

Mythological Eve: Progenitor of Mankind and Prototype of Women

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ABSTRACT

Eve – progenitor of mankind – was, from ancient times, enveloped in myths and legends. Although mentioned only four times by name in the Bible, she is an important biblical figure and archetype. She became ‘the mother of all living’ (Gen 3:20). Various scholars have concluded that a goddess lies behind Eve and that she can be linked to particular mythological figures. Etymologically, the name ‘Eve’ (חַוָּה) and the Aramaic words ‘life’ (חַוָּה) and ‘serpent’ (אֲרִיִּס) all appear to be derived from the same root. In the Garden of Eden narrative, as described in Genesis 3, the serpent (שֵׁרֶפֶן) skilfully deceived Eve into disobeying the divine command. Sin, and thus death, entered the world through the disobedience of Eve. She became the prototype of all women. Ancient perspectives on the creation and role of women varied. Since the late nineteenth century there is a progressive interest by feminists in the science of religion. Traditional interpretations of biblical texts regarding women are being questioned and in some instances – from a balanced modern point of view – reinterpreted.

A INTRODUCTION

Feminist discussions on religion during the past decades drew attention to the role and status of Jewish and Christian women alike. Traditional interpretations of biblical texts regarding women are being questioned and in some instances – from a balanced modern point of view – reinterpreted.

The pronouncement in Genesis 3:16b ‘Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you’, was apparently sufficient motivation for a patriarchal system – for many centuries – to apply this verdict literally, resulting in the so-called oppression of women and their subservience to men. Feminist theologians started their own biblical studies and exegesis of Scripture. Traditional interpretations – such as that of Genesis 3:16b – were re-evaluated. In the light of this new interest by feminists – since the late nineteenth century – in the re-interpretation of biblical texts, particularly those referring to women, an examination of Eve from a different angle could be relevant. Reading of extant ancient texts indicates that Eve was not only the first

created woman and 'the mother of all living' (Gen 3:20b), but developed from a mythological background. The purpose of this article is to review briefly Eve's possible association with relevant mythological figures. The aim is, therefore, first and foremost to deliberate 'mythological Eve' and not to analyse the 'biblical Eve'. However, for the sake of completeness, ancient perspectives on the creation and role of women are also examined, albeit cursorily. Obviously, it is not possible to do an in-depth analysis within the scope of an article.

Creation myths are tales relating the origin of mankind and the natural world (Kruger 2001b:219). These myths are attempts of man to penetrate the unknown and are personifications of the unconscious and preconscious processes describing man's awakening to the universe. When he encounters the unknown, man projects an archetypal image which involves his instincts (Naude 1986:754-757, 760). The mystery of the coming into being of the universe is a central problem for all mythologies. Some mythologies describe a total void at the birth of all things or, alternatively, a limitless expanse of water, an undifferentiated waste shrouded in darkness. In some instances the struggle between creative order and destructive chaos is defined in terms of a perpetual cycle of creation and destruction (Willis 1993:18-19).

Thanks to the discovery of large quantities of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hittite and Canaanite literature, several traces of Ancient Near Eastern mythology can be identified in the Hebrew Bible. These Near Eastern myths appear either in direct parallels, allusions or in figurative expressions, such as poetic imagery. They are accommodated to the Israelite religion by replacing the pagan gods with Yahweh. Much in the mythological passages can be traced back to indigenous Canaanite sources. Abundant evidence indicates that myths of the various Ancient Near Eastern peoples circulated freely beyond their boundaries (Gaster 1962:481-484). In all actuality myth and religion cannot be separated. Myth could be regarded as a religious concept and, thus, may serve as a valuable ally of religion (Kruger 2001a:50, 52).

The Garden of Eden narrative is one of the most enchanting and idyllic descriptions in literature. The narrative is marked by childlike simplicity and susceptibility. A mythical background is visible everywhere. All emblems are derived from ancient religious traditions. However, in depth of moral and religious insight, this passage is unsurpassed in the Masoretic Text (Skinner 1930:51-52).

