

Was Eve the First Scientist?

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

First Church in Boston

March 12, 2023

The month of March is Women's History Month and last Wednesday March 8 was International Women's Day, in which we are invited to imagine a gender equal world and do something to make that a reality. On that day, I happened to be visiting my daughter Sally in her home in Mérida, a city of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. I had noticed earlier that there were graffiti on several of the public monuments in the city, and Sally explained to me that this was an ongoing issue with femicides, with the disappearances of women who protested the macho culture all around them; there was a strong feeling among the activists that the government was not taking these disappearances seriously enough, and some had started defacing the town monuments to try to make the protest visible. On that Wednesday night, we had scheduled a walking tour with a local historian, and in the course of an hour, we encountered three separate protest marches, each of which seemed to have about a thousand marchers, mostly women but a fair number of men also. It was a stirring sight and I won't soon forget it.

But lest we think that disappearances of women and girls is restricted to our Latin neighbors to the south, there are also problems with disappearances of Native American women in this country, particularly from big cities. In both places, this deadly problem flies under the radar of the news media and politicians most of the time.

I will not lead a protest march this morning, but I want to honor the ideals of gender equality by focusing on one the most important women in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Eve, the mythical mother of us all.

Now some of you might be thinking, “why do we have to concern ourselves with myths? Myths are things that aren’t true and rational scientific people shouldn’t waste their time on things that are the product of fantasy.” Yes, it is always good to recognize that there is a line between fact and fantasy and where it lies.

But the word “myth” speaks to stories which have power in our world regardless of whether they are deemed historically true. And if we are interested in bringing about a gender equal world, we need to lay out the ideas about women which are presently keeping them powerless, regardless of the historical standing of those stories.

Many of our fundamentalist neighbors, of course, insist that every word in the Bible is the unquestionable word of God, and many of those people will hold on to this opinion when you show them blatant contradictions. I am not shackled in my approach to Bible stories by any notion that the whole book was written by God or that nothing in it can be false or mistaken. I look at it, as our liberal ancestors did, as any other book, a product of human genius and human error.

We have two stories in Genesis dealing with the creation of the world. Many other cultural traditions have their own origin stories. I learned this week that in one strand of the Maya tradition, the original creator deities were an elderly couple who produced a pair of twins one of whom was the Maize God.

Let me set the Garden of Eden story in context. As I said, there are two separate creation stories at the beginning of Genesis. Each has features that the other lacks, and sometimes the divergence between them is so pronounced that they could not both be true in any sense.

The seven-day creation story in Genesis 1 does not mention the Garden of Eden; it starts with an empty void. God creates everything in the world in six days simply by speaking, "let there be X, Y or Z." And that's how X Y and Z came into being. At the end of each day, God looks at what has been created and

pronounces it good. We don't know whether this "good" means "complete," "well-made," "righteous," or any other senses of the word "good," but it is striking that, in contrast to the second creation story, there seems to be no hint of evil in the first.

In the seven-day story, they get to the sixth day, and God orders that humans should be created in God's image and given dominion over everything else that has been created up to then. Humans are the last things created, and both sexes are created at the same time: "So God created humankind in his image,

in the image of God he created them;

male and female he created them."

No Garden of Eden, no names for the people, no rib or deep sleep or talk of loneliness or a need for companionship, just a suggestion that it would be good to have people in the world in God's image and that wish, like all others in the seven day story, being suddenly fulfilled just after it is pronounced. A good day's work and a good week's and then God declares a holiday for the seventh.

Notice that in this first story, there is no subordination of one gender to the other, and both are said to be made in the image of God. They are not in the image of each other, but each is in the image of God. It's a paradox!

Now let us move forward to the second creation story, which takes place in and around the Garden of Eden. This story begins with a description of a place and four rivers which flow from it, but there is no vegetation and no rainfall. While the humans were created last of all in the first story, the male human is created first in this second one: God forms the man (“Adam” means “man” and it is unclear whether this is a name or a noun) out of the dust and then blows breath into him to bring him to life. He places him in the Garden and commands him to till it and keep it. Then God gives him this instruction on the fruit of a certain tree: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Now it is never explained in so many words just what this tree does. There is another named tree in the Garden, the Tree of Life, but that is not included in this rule. Notice that when God gives the man this rule, they are alone, for the man is still the first creature to be created.

