



A Review of Carol Meyers.
Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context.
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R*ediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* is a revision of Carol Meyers' 1988 work, *Discovering Eve* (Oxford), a feminist study that garnered much praise and enthusiasm in feminist biblical studies. Meyers aims to reconsider in context "Eden Eve," the first woman in Genesis 2–3, and "Everywoman Eve," the average Israelite woman in Israelite history (particularly in the entire Iron Age, ca. 1200–586 BC). Much of the book is taken up with archeological, ethnographic, and sociological studies surrounding the "Everywoman Eve" of the Levant, which I will not discuss in detail here since Meyers' analysis of the former ("Eden Eve") is, in my view, of greater import for ongoing studies in biblical manhood and womanhood. A summary of the contents, however, is in order, followed by critical interaction.

SUMMARY

In chapter 1 Meyers demonstrates how the character of Eve is familiar to Western culture and therefore links the present with the past. The twenty-first century woman can learn much from the representative "first woman" of the Hebrew Bible. Her stated objective is to "confront the problematic stereotypes projected on the biblical past in popular culture and biblical scholarship, both of which follow the long tradition of reading later ideas about women into Israelite contexts" (202).

In chapter 2 Meyers discusses the sources for her project, namely, the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern (ANE) writings, anthropological data, and archeological findings, especially in the last 50 years. The Hebrew Bible is for Meyers a "resource" for understanding the daily lives of "Everywoman Eve," but is insufficient for giving readers a full picture of their daily lives and tasks (24).

Chapter 3 describes the setting and context for the lives of Israelites in Iron Age I and II. In chapter 4, Meyers attempts an exegesis of Genesis 2–3 without reading into it the influence of later misogynist, post-Hebrew Bible commentators and translators, which only serve to perpetuate a false reading of the text in her opinion, biased on false presuppositions. She aims, on the other hand, to consider only the problems and customs associated with the Israelites at the time when they emerged as a nation among the culture productions of the Iron Age (66).

Chapter 5 discusses the five Hebrew lines of Genesis 3:16 in detail, a verse she considers troubling on the basis that it has been used for centuries to validate male dominance and female subordination to men, particularly in the home. The context of the verse, according to Meyers, is peasant life in the Iron Age, where female labor was essential to the agrarian culture and reproduction was a necessity. The “curse” of Eve is not a curse in the traditional sense. Indeed, “curse” language is not used with the woman as it is with the serpent and male. Rather, 3:16 provides the sexual ideology from which women (and men) should live complementary lifestyles. In other words, the verse has to do with male sexual control of female reproduction, which “can be understood as a cultural measure to encourage or sanction multiple pregnancies” (100). Thus, Eve initiates the “productivity and procreativity of ‘Every-woman Eve’” (102). Meyers offers a translation of 3:16 that reveals her central hermeneutic:

I will make great your toil and many your pregnancies;
with hardship shall you have children.
Your turning is to your man/husband,
and he shall rule/control you [sexually].

Chapter 6 provides a detailed overview of the aspects of the agrarian household, which was the immediate and determinative social context for ancient Israelites. The household is “the most salient feature of biblical antiquity for reconstructing and understanding women’s lives” (103). Meyers gives attention to economic, social, and religious concerns in the household. Her concern is to avoid applying current ideas or perspectives in considering women’s lives in the biblical past.

In Chapters 7 and 8 Meyers describes the daily activities for women in agrarian cultures and their social and economic impact on the family unit and wider community, which also includes religious activities. Chapter 9 assesses various women’s positions held in the community according their “professional” value. In concluding the book, chapter 10 offers a rebuttal to the widely held view that the Israelite community was “patriarchal” and male-dominated at every social level. Meyers suggests to the contrary that the Israelites operated under a “heterarchy” model in which women functioned in complementarity with other leaders and held power alongside of their male counterparts.

CRITICAL INTERACTION

The nucleus of any society is the home, the place where direct change on a society begins. In examining women’s roles in Israelite society, Meyers is right to begin here rather than the political spheres of influence. Her book is replete with helpful details about Israelite home life and the key roles that women and mothers play in the home. Whatever differences there are between the complementarian and egalitarian positions, Meyers’ study sheds honest light on the importance of women in the home and in the family, not least as mothers but also as shapers of values, morality, and ethics. Meyers’

presuppositions are decidedly feminist and egalitarian, but this does not mean that there is no value to the archeological and ethnographic evidence she presents. At many points, I benefited from learning about these studies. Even so, I have significant points of disagreement with Meyers, which I will try to enumerate here.