Eve, progenitor of mankind and prototype of woman, has been enshrouded in legends, even before the Christian era (Haag et al 1994:19).

B ETYMOLOGY OF THE NAME EVE

The *Nag Hammadi*¹ tractate *On the origin of the world* contains a passage on the meaning of the name for serpent in Aramaic. The Aramaic words for Eve, life, mentor and serpent all appear to be derived from the same root, written with similar consonants. The text explains that a heavenly Eve, whose name means ‘life’, appeared in the form of a serpent in order to persuade the earthly Eve to eat from the fruit and thus gain Gnostic wisdom² (Wintermute 1962:817).

The origin of the name חוה (Eve) is controversial. The popular etymology in Genesis 3:20 connects the name with the root חיה (to live). Rabbinical exegesis associated the name with the Aramaic חויא (serpent). The usual appellative אשה (woman) is linked in the wordplay of Genesis 2:23 with איש (man) (Childs 1962:181-182). Scholars have commented on the Aramaic *hewya*’ and variants, as well as the Arabian *hayya*, meaning serpent (Wyatt 1999:316). Although these associations have been made, the actual linguistic derivation of the name remains uncertain (Sakenfeld 1993a:207).

C EVE IN THE CREATION NARRATIVES AND THE FALL OF MAN: THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE ROLE OF MYTHS AND LEGENDS

1 Eve and the Fall

Although mentioned by name only four times in the Bible, Eve is nonetheless an important biblical figure and archetype. Her characterisation is ambivalent, both good and bad. She is the prototype of women. Adam calls her Eve, because she is the mother of all living – progenitor of mankind. While pronouncing a curse on Eve – after the Fall – the Lord God simultaneously declares Eve as the one through whose seed the serpent will be crushed³ (Ryken 1998:247).

The negative aspect of Eve’s status concentrates on her being the first human to succumb to temptation, and thus sin. Powerful post-biblical traditions portray Eve as the archetype of the sinner (Ryken 1998:247). Legends surrounding Eve are primitive attempts to explain phenomena such as love between man and woman, painful confinement and the inferior social status of women (Cohen 1939:196, 198). Genesis 2:24 elucidates the social institution of marriage: the man leaves his father and mother to become one in flesh with his

¹ Papyri texts: Thirteen Coptic codices containing a large number of Gnostic texts; discovered in 1945 at *Nag Hammadi* near the Nile (Deist 1990:165).

² A second century Gnostic sect – the Ophites, also referred to as serpent disciples – regarded the serpent as their patron and venerated it as a medium of divine revelation (Good 1990:635).

³ Genesis 3:15, 16.

wife; the woman is thus placed back into her original state as bone and flesh of man⁴ (Fishbane 1987:199). In Genesis 2:24, strangely enough, an echo of a matriarchal culture is detected. In a patriarchal society, as in ancient Israel, it would have been more appropriate to say that the wife leaves her father and mother and cleaves to her husband and not the other way around, as in the said text. Given the aetiologies⁵ regarding Genesis 3:14-19, there is the possibility that Genesis 2:24 is an editorial aetiological insertion. Although there is no reference to parenting, the reference to father and mother could be explained as poetic license (Lawton 1986:97-98).

Towards the end of the narrative the Lord God informs the woman what her future relationship with her husband will be.⁶ For many centuries this verse has been cited to prove the husband's superiority over his wife and keep women submissive to men. Cultural changes in the relationship between men and women in modern Western society, as well as feminist readings during the past decades, are challenging this interpretation of the verse. A fundamental question is whether this verse is prescriptive or descriptive. This narrative is not an historical report of the so-called 'Fall', but a myth symbolically expressing a transcendental reality. Sin is not the main aspect of the narrative, but the resultant transforming of harmony into disharmony (Vogels 1996:197-199).

