his fundamentally human, as opposed to divine, nature: he may have godlike wisdom, but he is not a god, merely sculpted dust. This understanding is supported by the verses following the extract quoted above, where God declares that having eaten the forbidden fruit the human is now like him in knowing

good and evil; so he must be prevented from eating the fruit of the tree of life, which also grows in the Garden of Eden, and thereby living forever (Gen. 3.22). This is the only thing that now separates humans from God (or gods): humans die, but gods do not; and to preserve that boundary God expels the human from the garden, away from the possibility of becoming immortal (Gen. 3.23–24). The text implies that the human has not yet eaten from the tree of life, because had he done so he would already be immortal; and this in turn implies that he was created mortal, not immortal. Immortality may have been theoretically within the humans' grasp, and their actions may have destroyed the opportunity for them to have it. But that is different from saying that their actions – or the woman's actions in particular – caused a change in their ontological status from immortal to mortal.

Nevertheless, the reading that death was brought on the human race by a woman has a long history, as is clear from the second patriarchal moment quoted above. Dating from the second century BCE, this is taken from a work that according to its own prologue was written in Hebrew by a Hellenistic Jew named Jesus Ben Sirah and translated into Greek by his grandson. The Greek version has been transmitted to us as part of the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of Judaism's Hebrew scriptures. The Septuagint dates from the third or second centuries BCE, and as well as translations of every book in the Hebrew canon it contains several works (including the *Wisdom of Ben Sirah*, from which the extract is taken) that are not present in the Hebrew collection. The Septuagint with its expanded table of contents was scripture for Greek-speaking Jews, and in the Hellenized culture of the eastern Mediterranean it was the scripture used by the earliest Christians, who were Jewish. Later it was combined with the documents that eventually formed the New Testament to produce a distinctively Christian Bible. Although the fifteenth-century Christian reformer Martin Luther and his Protestant followers rejected the Septuagint – and thereby its additional books – in favour of the Hebrew scriptures as the true basis for the Christian Bible, Catholic and Orthodox Christianity have continued to revere the Septuagint's additional books, known as the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical works, as part of the canon of scripture. So despite being largely overlooked by Protestant Christianity, the *Wisdom of Ben Sirah* is a part of the Judaeo-Christian scriptural tradition, hence its inclusion here.

The verse cited is the earliest known reference to the traditions in Genesis 2–3. It comes as part of a series of didactic comments on good and bad wives and how they bring prosperity or pain to their husbands (Sir. 25.13–26.16). The series as a whole is at best patriarchal and at worst

positively misogynistic, from an author who was writing for the education of young Jewish men, and in doing so reflected the general sentiments of his own patriarchal era. The verse quoted above is, however, highly unusual in presenting such a negative assessment of the woman's role in Eden, since other similar allusions to the Genesis traditions in subsequent Judaeo-Christian texts hold Adam or humans in general rather than Eve alone responsible for the entry of sin into the world. That said, Ben Sirah's negative attitude was reflected some 200 years later by the New Testament writer of the first letter to Timothy, as quoted in the third moment above. This writer's proclamations were made in the context of the emergence of the Jewish sect that would later become Christianity, and although there is no external evidence of the letter's context it may well have been a local response to the influence of heterodox Gnostic groups who, believing that material, bodily existence (and thus physical reproduction) was evil, sought instead spiritual enlightenment via esoteric knowledge and also allowed women to be teachers. The relevance of Eve, constructed as a woman who sought and transmitted what turned out to be illegitimate knowledge, is evident in such a situation. The writer of 1 Timothy claims to be the apostle Paul, the mid-first-century CE Jewish convert whose surviving letters with their exposition of the significance of Jesus' life and death are the earliest foundational documents of Christianity. But the sentiments expressed in 1 Timothy differ in significant ways from those in other letters written by Paul. Among those differences is this idea that the woman, not the man, was deceived and became a transgressor, so she needs to remain silent, learn in humility and bear children. Elsewhere, Paul requires women to cover their heads when speaking in church (1 Corinthians 11.3–15), but clearly envisages them having the right to pray and prophesy in mixed gatherings in public.⁴ Paul himself also attributes the original transgression to the man Adam (Romans 5.12–19; 1 Corinthians 15.22) rather than to the woman, which is another significant difference from the sentiments expressed in 1 Timothy. Unfortunately, it is the more negative version of events that has had the greater impact on social mores both inside and subsequently outside the church, one suspects because in the early days of Christianity it was more compatible with the pre-existing social structures, and allowed churches to exist more easily within those structures without attracting unwanted hostility.

In summary, then, our three biblical moments demonstrate the increasingly patriarchal trajectory of an already patriarchal tradition. It is not the only

trajectory of the Adam and Eve story in the Bible, but it is the one that has had the most enduring effect. And yet the two best-known instances of it (Genesis and 1 Timothy) both appear to have arisen from moments of contestation. They thus affirm a patriarchal world order while unwittingly betraying to the discerning reader its vulnerability.