

READING RECOMMENDATIONS: OLD TESTAMENT

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Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

The new book by Duke University professor Carl Meyers, is a remarkable achievement within the burgeoning field of feminist studies in religion. The task she sets herself is seemingly limited to a small corner of history: the Iron I Age in ancient Israel, approximately 1200-1000 B.C.E., prior to the advent of the monarchy. This, she maintains, is the formative epoch in Israel's history when "the essential characteristics of Israelite gender roles were established . . . and primary survival needs were a crucial issue" (p. 23), and later developments are best understood in comparison with it.

Meyers is in search of "the pristine Eve"—not a putatively historical personage behind the narrative in the opening chapters of Genesis, but the early view of women which contrasts with the androcentric rendering in later biblical sources and which varies especially from the misogynist interpretation of the subsequent Christian and Jewish communities. There are two parts to this pristine Eve to be recovered: "the Eve of the Eden story"; and "Everywoman Eve," or the lot of every woman living in early Israel. Significantly, she notes, typical Israelite women are not likely to be identical to biblical women, for the Bible as we have it reflects the perspectives of public, urban life and the ruling [male] elite, whose portrayal of women is bound to be distorted. For that reason, it is essential to go beyond the biblical texts by making the search truly multidisciplinary, and Meyers draws very instructively on archaeology, anthropology, sociology, as well as feminist hermeneutics.

Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to a close reading of Genesis 2-3, while the balance of the book pursues the discovery of Everywoman Eve. The sensitive treatment of Genesis 2-3 in the fourth chapter represents, it may be fair to say, a further development of the line of interpretation initiated by Phyllis Trible in 1973 and again in her 1978 book, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress Press). Chapter 5, however, focuses entirely on one verse which is especially problematic, Genesis 3:16, a key reason why "much of

the Bible is not user-friendly” (p. 97). In a fascinating, carefully reasoned, and compelling discussion, Meyers shows how semantic and lexical nuances support a quite different translation than is found in the Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and most modern versions:

I will greatly increase your toil and your
pregnancies;
(Along) with travail shall you beget children.
For to your man is your desire,
And he shall predominate over you.

Some of her most important points here deserve to be highlighted. The first line refers to pregnancy on the whole, not just childbirth; in the second, “beget” applies to becoming a parent and is not gender-specific; the “toil” and “turmoil” are physical work and mental anguish, not birthing pains; and the fourth line should be read in light of the sexual context established in the third line, not as legitimation of general *social* dominance by males. This verse, quite simply, expresses two mandates for early Eve: work productively and have many children. The conditions of life in premonarchic Israel were such that these roles were crucial.

A harsh picture unfolds in Meyers’s detailed depiction of domestic existence in those times, which was played out predominantly in small villages scattered over the Palestinian highlands. She argues that relative gender parity prevailed because the basis of social relations was the household, where complementarity of male and female was necessary for mutual survival. Division of labor along gender lines was based on the man’s strength and the woman’s procreative role, but this would have been for them merely an aspect of their interdependence.

Meyers’s argument becomes most slippery at this point. She adopts the common sociological distinction between power and authority: women have the power (because males depend so heavily on their domestic and productive functions) while men have the authority (because of the patrilineal inheritance system customary in that region). Yet are not the indications of the males’ roles in judicial, cultic (beyond the household shrines), and military spheres evidence of a public—private dichotomy even in early vil-

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lage life? And is not the patrilineal (Meyers, on rather tenuous grounds, prefers this term to “patriarchal”) system itself an orientation of the family toward the male head of the household? Moreover, do not some of the more objectionable texts in the Hebrew Bible—such as the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11) or the host’s proffering women to the mob in order to save his male guests (Genesis 19; Judges 19)—betray a distorted power relation between the sexes even in an early period? These are difficult and telling questions, and it may be too simple, as Meyers tends to do, to relegate sexism to the later monarchic period, following the egalitarian social structure supposedly prevalent in the early Iron Age.

But these must not detract from Meyer’s accomplishment. She has presented us with a penetrating analysis that is at the same time informative and eminently readable. In few other books will one find so thorough a description of that social period in Israel’s history, and in no other extended analysis does the focus fall on women’s role in that early context. It is an enlightening study, one which deserves careful attention by biblical scholars, students, clergy and laity alike.