2 Mythical Eve

Despite Eve's human status, fragments of mythological traditions are present in the narrative. Various scholars have concluded that a goddess lies behind Eve (Wyatt 1999:316). A theory exists providing an explanation for the creating of the woman from the man's rib. A sign *TI* in a cuneiform text of the Sumerians denotes both 'life' and 'rib'. In a Sumerian myth a female character called *NIN.TI* – that is, lady of *TI* – could be interpreted as either 'Lady of the Rib' or 'Lady of Life'. The latter interpretation is structurally similar to the aetiology for the designation Eve (*Hawwāh*), being connected to the word *hayā*, meaning life. This myth could have led to the legend that Eve had been formed from the rib of Adam (Gaster 1969:21). The above-mentioned myth furthermore indicates that the female *NIN.TI* was created by *Ninhursaga*⁷ when *Enki*⁸ had a pain in his rib (Fishbane 1987:199).

⁴ Genesis 2:23 : 'And the man said, This at last is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man' (ESV).

⁵ Explanations in response to questions about origins (Deist 1990:6,87).

⁶ Genesis 3:16b: 'Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you' (ESV).

⁷ Mother goddess and creator; consort of *Enki* (Ann & Imel 1993:341).

⁸ Sumerian fertility god who governed the fresh water sources (Van Reeth 1994:73).

A goddess named *Hwt* appears in a votive stela from the Carthaginian necropolis, beginning with the invocation ‘Great Lady, *Havvat*, Goddess, Queen (?)’ (*rbt hwt ’lt mlkt ...*). *Hwt* could be related to the Hurrian divine name *Hebat*, who was the consort of *Teshub* [or *Tsehuh*] the Hurrian storm god (Wyatt 1999:317). The name *Heba* or *Hebat* – a variant of *Ishtar*⁹ in Hurrian texts – also appears in Hittite myths as the consort of the storm god [*Teshub*]. Hittite god-lists indicate *Hebat* as ‘queen of heaven, *Hebat* of *Halba*, *Hebat* of *Uda*, *Hebat* of *Kizzuwatna*’. In Hittite prayers she is addressed as ‘Sun-goddess of *Arinna*, queen of all the countries in the land which thou madest, the cedar land, (Lebanon?) thou bearest the name *Hebat ...*’. Although there is no evidence that the biblical name *Hawwah* (Eve) has been deduced from, or that it could be connected to the Hittite *Heba* or *Hebat*, such a possibility is not precluded (Patai 1992:160-161).

Eve was known in Mesopotamia, Sumer and Phoenicia as goddess, mother and guardian. As Phoenician goddess of the Underworld she was invoked in inscriptions and possibly identified with *Ishtar*. In Ancient Near Eastern traditions Eve was also known as *Chavah* [*Hawwah*] and *Meshiane*. In Persian mythology *Meshiane* was celebrated as the first woman and creator of life (Ann & Imel 1993:326, 329, 338).

Kikawada (1972:33-35) draws attention to the Old Babylonian *Atra-hasīs*¹⁰ epic that seems to give a literal as well as thematic parallel to the Genesis title ‘mother of all living’.¹¹ In this epic the goddess *Mami*¹² the creator, is called *bēlet-kala-ilī*, ‘mistress of all the gods’. It should be noted that in this formula the title is similar to that for Eve. Adam called the woman *Hawwāh*, for she is *’ēm kol-hay*, mother of all the living. The title is bestowed on Eve after her creation and near the end of the Garden of Eden episode, when she was destined to be a fertile and procreating woman. At the same position in the topical progression of the *Atra-hasīs* epic – just before the first childbirth and at the conclusion of the creation episode – *Mami* is honoured by the assembly of gods as ‘mistress of all the gods’. Behind the character of Eve there is thus, in all probability, the hidden figure of the mother-goddess *Mami*. It is furthermore conjectured that *Hawwāh* (Eve) was an onomastic form derived from her title, *’ēm kol-hay*. There is, however, a sharp contrast between the Masoretic Text

⁹ *Ishtar* was a prominent and very popular goddess in the Assyro-Babylonian pantheon. Of Semitic origin, she was worshipped throughout Mesopotamia as goddess of love, war, fertility, childbirth and healing. At the same time she could cause disease and inflict punishments. She is known by many names and other goddesses were assimilated into her (Ann & Imel 1993:333).