The first point of contention is with Meyers' attempt at a contextualized argument for Genesis 3:16. She says that interpreters have long contextualized the man's role in toiling in the ground, but treat what God tells the woman as a dictum for all time (95). But Meyers' translation of 3:16 (see above) is troubling on a number of levels, and is an example of eisegesis and author-imposed hermeneutics. She argues, for instance, that the Hebrew use of *ish* and *ishah* as translated "husband" and "wife" in Genesis 2-3 is anachronistic because the social process shaping marriage did not yet exist. She is content to say that *ish* only means "man," and *ishah* "woman" (93). Are we to assume that marriage is an anachronism in Genesis and Iron Age Israelite societies based on the gloss of these two Hebrew words?

If Genesis 3 is an example of an independent tradition as Meyers assumes, seized and spliced together with the rest of the creation narrative in order to make sense of the origins of man (at least, from an Israelite perspective), her interpretation of *ish* and *ishah* is perfectly legitimate. If, however, the entire Pentateuch (including Genesis) is the work of one author in a covenant community, then the semantic range for *ish* and *ishah* is broader.

It is true that *ish* in general means "man," but it also means "husband" in the Pentateuch just as *ishah* means "wife." See, for instance, Genesis 16:3; 29:32, 34; Leviticus 21:7; and Numbers 30:7. The latter two of which deals with marriage and divorce laws. Is it not fairly obvious that the context for the serpent's temptation comes immediately on the heels of God joining Adam to his *ishah* as his wife in Genesis 2? Meyers' exegesis is insufficient, therefore, and fails to examine even the immediate context of the words and phrases in Genesis, leading to a forced and unusual translation.

Further, I am suspicious of Meyers' understanding of "your desire will be" in line 4 of Genesis 3:16 (94). Meyers says that "virtually all modern scholars" take "desire" to be "sexual desire," but then she fails to list any of them. Who are these scholars? She then depends upon Lohr (2011) for "examples of those problematic commentaries" (221, fn26) with which she is referring. But the passage is not really about a woman's sexual predicament, and Meyers' interpretation ("and he shall rule/control you [sexually]") sounds more akin to a divine justification for rape.

One is perplexed at Meyers' understanding of the word "desire" and "rule over," not least because of her significant revision in the translation, but especially given that the verbal parallel in Genesis 4:7 is not even mentioned in her book. Surely, context is key, which is one of Meyers' stated goals! Even if we grant that the terms in 3:16 are ambiguous, they are disambiguated in the following chapter. In 4:7, it is sin's "desire" for Cain that ultimately "masters" him (both Hebrew words from 3:16 are repeated), just as it is woman's desire to master her husband via insubordination. Sin complicates and frustrates all male-female relationships.

Overall, the "curse" of Genesis 3 is not really a curse for Meyers. There is no vestige of sin embedded in the discourse, rather the chapter is troubled with sociological concerns. In her view, Genesis 3:14-19 is cause for optimism. For the woman, her "turning" to the man has to do with the "rejoining" after the separation of 2:22-24. For the man, he "turns" to the soil, i.e., he dies. Both of these reverse the original creation mandate of being fruitful and multiplying, and account for the procreation of humanity and its mortality (95). As she explains on 3:16, "In the Hebrew Bible, God's words proclaiming male control of female sexuality can be understood as a way to overcome pregnancy reluctance so that agrarian households would have essential offspring. In both cases the goal was motherhood in

the service of a greater social interest” (101). Additionally, “Cultural values encouraging childbirth to maintain or even increase population are embedded in Genesis 3:16” (101). Thus, the issue of Genesis 3 is a sociological one: “Genesis 3:17–19 mandates exhausting labor for men, and 3:16 orders women to work hard and have multiple pregnancies. Together these passages reflect the Israelite environment and demographic context” (101). For Meyers, the curse of Genesis 3 is not really a curse. Nothing could be further from the truth. The curse of Genesis 3 is the cause of infant mortality, not the solution to population control.