God then decides it is not good for the man to be by himself, he needs a helper as his partner. So God makes all the creatures of the land and the birds of the air and brings each one to the man to see what he will call them, and whatever

name he calls them sticks. But this did not solve the man's loneliness, so God causes a deep sleep to fall upon the man and steals a rib and forms it into a woman. The man wakes up and is delighted, calling it "at last flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone." The two were together, naked, without being ashamed.

Let me pause here. Comparing this second story to the first one, it is noteworthy that there is here no mention here of creation of the heavens, of the sun or moon, of the clouds or rain, of the sea or the creatures who live in it. It was the man first, then the land creatures and birds, and then the woman. Of the land creatures, the only one we hear from is the serpent, who is described as the craftiest creature God made.

We do not hear Adam retelling Eve what God told him about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, we only can infer what he told her from what she told the serpent. The serpent sidles up to her and asks her if God said not to eat from any tree in the garden? To which the woman replied that God had said not to eat of the fruit of the tree that was in the middle of the garden, nor to touch it or we will die. That wasn't quite what God had told Adam. God had used the name of the tree, and he didn't impose any restrictions on touching the fruit. But God did tell Adam that "in the day that you eat of it, you shall die."

When the woman retells this to the serpent, the serpent immediately says that neither the man nor the woman will die from eating the fruit. Rather, they shall have their eyes opened, and, like God or gods, will know good and evil.

Now here we have what might be called a crisis in authority. The second-hand admonition passed from God to the man and then relayed to the woman is now being directly contradicted by the serpent as to the danger of eating the fruit. The woman, for all we know, could be only a few hours old. Her relationship with the man is untested. Her relationship to God is untested. Does God have the authority to dictate or restrict her diet? Does the man have the authority to enforce God's prescriptions and proscriptions. Should she put her faith in the serpent?

The narrator does not dwell on her state of mind, but her decision to eat the fruit is said to be based on three things: the tree was good for food, it was a delight to the eyes, and it would impart wisdom, a desirable trait. With those three considerations, she takes the fruit and eats it and also offers some to the man, who also eats.

Notice something here: they do not offer the fruit to the serpent before eating it themselves; he's the one contradicting what God told them. If he's lying

about the toxicity of the fruit, wouldn't it be good to test that by proposing that he eat the fruit also? Alas we shall never know.

But what about those warnings? The man and God both said the man and woman would die if they ate of it, but they did not die, so should we score one for the serpent? Maybe they ate of the wrong tree. But the fruit they ate did have some enlightening effect, for they noticed they were naked, and they sewed clothes out of fig leaves to cover themselves.

As the rest of the story unfolds, God sees something is amiss when he walks in the garden in the cool of the evening, and notices that the man and woman are both in fig-leaves. They said they were ashamed because they were naked and God replied "who told you you were naked?" Now you have to grant that God's questions at this point are a little puzzling if God is omnipresent – he is everywhere – and omniscient – all- knowing. Why is he asking questions to which he would already know the answer?

I think the story teller here is trying to show that the knowledge of good and evil leads to feelings of shame and guilt, and God is showing the humans and the serpent the power of a knowledge of good and evil to make us feel bad. They play the blame game: the man places the blame on the woman and the woman

passes the blame to the serpent. Maybe if they had not tasted of the forbidden fruit, they wouldn't be bouncing blame around them like a volleyball.

Then God, having extracted confessions from the two humans, throws the book at them all: the serpent will lose his legs and have to eat dust and travel on his belly, the woman shall suffer pain in childbearing and yet "your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you," and the man shall have to work at hard labor to be able to eat and at the end of his life, shall return to the dust from which he sprang. So death is the sentence God imposes overall.

The Hebrew word for dust is Adamah, and this punishment creates a pun with the word used to name the first human, Adam. After the sentence is passed, Adam names the woman Eve.

Then God worries out loud, "see the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever." So he imposes the last element of his sentence: banishment from the Garden. There is a flaming sword to keep out Adam and his descendants. Paradise has become just another gated community.