¹⁰ Hero or wise man in an Old Babylonian flood myth (Storm 2001:32).

¹¹ Genesis 3:20.

¹² Known in Babylonia, Assyria, Sumer and Akkad; she was creator of life as well as mother and guardian; she was invoked during childbirth and was especially compassionate to women who were bearing a second child (Ann & Imel 1993:338).

and Ancient Near Eastern parallels. The great lady in the *Atra-hasīs* epic received the title of creator, while Eve is created as the first woman. Although the Masoretic Text demythologises the function of the goddess it does not entirely do away with the attributes of *Mami*, but ascribes it to the first woman and human mother. In addition to being created, Eve is also creator. A transparent added image is superimposed upon her.

3 Function of the serpent in ancient cultures and association with Eve

a Introduction

It is widely attested in the history of religions that the symbol of the serpent is used to represent both hostile and benign sacred powers (Wintermute 1962:816). The serpent was a well-known reptile of the wilderness and was worshipped by many Ancient Near Eastern communities. Apart from evil and destruction it also symbolised healing and creativity (Williams 1962:291). In the Hebrew Bible the serpent is seldom viewed in a positive way. Traces of archaic reverence may be concealed in the traditions about the serpents of Moses (Wintermute 1962:816). In the Ancient Near East the serpent is commonly associated with certain deities and demons as well as with magic and incantations (Hendel 1999:744). The Canaanites regarded the serpent as symbol of the god *Eshmun*, god with healing powers¹³ (Knight 1981:34).

The generic word for a venomous serpent, שָׂרָפָה, appears thirty-one times in the Masoretic Text. The Ugaritic *nhš* (serpent) and Arabian *hanaš* (serpent) are the only cognate Semitic nouns (Hendel 1999:744). In Amos 9:3 the word refers to a sea-serpent, crocodile or dragon [Leviathan]. The bronze snake idol referred to in 2 Kings 18:4 is called *nehuštān* (נְהוּשְׁתָן) (Holladay 1971:235).

b Eve and the serpent

The serpent (שָׂרָפָה) in Genesis 3 is described as ‘more crafty than any other beast of the field’.¹⁴ The most intriguing biblical serpent with mythological associations is the *nāhāš* in the Garden of Eden. Although defined as an animal it had the power of speech and the astuteness to deceive the Woman through his characteristically human ability. The serpent’s identity combines in a complex way characteristics of three distinct categories of being an animal, like a human with respect to the power of language and like the gods with respect to secret knowledge (Hendel 1999:746-747).

¹³ The serpent is associated with the Greek god of healing, *Asclepios*, and is preserved in the physician’s caduceus which shows the serpent entwined around the staff of the Greek god *Hermes* (Landman 1939:484).

¹⁴ Genesis 3:1 (ESV).

