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Biblical Images

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Gustave Doré

Adam and Eve Driven Out of Eden.

Chapter one

Eve: The Missing Half

Eve* is not merely the first woman to be mentioned in the Scriptures, she is the first woman. Thus, even more than other biblical figures, she is an archetype, the mother and precursor of women in general. In a sense, every man, at some stage in his life, is Adam, and every woman is Eve. The Adam-Eve relationship is fundamental to every life pattern. We come back again and again, in a multiplicity of guises and forms, to these two prototypes, for Adam and Eve represent the complete course of human life: in other words, they project an image not of men in their individuality and particularity, but of man as a species, of humanity as humanity. So it is that the mystics taught that all human souls are not only descended from Adam but are actually dependent upon him, are components of his being. Adam is that man who includes all men. Adam and Eve are not merely archetypes but the very stuff of mankind, and their story is the story of the human race.

Such an interpretation of the story of Eve opens the way to a comprehensive view of women, for, as I have implied, every woman is

* The story of Eve is to be found in Genesis 2:18–4:2. Similar references will denote the source of succeeding chapters.

part of Eve at one time or another and in some way or another plays Eve's role over and over again. This is not to say that Eve is necessarily to be held up as a model. Not even the most exemplary female figures in Jewish history are without flaw. The four matriarchs themselves – Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel – who are in many respects the paragons of Jewish womanhood, have not been immune to criticism by the Talmudic sages or by the leading lights of other generations either. Indeed, none of the great biblical personalities comes across as an unambiguous or one-dimensional embodiment of sweetness and light. All are real, live people with their triumphs and failures, strengths and temptations, inhibitions and struggles. At times, it is an individual's very failing or flaw which is intended to be constructive. All these personalities in the Bible are, in some sense, object lessons, although they are not necessarily to be imitated. On the contrary, the purpose of a given narrative is often to warn us against the mistakes of our ancestors, however great and important and even superior to us the latter may have been. Thus, for example, Eve's story is the story of a woman, with all woman's grace and beauty, on the one hand, and all her capacity to corrupt and be corrupted, on the other. Eve is both a positive example and a warning concerning female power and the female role in the world.

The story of Adam and Eve is multifaceted, and I shall touch on only a few aspects of it. The first thing that is important to understand about Eve is the seemingly simple matter of her creation, which in turn, reflects a certain notion of her relationship to Adam. The Talmudic sages agreed that Eve was not simply born from Adam's rib, as we are somehow accustomed to think, but that Adam and Eve (or rather *ha'adam harishon*, "primordial man") came into being as a single creature with two faces or sides – the one, male; the other, female. The biblical word *tsela*, usually understood to mean "rib," could be taken in the sense of "side" as in the phrase *tsela'ot haMishkan* ("the sides of the Sanctuary"). Woman was created from Adam's *tsela* because she was to begin with a *tsela*, or a side or aspect of primordial man, who thus came to be two distinct persons.

This notion is reinforced when one looks beyond the story of the creation of man, to its implications as they are spelled out in what follows. The idea of creation as separation recurs both in the Scriptures themselves and, afterward, throughout Jewish literature. Hence, the

upshot is that the relationship between men and women in all times and places has the character of the quest for something lost, to use the Talmudic expression. Male and female are essentially parts of a single whole, originally created as one being; but for various reasons – principally the establishment of a different, more complex, and perhaps deeper kind of connection between the two – the whole body is divided. The two half bodies are constantly in search of one another and find no fulfillment until they are rejoined, in a new and different unity. The words of scripture that follow – “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24) – relate primarily to the event of the division. The implication is that, while the filial tie is very strong – indeed, virtually unbreakable – there is another tie, hidden, but nonetheless present at birth: the tie with a future partner. This tie is even more fundamental to the child’s being than the tie with his parents, so that he eventually abandons them and goes in search of his lost “better half.” His quest is for his own completeness, for the wholeness of his own flesh which he lost when, in the second creation, he was divided, as it were, into two. What he seeks is a return to his primordial oneness.

According to this view, the male-female relationship was originally intended not as a means of procreation but rather as something more basic and primary. Procreation is a secondary function: in the story of the Creation and of Eve, childbirth makes its appearance late, as a surprising new dimension to the relationship between men and women. In a sense, the birth of a child is a kind of bonus, a new creation, a new man, wondrously brought into being by the very act of reunification. The primordial oneness in itself appeared to be sterile; but, in recovering that oneness, the two uniting parts create out of themselves something that has had no earlier existence. And, indeed, the narrative describing the first childbirth and the first children emphasizes the marvel of this new creation, this new world. The basic male-female tie is not a function but an essential bond, the reunification of two essences. As a consequence, the family, too, comes to be seen as being of intrinsic primary value for man and not merely as a social device for meeting one need or another.

