

## “Adam and Eve Grow Up”

By Kim D. Wilson

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos

October 20, 2013

We are religious liberals. We believe that revelation is not sealed. And we find that wisdom can come from many different sources. Including the Bible, which is not used very much in many of our congregations. I think I was fortunate in being introduced to the Bible when I was in grad school, studying for the ministry. I was fortunate to have open-minded, forward-thinking professors, who helped me understand the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures as poetry and literature –and even sources of spiritual insight. We were taught to look at texts, taking into account metaphorical meanings and the cultural background of the writers. I think I was fortunate also because I didn't have preconceptions or misconceptions to wrestle with as most of the other students did. A lot of what we were learning crashed up against their previous understandings.

As a young person growing up in a Unitarian Universalist religious education program, we learned a little bit about the Bible, but not much. In seminary, I found it fascinating to study the Bible as a group of documents written from the points of view of its many authors, taking into account their cultures and doing what's called “exegesis” of various texts. Exegesis is a way of examining and exploring a text in order to try to understand its true meaning or possible meanings.

The Hebrew and Christian Bibles are so foundational to Western societies that I think it's important to be at least somewhat familiar with them. And the story in the Hebrew Bible (what Christians traditionally called the “Old Testament”) that has undeniably had the most far-reaching effects on our society is Genesis. Most, and especially Christian interpretations of the story are variations on humanity's “sin and fall from God's grace” theme. Because Adam and Eve are disobedient and commit the first sin (by eating the apple), they fall and are expelled from “paradise.” They are punished with pain and death, and life goes from being completely good to completely evil. This interpretation, which has been almost universally accepted as correct for the better part of two millennia, has had a strong negative influence on Western culture's view of life.

Although the story does reflect the patriarchal perspective of society of the ancient Near Eastern writers, most traditional interpretations have escalated that patriarchal orientation (and guess who was doing the interpretation –men), making the myth a “misogynist's playground,” says Lyn Bechtel, a feminist biblical scholar. She continues, “They have suggested that women are secondary, inferior, and should be subordinated to men as their punishment from God for being seductive and responsible for bringing sin, evil and death into the world.” The story of Adam

and Eve has been pointed to for centuries as “proof” of male superiority and the inferiority and moral weakness of women.

Lyn Bechtel and a number of other biblical interpreters have found that there are problems associated with the traditional “sin and fall” interpretation. The most compelling reason to question this traditional interpretation, says Bechtel, is that Genesis is never referenced in the Hebrew Bible as an example of sin, fall and punishment. It presents a very negative view of life and death and it characterizes women as the bringers of sin and death. That’s a pretty strong statement. Doesn’t it seem odd that this extreme view of women is not found anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible?

So, what some modern biblical scholars have done is to take a fresh look at the Adam and Eve story. The two most important things I learned about biblical exegesis are that 1) we need to understand the cultural assumptions and concerns of the culture of the time, and 2) we in our society are trained to understand literal truth but we need to understand the Biblical texts in terms of metaphorical truth. In ancient Near Eastern societies, the elders would tell stories to teach and reinforce social conventions and behavioral codes among the group’s members. The stories were like poetry; they used symbols and metaphor to convey meaning. By exploring the symbolic images in the Adam and Eve myth and placing them into the context of the ancient Near Eastern society, a totally different meaning starts to emerge from the text.

One of the most important signs in the myth is a symbolic image: the *adam* (human) and the *isha* (woman) are naked and not ashamed. When in the course of human life would this be true? In early childhood. As we know, small children aren’t self-conscious about being seen naked. This is because they haven’t matured enough to be self-aware, or conscious of the social implications of public nakedness. Later in the story, after Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, they have become self-aware; they’re aware of their sexual difference and conscious of the implications of public nudity. They have acquired a fear of being naked and they have a reaction of shame.

In ancient Israelite society, the major means of social control was shame, and the consequence of being naked, for adults, was shame. So this first experience of shame was critical to a young person’s socialization process and to their maturity. In the context of the Israelite society, Adam and Eve’s experience of shame was a positive one. Maturation entails increasing differentiation – change from an immature to a mature stage. So this part of the text provides an important clue: the man and the woman will go through increasing differentiation in order to progress from immature childhood to mature adulthood.

Lyn Bechtel explains:

“This [first] stage of maturation can be roughly compared to the stage of adolescent individuation and questioning, which is essential to the process of differentiation of the self from parents. This kind of differentiation is not rebellion or sin but natural and critical growth, in that the adolescent begins the quest for mature selfhood, freedom and independence. It is not a process of alienation from parents but a maturing of the relationship with the parents. Likewise, in the myth it is not a question of alienation between [God] and the humans, but a maturing of their relationship... This state is a crisis or crossroads in that it is a point of both danger and opportunity, a point of decision and change, a point of personal growth. It is not a fall, but movement toward the emergence of human consciousness, freedom, maturity, socialization and the realization of identity in relation to the group.”

Next comes recognition of themselves and each of each other as sexual beings. One of the major symbols in the story, the tree, represents growth, maturation and the continuation of life through sexual reproduction. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is the result of the union of male and female parts (the male pollen goes into the female ovary) and contains seeds of the generation to come. And the shedding of leaves year after year make it appear to die and begin life again each spring. A tree has the ability to produce life generation after generation. The human ability to procreate develops and is realized during the process of maturation. For a group-oriented society, the cyclical continuation of life through the generations of the group was the way they coped with death. They would have understood life and death as natural parts of the cyclical process of life.