As previously pointed out, the Aramaic *hewya* (serpent) shows an intriguing similarity with the Woman's name *hawwāh* (Eve).¹⁵ This similarity has inspired speculation about an earlier form of the Garden of Eden narrative in which only God, man and a serpent deity are involved. An earlier form of the paradise story has been identified in two Ugaritic incantation texts (Layton 1997:29). Centuries later than the Ugaritic texts, early rabbinic interpretations¹⁶ indicate a similarity between the biblical *hawwāh* and Aramaic *hewyā*. According to *Genesis Rabbah* 20 'the serpent is your [Eve's] serpent [seducer] and you are Adam's serpent.' This similarity was seen rather in terms of the temptation than that of Eve being a serpent goddess (Wallace 1985:148). In the said *Genesis Rabbah*, Rabbi Aha explains that *hawwāh* is a justification for Eve's name. Rabbi Haninah adds to this explanation: 'When the woman was created, the Satan was created with her' (Boyarin 1993:88-89). Ancient interpreters undeniably made an association between Eve and the serpent. It is not clear on what grounds it was made. According to the interpretation of Rabbi Joshua ben Qarhah the serpent conceived a passion for Eve. One gets the impression that the rabbis studied the material in an attempt to answer some baffling questions concerning a fixed tradition (Williams 1977:358-359).

c **Bronze serpent**

According to Numbers 21:8-9, the bronze figure of a serpent was made and erected by Moses in the wilderness. Many wanderers in the wilderness were bitten by fiery serpents and were urged to look at the bronze serpent so that they might be healed (Williams 1962:291). In the account of Hezekiah's reforms¹⁷ 'he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; ... it was called *Nehushtan*'.¹⁸ It is doubtful whether this bronze object in the eighth century ever had been made by Moses. It was probably of Canaanite origin, representing a fertility deity recognised in Jerusalem before David's reign and venerated there down to the reign of Hezekiah (McCullough 1962:290). The serpent-image mentioned in 2 Kings is associated with idolatrous, non-Yahwistic worship. It is, however, more likely that *Nehushtan* was a traditional sign of Yahweh's healing power (Hendel 1999:746).

d **Leviathan**

Liwyātān (לִיְיָתָן) is the Hebrew name of a mythical monster associated with the sea. Etymologically the name might be interpreted as 'the twisting one' or 'the wreath-like'. Both interpretative possibilities indicate the original concept of the *Leviathan* as a serpent-like being (Uehlinger 1999:511). It was a ferocious monster in the Phoenician mythology. It is related to the Canaanite *Lotan*, a

¹⁵ See §B above.

¹⁶ Recorded in *Genesis Rabbah* 20.

¹⁷ 2 Kings 18:4 (ESV).

¹⁸ ESV.

spearheaded monster killed by *Anath*¹⁹ (Storm 2001:47). Considering that *Leviathan* is mentioned only six times in the Hebrew Bible it could be seen as a figure of minor importance (Uehlinger 1999:512).

e Serpent in ancient cultures

The serpent symbolism in the narratives of the Egyptian plagues and the bronze serpent of Moses is representative of traditional Ancient Near Eastern associations with the serpent. In Mesopotamian mythology and iconography the serpent can be identified with a number of deities and demons. In Egyptian mythology and iconography the serpent is a dominant and multivalent symbol. It can appear as an adversary or a protector, a deity or a demon; it can signify life and regeneration or death and non-existence. The venomous *Ureaus* serpent [cobra] protected the Egyptian kings and gods. The serpent symbolism in Canaanite and Phoenician mythology and iconography was not as diverse as in Mesopotamia or Egypt. In the *Qudšu*²⁰ iconography the serpent is associated with a goddess, probably *Ašera*²¹ of the Ugaritic mythology (Hendel 1999:744-746).

4 Jewish mysticism and the Garden of Eden narrative

During the past decades it has become evident that variant forms of religious mysticism penetrated Judaism during the Talmudic era. Archaeological evidence indicates a widespread influence of Greek-Roman mysticism on Judaism from the second to the sixth century AD. Forbidden pagan symbols appeared freely in synagogues (Neusner 1975:174, 179-180, 182). Throughout the centuries Jewish reasoning was in two opposites: rationalism as presented by the Talmud and mysticism as elucidated by the Cabbala²² (Shulman 1971:640). Mystics mainly seek intimate knowledge of the divine that reaches above the intellectual and rational reasoning (Holtz 1984:306). In *Zohar* I,²³ the classic document of the Cabbala, different aspects of Genesis are discussed, in particular, the creation and Garden of Eden narratives. The phrase ‘God created

¹⁹ Ugaritic and Canaanite goddess of fertility and war, associated with Ba'al (Ann & Imel 1993:318).