The story of the separation, of the halving of the original human personality, sheds light on a basic difference between man and other

living creatures. The latter are from the outset divided into male and female. Hence, the relationship between the two sexes is, in their case, based upon the task of reproduction rather than on any inherent meaning in the relationship. To borrow a phrase from the medieval sage Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, “No bull takes a cow to wife.” The bond is accidental, opportunistic, and functional in a way in which the human conjugal tie cannot be.

It thus becomes clear that the story of the creation of Eve from the *tsela* is more than just an incidental account; it is essential to an understanding of human marital and familial ties and to the whole elaboration, later, of ways of strengthening them. The great body of Jewish marital law and custom in all its detail is nothing more than an expression and a spelling out of the original role of the first woman, Eve. To this very day, a nuptial blessing – “May You cause the bride and groom to rejoice as You did Your creation in the primeval Garden of Eden” – reminds us of this motif. In effect, every wedding is a return to the primordial state of Adam and Eve.

Another important element in the Eden story is the role of Eve as arch-temptress and hence the one responsible for the expulsion from the Garden. The story of Eve’s temptation raises many questions which have troubled students in every age – among them the question why this particular sequence of events and why it was Eve who tempted Adam.

One of the most significant explanations turns upon a peculiarity of this first human generation which was afterward rectified. Adam, it seems, had been commanded directly by God, while Eve received the commandment only through Adam. From this circumstance, a far-reaching conclusion can be drawn: obedience to the divine imperative, whether negative or positive, must be based upon a direct personal relationship. When, in the absence of such a relationship, obligation is mediated through some third party, failure is invited. The story of the theophany at Sinai, which in its inward form, describing the “creation” of Israel, recapitulates the story of Adam’s creation, is nonetheless essentially a reversal of the expulsion from Eden. Here the commandments are given quite differently: the whole house of Israel, men and women alike, step forth to receive the Torah together. The *Rishonim* (medieval rabbinic commentators) even find hints that the Torah had to be accepted

first by the women (the “house of Jacob”) before it could be accepted by the men (the “house of Israel”). There is thus a rectification of the original pattern, based – at least in part – on the need for directness in a true relationship.

There are other explanations as well which, at the very least, provide food for thought. A problem that engaged the sages of the Talmud in a variety of ways was what they called “the added measure of understanding given to women” – women’s intuition, which implied, among other things, that they have an extra degree of curiosity. The incident of the Tree of Knowledge turns, after all, partly on the arousal of curiosity, the temptation to know too much. Curiosity is not in itself considered to be bad or conducive to sin, but inquiry beyond permissible limits is always dangerous and sometimes corrupting. Hence, the attempt to set a variety of limitations upon women’s inquisitiveness.