But do you see a problem with what God says here? He says that Adam has become "like one of us." Who is us? Who is God talking to? We didn't hear

anything about God creating inferior Gods or angels or any divine beings in this second creation story, or even the first for that matter? Is he talking to himself? Is this monotheism or is there some pantheon hidden here?

Most importantly, what's wrong with knowing something about good and evil? Sure, certain mentalities and certain cultural orientations get obsessed with good and evil, but can you imagine a society based entirely on naivete? Can we build the Beloved Community without knowing something about good and evil? We may run around all day long without clothes and without shame, but at a certain point, we're gonna get a sunburn.

Here's my point: Eve has gotten a bad rap. She was not the first sinner; she was not a temptress or a siren or a witch. She was the first scientist. She wanted to know what effect each plant had on health and the body, if she was going to be the mother of all the generations of the human race. She wanted to start building up a base of knowledge to help women and men in the future know how best to structure their societies and live their lives.

An English professor named Harry White from Northeastern Indian University has published an essay entitled *Adam, Eve, and Agriculture: The First Scientific Experiment*. Here is the abstract:

“Genesis offers little to no evidence for the traditional interpretation of humankind’s fall into sin and evil. Rather it dramatizes the movement from hunter-gathering mixed economies to the beginnings of agricultural civilization, inaugurated by Eve’s decision to test God’s word and discover for herself and thereby gain for all humankind a method for knowing good from bad, right from wrong, true from false.”

Smith says that the fundamental setting of the Genesis creation story is the progression of society from hunter-gatherers to agriculture. “The events portrayed in Genesis tell of humankind’s emergence from a mixed economy of hunters, gatherers, and gardeners to a complex society including hunters, gatherers, gardeners, but now also farmers and herders.”

What kind of knowledge is useful in a society in transition from foraging to agriculture and herding? Smith says, “So in his day Adam had to know, or to learn very quickly, not only about all the animals, but he and Eve also had to be acquainted with all the plants, particularly since they were going to be gathering their food from the wild and not be harvesting crops they had planted.”

What did Eve know? “Obviously she knew how to gather fruit. No doubt one of the purposes of the legend is to justify the rule of men over women within the family (Gen. 3.16), but there is nothing to suggest, what so many commentators have proposed, that Eve was and all her daughters are more culpable because she ate from the forbidden tree first and seduced Adam into sin.” Then Smith quotes the second century Christian Theologian and lawyer Tertullian “All women, he said, derive from Eve “the ignominy ... of the first sin, and the odium (attaching to her as the cause) of human perdition. . . . And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil’s gateway; you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law.”

This is an outrageous charge. Eve had every reason to be curious, and it turns out that the supposedly deceitful serpent was the honest one in this story, since it was not true that she or Adam would die, but it was true that they would have a better handle on good and evil.

In the last few years we have begun to learn how many unsung women have contributed to the advancement of human knowledge in scientific and

technical fields. We will never know the names of all those kitchen experimenters who brought us to the present state of human knowledge.

But correcting that injustice is not why I bring up Eve today. I am talking about the story of Adam and Eve because it is the foundation for the most pernicious error of orthodox Christianity, namely the doctrine of original sin. The book of Genesis is a part of the Hebrew Bible, but it was not Judaism which came up with the idea that Adam and Eve's eating of the fruit condemned virtually all of their human descendants to eternal torment after death. I used to think that the word "original" in "original sin" meant something novel or clever, but it actually means "pertaining to the origins," that is a punishment for an offense which was committed way back in the mythical origins of the human race.

Even assuming that eating the fruit was an offense, the punishment is wildly out of proportion to it. St. Augustine, the Christian thinker who developed the doctrine the most, held that it even condemned to Hell little children who died before they could talk or walk. Even in the book of Genesis, the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience is followed in the very next book by Cain's murder of his brother Abel in the second human generation, and all Cain gets in punishment is

to be banished from the land on which he was living. Is murder less onerous than eating the wrong fruit?

Let us honor this Women's Day all those unnameable, unsung and innumerable women who were creative enough to figure out for themselves and for the benefit of the rest of us what was dangerous and what was safe, who learned to distinguish good from evil and to help create the Beloved Community among us.

AMEN.