²⁰ *Qudšu* or *Qedeshet*: Canaanite origin; maybe similar to *Athirat* and well-known in the Egyptian mythology; she was usually portrayed as a naked figure, standing on a lion, with a *Hathor* hairdo and holding snakes or plants in her hands (Cornelius 2004:45).

²¹ Great mother-goddess, worshipped in many Near Eastern regions; consort to the Canaanite high-god *El* (Handy 1994:72-77).

²² Meaning of Cabbala: tradition of concealed knowledge. An esoteric method of biblical interpretation, heavily influenced by Neo-Platonism and practised during the Middle Ages by Jews and some Christians, according to which even the letters of the biblical text have a special meaning (Deist 1990:36).

²³ The *Zohar* was constituted ca. 1290 (Blau 1980:3).

man in his own image²⁴ was interpreted literally. The cabbalists refer to non-Jews as descendants of the serpent that beguiled Eve and implanted impurity in her.²⁵ The evil deceiver literally means the serpent, and the serpent is Satan²⁶ (Sperling & Simon 1931:108, 133-134).

5 Ancient perspectives on the creation and role of women

a Creation of the woman according to certain deuterocanonical writings²⁷

The book *Jubilee* is regarded as one of the most important books of the *Pseud-epigrapha*.²⁸ Written some time during the period 153 to 105 BC it presents a graphic sketch of Judaism during the two centuries before Christ. The historical background reflects the Maccabean leadership.²⁹ The author was, in all probability, a strict Pharisee or Levitical priest. The purpose was to rewrite Genesis in such a way that it would appear that the Law was rigorously observed by the patriarchs. Judaism had to be liberated from the demoralising effects of Hellenism (Tedesche 1962:1002-1003). Additional to his concern for matters of the law, ritual and cult, the author exhibits a perspective regarding women that stands in sharp contrast to that shown by the biblical writer. Some aspects of the reworking of the narratives might even be understood as in sympathy with certain contemporary feminist readings of the biblical text. The author significantly strengthens and enriches the portrayal of female characters. The creation of the woman [Eve] in Genesis is in a context devoid of all signals associating her with the future tragedy of Eden (Amaru 1994:609-610).

One of the apocryphal books, *Judith*, recounts how the example of a devout woman inspired a small Jewish town to resist the overwhelming force of a pagan army. Although the scene in the book is set in a time shortly after the return from the Babylonian exile,³⁰ scholars date the period of the events in the story at a later date. The book was probably written between the years 150 and 125 BC – thus during the period of the successful Maccabean revolt (Winter 1962:1023-1025). At the end of the tale of the heroic rescue of Israel by the hand of Judith, she exclaims in praise:

‘Let all your creatures serve you,
for you spoke, and they were made.

²⁴ Genesis 1:27 (ESV).

²⁵ *Zohar* I, *Bereshith* 28b.

²⁶ *Zohar* I, *Bereshith* 35b.

²⁷ Apocrypha, also known as deuterocanonical writings/books; a number of early Jewish and Christian writings not regarded as canonical (Deist 1990:17, 69).

²⁸ Religious writings published under the name of some prominent figure of the distant past, such as Abraham or Moses (Deist 1990:207).

²⁹ Leadership under Simon and John Hyrcanus.

³⁰ 538 BC.