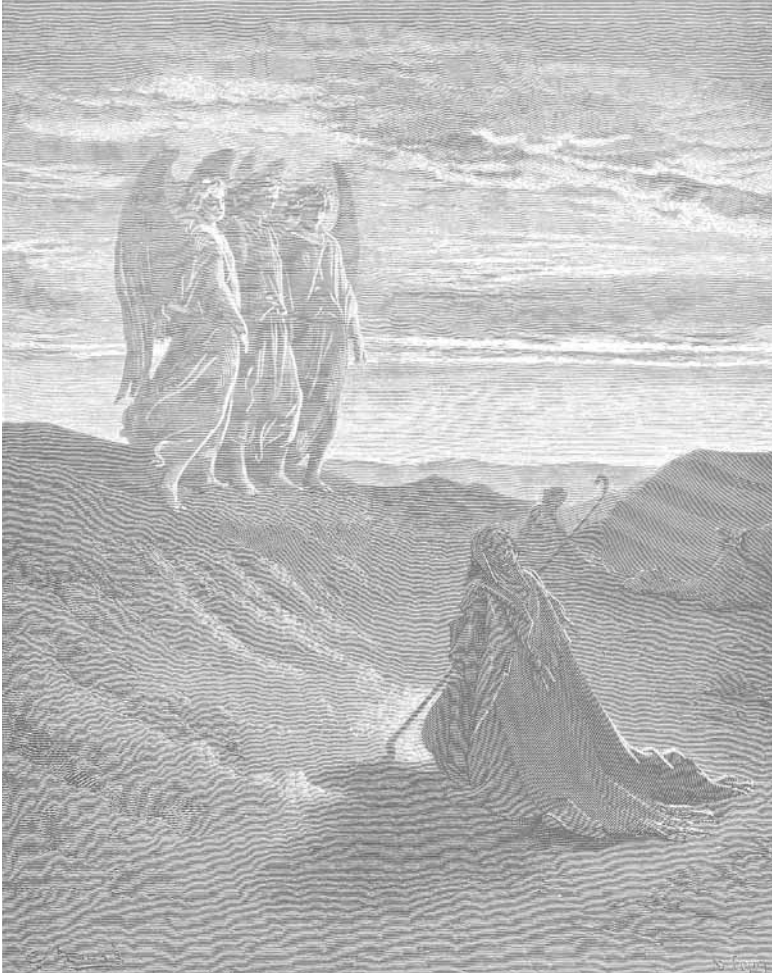
From another point of view, also much discussed, the sin of the Tree of Knowledge is connected to the special character of the male-female relationship. The subject of this sin is, of course, very broad and includes within its purview questions of knowledge versus innocence, life, and death.

Human beings are the only living creatures whose sex lives are not circumscribed by a reproductive code. We are indeed emancipated to a unique degree from the cycle of nature; it is conscious relatedness and emotion that are decisive for us, not biological instinct, which serves merely as an underpinning.

The question of knowledge (*da’at*) in this context and certainly of the Tree of Knowledge must be seen in the light of the use of the same Hebrew root to describe the relationship of the first human beings to each other: “And Adam knew (*yada*) Eve his wife” (Genesis 4:1). The Tree of Knowledge thus represents not so much the loss of the primal innocence of Eden, but rather the loss of one set of relationships and their replacement by another, quite different set. Instead of the sort of practical, instrumental male-female connection that prevails in the rest of nature, we have the advantage of a tie that is largely free of stubborn biological determination. On the other hand, this very freedom gives rise to the evil impulse, a wild desire which knows no inherent bounds or limitations, including its own original function. Other human instincts –

hunger, thirst – are clearly related to specific functional ends and reach satiation when those ends are achieved; the sex drive appears to have no aim other than its own gratification. It is thus distinctively human desire, with its unique potential for achieving intimacy as well as for wanton aggrandizement, that the Tree of Knowledge introduces into the world.

The existence of sexual prohibitions in every culture reflects the universal sense of the strangeness of this distinctively human pattern; and thus the sin of the Tree of Knowledge is described as stemming, not from hunger or thirst, but from a “lusting of the eyes,” an attraction to the beauty of the fruit as an end in itself. It is pure desire, with no utilitarian purpose. The appearance of such desire is specifically linked with the woman, for whereas in all other species reproduction depends upon the susceptibility of the female, much more than the male, to a cycle of sexual readiness, in the human female alone such a cycle (as distinct from the reproductive cycle *per se*) no longer exists, and sexual activity is a constant possibility. The sin of the Tree of Knowledge thus begins with the woman, for it is she who reveals in her own make-up the possibility of emancipation from the cyclical, mechanical workings of instinct. Had man remained within the bonds of instinct, of urges built into his own biology, he might have remained in the Garden of Eden in a world of much beauty and contentment but also of limitation. Through the Tree of Knowledge, a new world came into being with the free play of desire. There emerged also freedom of choice. The sin of the Tree of Knowledge is both the first sin and the key to this new world. Only after many generations, after thousands of years, has the human race, in the fullness of its freedom, begun to reconstruct for itself functional frameworks that might belatedly rectify the first sin, give it positive meaning and thus annul it *qua* sin, turning it rather into a purpose and a task.



Gustave Doré

Abraham and the Three Angels.

Chapter two

Abraham: The Renovator

Abraham* is the hero of an epos that is peculiar to Israel and stands out with a greatness of its own in the history of mankind.

The Bible story tells us a great deal about the man and his ideas, the way he lived, his friends and enemies, his family, and so on. Having been told so much, the question may well be asked: What, after all, did he do? What makes him a central figure in the memory of the race? Key figures in history are not ordinary persons, and we usually attach some descriptive epithet to a great name: a noble conqueror, an artistic genius, an intrepid explorer, the founder of an empire, and so on. How can we define the greatness of Abraham?