Another symbol, the snake, had several symbolic meanings in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt and Israel. It represented recurring youthfulness, because of its ability to shed its skin. It was also a symbol of male sexuality. Snakes carry an element of mystery, as if they embody some kind of special knowledge, because they seem to move so gracefully and effortlessly, yet they are legless. Consequently, the snake characterized wisdom. In the Genesis story, the snake is described as *arum*, “shrewdly or cleverly wise.” The wisdom here is simply being “street-wise,” a practical wisdom which makes people smart in their dealings with members of the community. The snake character here is also a symbol of adult male and female sexuality, of the continuation of life through generations. And it represents mature knowledge of the oppositional forces of life: the life-producing and life-threatening aspects of life; the known and the unknown, the controllable and uncontrollable; and potential and limitation. “The fact that the snake is a wild, natural animal means that maturation, which it encourages, happens ‘naturally,’ not because of a sin or fall.” (Bechtel)

An important part of maturing is being able to understand and separate the oppositional forces of limitation and potential. In telling the young Adam that he can eat fruit from all of the trees (potential) except the Tree of Knowledge (limitation), God is a fatherly figure protecting his child. When Adam and Eve are ready, the snake encourages the woman to eat of the Tree of Knowledge (which is now potential), so her eyes will be opened and she will have insight like her parent. “Although the woman stands on the threshold between childhood and adulthood, she still perceives the world through the idealism of youth. She is only able to perceive the good or potential of eating/maturation, but not the limitations, despite the fact that the snake said she would discern good *and* bad...She must learn the reality of adulthood from experience.” (Bechtel)

Matthew Fox, a theologian and former Catholic, also rejects Eve’s eating of the “forbidden fruit” as disobedience to God, and interprets her act as a courageous response to a challenge. When the snake presents Eve with the dilemma, “Obey God” or “Be like God,” Eve realizes that she has a choice. She chooses the unknown: to be like God, knowing good and evil, even though she may not understand what evil is. Adam makes the same choice. Fox calls the eating of the fruit not Original Sin but Original Blessing. By choosing to make up her own mind, “Eve becomes the archetype of the one who opened up the dimension of the human spirit and was courageous enough to accept the gift of free will,” whatever the consequences might be. (Joseph Fabry)

When God is strolling through the garden and sees that his “children” have eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, like most parents, he is not happy that they have disobeyed him. Adam and Eve react like typical teenagers. Neither one is willing to take responsibility for what they have done. Adam defends himself by saying, “Eve gave me the fruit” and Eve blames the snake, saying, “It tricked me into eating it.” Now God gives Eve a reality check: female adult life consists of potential *and* limitation.

Eve’s critical potential and power will be the ability to produce life, but it won’t be easy. God goes on to say that her desire will be for her husband and that he will rule over her. If you’re not already doing so, you may now cringe. Yes, this story comes from a patriarchal society. Bechtel points out, though, that the text speaks only of ruling over the woman’s sexual desire, not her entire life. But how does the husband controlling the wife’s sexuality fit within the maturity theme?

Bechtel offers this explanation: “Control of the woman’s sexual desire is a type of family and societal boundary which restricts her sexual power to a controlled arena that benefits the group/household, not foreigners/outside groups. If her sexual power is uncontrolled and extends beyond the boundaries of her household or

Israel, she has the potential of ‘building the house’ of another group, which is threatening to the existence of the family and Israel.” To be mature in the group-oriented Israelite society, then, conformity to social norms was essential.

God has news for Adam, too: he will be responsible for feeding his growing family. And it will be hard work. The ground has the potential to grow all the food they need; it’s also limited because it produces inedible plants as well.

Viewing the Genesis story through the lens of a maturational process, these realities of mature life are not punishments for disobeying God, but rather they describe the normal responsibilities and natural limitations that come with being an adult in an ancient agrarian society. And with the eating of the forbidden fruit, these two maturing humans are given the biggest responsibility of all: the ability to exercise free will.

I’ve wanted to talk about this interpretation of the Adam and Eve story for a long time. To me, it’s a much more plausible interpretation than the original sin and fall from God’s grace. I’ve wanted to share this because I seek the truth, and I continue to learn that there are different ways of understanding the truth. And that’s the message that I want to pass on to all of you. When I was a student at Moravian Theological Seminary, Lyn Bechtel was my Old Testament professor. I told her that I wasn’t good at seeing symbolism. She said, “Don’t worry. It just takes time.” She was right. I have gotten better at it.

In today’s first world countries, we tend to take things literally. Most of the Bible is written mythologically. The inability to understand mythological truth, added to the fear of having one’s religious understandings crumble has had, and continues to have, vast implications. Right down to how we see women. And men. Our society. And humanity itself.

That fact is a mountain that will not be moved any time soon. We find hope for positive change inside ourselves. Each of us must pour our time and energy into reaching our full potential as loving, caring, learning and growing people. May we always be fully open to truth, and meaning, wherever we may find them.