You sent forth your spirit, and it formed them;
there is none that can resist your voice.³¹

Levison (1995:467-468) draws a comparison between this song of praise and Psalm 104:29-30.³² In *Judith* 16:14 there is a prominence of creation language as well as praise to God as Creator. Psalm 104 evokes the image of the creation of the first man, while the psalm of Judith – a woman’s song – refocuses on the creation of the woman. Levison (1995:468) concludes: ‘In this psalm, sung by the prototypical Jewish heroine, the discovery of an intertextual echo of the creation of the first woman is anything but unexpected’.

b View of Ben Sira

The *Wisdom of Ben Sira* is exceptional therein that it discloses the name of the actual author, Jeshua ben Eleazar ben Sira. The book was probably compiled at the beginning of the second century BC. Ben Sira was evidently a scribe devoted to the Law and to prayer, probably belonging to the priestly class. In his teachings Ben Sira pays considerable attention to women and wives. His rating on whether a woman is good or bad, is solely from a man’s point of view. He compares a woman’s wrath with the venom of a snake. According to his interpretation of Genesis 3, Eve – and thus the woman – was responsible for sin and death. Ben Sira’s negative perception of women was generally accepted (Collins 1997:23-24, 36-37, 64-67).

c Ephrem’s view of Eve and women

In contrast to the dominant male gender ideology of his time, Ephrem the Syrian³³ ‘ignored traditional preconceptions about gender’, and did ‘a great deal to promote the role of women in worship’ (Botha 1997:483). Although Ephrem accepted the socially established gender roles of his time, his writings suggest a critical attitude towards sexism. Both Eve and Mary are regarded as representatives of women. The dishonour brought upon women by Eve is counterbalanced by the acquittal through Mary. His emphasis on, inter alia, the unity of the sexes, ‘led him to present Eve in a more balanced way’ (Botha 1997:486, 488-489).

d Rabbinic stance on women generally and Eve in particular

Hellig’s (1998:47-48) theory is that ‘the rabbis projected their anxieties onto women generally, and particularly onto biblical women on whom the rabbis

³¹ *Judith* 16:14.

³² ‘When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground’ (ESV).

³³ A Syrian hymnist, exegete, teacher and deacon of Nisibis and Edessa; lived ca AD 306-373.

provided extensive interpretation'. The question about men's inability to protect their women is a universal problem regarding powerless conquered people. Women are regarded as spoils of war and men have fears that women, vulnerable to rape, would willingly submit to such encounters. Psychoanalytical research on rabbinic material³⁴ indicated that the rabbis reflected these fundamental anxieties about women in their interpretations of the Law.

In the *Erubin*³⁵ 100b the following is said, inter alia, about Eve: 'Eve was cursed with ten curses, since it is written: unto the woman he said, and I will greatly multiply (Gen 3:16), which refers to the two drops of blood, one being that of menstruation and the other that of virginity ... and he shall rule over thee teaches that while the wife solicits with her heart the husband does so with his mouth ...' (Epstein 1938: 697). In the rabbinic literature Satan is portrayed as suitor of Eve, as well as the spirit of temptation. He is personified in the serpent and is depicted as symbol of iniquity and seduction (Shulman 1971:321-322). *Genesis Rabbah* furthermore declares that the Woman and Satan were created concurrently. According to Rabbi Yehoshua the Woman is the source of death (Boyarin 1993:89-90).

e New Testament and Christian perspectives

In both Jewish tradition and the New Testament, Eve is proffered in a negative way. She is presented as representative of the alleged weaknesses of women. Emphasis is placed on the so-called gullibility of Eve and her tendency towards sin. Early Christian theologians contrasted the sinfulness of Eve with the perfection of the 'new Eve', Mary, mother of Jesus. Paul feared that the Corinthian Christians would be led astray from Christ, just as Eve was deceived by the serpent³⁶ (Sakenfeld 1993a:207). Patristic writers endorsed the conviction that male dominance of the female could be biblically justified. Tertullian³⁷ reminds a female audience that the descendants of Eve were responsible for the death of the Son of God. Christian writers speculated whether Eve had received the 'image of God' as completely as Adam had. These writers reminded women of their natural inferiority (Clark 1990a:331-332). Caution should be exercised in the interpretation of the status and role of women in early Christianity. Males often wrote prescriptively and sources are scanty. Christianity's growing

³⁴ Rabbinic hermeneutics include dimensions such as allegories. *Genesis Rabbah* is regarded as the principal midrash, giving the traditional Jewish exposition of the Law. It includes a complete systematised Judaic commentary on Genesis. In the commentary the Garden of Eden narrative is compared with the chronicle of the Israelite nation (Neusner 1985:x, xi, 60).