Second, Meyers goes to great lengths to show gender co-leadership in ancient Israel by highlighting the “professional” and managerial roles that some women held in the biblical text and wider ANE culture. Yet, while women certainly held important roles in Israelite societies, these likely were the result of needs in the community and framed by the patriarchal leadership at the top of society. Patriarchy (a term Meyers dismisses) is not inherently ill-willed and does not denigrate those women of society. Every society has hierarchy as long as civilization has existed. Meyers fails to shed light on this reality, which is unhelpful in a book saturated with the goal of highlighting women’s roles in the family and community.

Meyers’ examples of those women who held high positions in Israelite society (Abigail [1 Sam 25], Micah’s mother [Judg 17], the woman of Shunem [2 Kgs 4, 8], and the Proverbs 31 woman) seem to be all woman of significant financial standing, elite in their own right. These women certainly bring in focus the managerial skills of some females in society, but Meyers fails to indicate that these examples are likely the result of their high status in society and natural mobility among the elites. They do not fit well with Meyers’ “Everywoman Eve” caricature and enjoyed greater autonomy than the average Israelite woman with whom Meyers so eagerly wishes to have them associate. The poorer women likely had fewer freedoms and enjoyed far less autonomy.

Third, Meyers provides a helpful overview of the instances in the OT of a mother’s household, giving attention to Rebekah, Ruth and Naomi, the Proverbs 31 woman, and the woman in the Song of Solomon (112ff.). Each of the texts she examines identifies the “household” with the senior female. However, she attempts to associate female wisdom (in the general, subjective sense) with the grammatically feminine word for “wisdom” (*hokmah*) arguing that the benefits of female wisdom was intended by the Hebrew author to underlie the propensity to view wisdom as female in the book of Proverbs and other Wisdom Literature.

This seems to me to be another error in which a scholar overemphasizing one theme or ideology tends to read that idea into many other passages of Scripture. The Hebrew word חָכְמָה is naturally feminine in gender, yet we cannot assume that in the original development of the word the purpose was to highlight the wisdom of the women of society, even if many of those women are highlighted as “wise” in the biblical text. More likely, the personification of “wisdom” (not necessarily its grammatical form) is to contrast the beautiful character of one “lady” over the ugly character of another—the adulteress. This point is rather clear in Proverbs 1–9, where “Lady Wisdom” always triumphs over against “Lady Folly” (see especially Proverbs 9). Given that the lectures of Proverbs 1–9 address the male heir and particularly exhort “the son” to avoid the lure of illicit sex personified in the adulteress Lady Folly, it makes sense that the author of Proverbs would offer to him a more beautiful woman for the son to pursue—Lady Wisdom. This idea is illustrated in poetic form in Proverbs 4:6–9, as the son is exhorted to find sweet satisfaction in wisdom as opposed to folly.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, we should be wary of scholarship that proposes significant reconstructions of an ancient biblical text, especially a work that seeks inherently to impose a feminist revision of Genesis 3. Works like *Rediscovering Eve* begin with the presupposition not that the biblical text is wrong but that it has been misinterpreted and mistranslated for over 2,000 years. Genesis 3:16 is not a paradigm for optimistic feminism—a paradigm, as Meyers contends, that influences our understanding of the rest of the Hebrew Bible and our application in the social sphere. What we find in Genesis 3:16, rather, is the first feminism that attempts to thwart God’s design. The woman was made to be a helper for the man (2:18), but now, in light of her sin in Eden, she desires to rule over him, and he responds likewise with more force than is necessary. This is judgment in need of redemption, not cause for optimistic, egalitarian relationships and population control.

Meyers asserts that the Hebrew Bible is insufficient for giving us a complete picture of Israelite women in context. This is true in some respect with regard to the finer details of ANE communities. The Bible is not a textbook on ANE life. But I cannot agree with this statement in full. As evangelicals have often argued, the scope of women’s roles within the family/community as communicated in the Bible is *sufficient* for “every woman” of the family of God. The “rule” of the man is not male tyranny as Meyers supposes. There are safeguards for women provided in the Torah (e.g., Numbers 30; Deut 24:1–4), and in the Christian era. Paul in particular stresses mutual submission, love, and protection between men and women in the home and in the church community (Eph 5:22–33; Col 3:19).