³⁵ The *Erubin* (Mingling) is a section of the *Seder Mo'ed* (Feasts) (Rappoport & Patai 1966:360).

³⁶ 2 Corinthians 11:3.

³⁷ North African Christian writer and apologist; born ca AD 160; his writings are significant for modern theological dialogues (Sider 1990:883-884).

conservatism towards women is revealed in later New Testament books (Clark 1990b:940-942).

D FEMINIST APPROACH TO THE BIBLE

As early as 1837 an American lecturer, Sarah Grimke, suggested that biblical interpretation was deliberately biased against women to keep them submissive. She urged women to become educated in order to study the Bible themselves. By the end of the nineteenth century a number of women had indeed become trained as biblical scholars. *The Woman's Bible* – largely the work of non-specialists – saw the light, but was not received with much enthusiasm. During the 1960s renewed interest in women's rights drew attention to the status and role of Jewish and Christian women alike. Feminists recognised the need to reassess centuries of biblical interpretation, mainly by male scholars (Sakenfeld 1993b:228-229). Feminist discussions of religion dealt predominantly with theological issues, rather than textual analysis. Phyllis Trible is one of the few biblical scholars that have applied literary theory (Pardes 1992:20). Regarding the Garden of Eden narrative particularly, Trible (1979:81) is of the opinion that women need no longer accept the traditional exegesis of Genesis 2-3. Rather than legitimising the patriarchal culture, the myth places the culture under judgement. It tells us that we are creatures of equality and mutuality.

Feminists have alleged that Judaism and Christianity are sexist religions with traditions of male leadership. According to the opinion of some feminists 'society has outgrown its need for religion'; there are, however, feminists who are convinced that religion is extremely important. The women's movement prepared women to commence with a systematic feminist critique of religion (Christ & Plaskow 1979:1-3).

E CONCLUSION

The mystery of the genesis of the universe has been a fundamental problem for humanity since time immemorial. Creation myths are an attempt of man to penetrate the unknown. The enigmatic figure of Eve – portrayed in the Hebrew Bible as the first created woman – seems to be linked to mythological characters centuries before the completion of the Genesis narratives. She was known in Mesopotamia, Sumer and Phoenicia as goddess, mother and guardian. The origin of the name *Hawwāh* (Eve) is controversial. The popular etymology connects the name in Genesis 3:20 to the root *hayâ* (to live). Later rabbinic references link the name to the Aramaic *heway'* (serpent). The conventional form אִשָּׁה (woman) is a pun on אִישׁ (man) in Genesis 2:23.

Ancient interpreters made an association between Eve and the serpent. In the history of religions, the serpent is widely attested as a symbol representing both beneficial and hostile sacred powers. In the Garden of Eden narrative, as described in Genesis 3, the serpent (*nāhāš*) skilfully deceived Eve into

disobeying the divine command. According to this narrative, sin, and thus death, entered the world through the disobedience of Eve. She became the prototype of all women. Genesis 3:16b has been cited for many centuries to prove men's superiority over women. In Jewish mysticism the intriguing biblical serpent of the Garden of Eden was equated with Satan. In contrast to the attitude of Ephrem, as well as certain deuterocanonical writings which portray women in a sympathetic light, rabbinic literature depicts women – and notably Eve – in a very negative way.

Considering the possibility that 'biblical Eve' was derived from a 'mythological Eve', it may be time for a reassessment of conventional biblical interpretation and especially that of Genesis 3. Women should commence with a systematic critique of religion.

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