The most accepted answer to this question – throughout the generations – has been the view that Abraham was the innovator of monotheism: that he gave us the faith in one God. He is alleged to have been the first to conceive and develop the idea, and thereby to have founded the Jewish people and all the monotheistic religions and, consequently, much of the philosophy and modes of thought that lie at the source of our civilization.

* Genesis 12:1–22:19.

Nevertheless, despite the vivid legend of the story of the young Abraham smashing the idols, this view of the father of the nation is not accepted by serious scientific scholars. A rereading of the Bible text is enough to show that there is no mention of Abraham's role as a great prophet bringing to the world the belief in a single God. Many wonderful things are related about the man, and his stature holds up to any critical scrutiny. His deeds and character are in fact recollected with love and reverence in many tales, with descriptions of his faith and devotion, his wanderings, his courage, his hospitality, and even his weaknesses. But the fact that he was the originator of monotheism is not mentioned.

In point of fact, a closer reexamination of the Genesis story and of the many exegeses leads to a different view of the man and sheds light on many other developments in religious history. To begin with, according to the Bible itself, the belief in one God is not anything new, nor is it the peak of some evolutionary development. Monotheism is not a higher stage of some process of growth following on a lower stage of polytheism. Monotheism is itself primary and basic; it has been the dominant mode of worship from as far back as human memory goes. All the other modes of religious faith came after it, and not before. For this truth, the scriptural text itself, though it does not say so in precisely this fashion, is the chief evidence. And like Maimonides and other Jewish sages, modern scholarship, especially in the field of anthropology, tends to question whether polytheism, even in its primitive forms such as fetishism or voodoo, is not a degeneration of primary monotheistic cults.

In other words, even the most primitive of peoples evince a faith in a higher power. It may be stretching the point to call this monotheism in the modern sense of the term, because the primitive mentality cannot make abstractions to the same degree. Nevertheless, a basic belief in one supreme basic power that makes everything happen in the universe is common to all – even to the bushmen of Africa or the inhabitants of the Tierra del Fuego in South America, peoples thoroughly isolated from other cultural influences. Their fundamental belief is not in many gods or even in various forces of nature that have to be propitiated; it is a belief in or worship of one power, one essence or thing that takes on the dimensions of the utmost grandeur their psyche can conceive. This fundamental stance of the human before the holy, which is just within

and yet beyond conception, is not necessarily a matter of man's relation to any specific force of nature, or to a person or awesome image, or even to gods and demons. It is the primary sensation of "little me," which is the true feeling of every human being when facing the mystery and the vastness of life in the world.

This is the genesis point in the soul. From it two different courses may be taken. One may hold fast to this primal unity against the impact of the inexplicable and bear up to all that such a position implies. This course would lead to a faith in a single God. The alternative development would be from the unity to the multiplicity. In other words, from simple monotheism – the direct faith in something not specific or clearly oriented (which is perhaps like the faith of a child) – to a complex faith, derived from the endeavor to isolate certain things and subjects. At first, there is the concept of the whole, because man cannot yet define any specific force or thing. Afterward, the whole begins to be analyzed, broken down into parts and categories: fire, water, air, earth, sun, and the like. Feelings of fear, gratitude, and shame lead to rites of worship of that eminent force of nature which seems to be most endowed with a life and consciousness of its own. In turn, it itself becomes a complex and variegated system of forces, each with a character of its own and ultimately with a representative god of its own.

After further development and degeneration, the stage is reached of the image or figure. The graven image is not the father of the god but its offspring. At first, the image is the symbol of the divine's power; but, after a certain decline of the power of faith, men no longer present themselves before the primal force or the symbol but relate to the physical image, the statue. Then follows the worship of these statues and pictures and of whatever else is given to visual perception, touch, caress.

Idolatry of this sort is, therefore, not the first or the most primitive stage of religion. It is a later development in a certain direction. It is a transition from the primal belief in an unknown God to a worship of tangible and comprehensible gods. The great amalgam of the infinite is very difficult to negotiate with. It is much easier to relate to some specific force or image and to propitiate "him" with offerings and to expect certain responses in the way of rewards and punishments.

Polytheism is thus a complicated and sophisticated system of

Abraham

worship springing from the need to establish a “rational” and direct contact with the divine. Instead of trying to communicate with a basic supreme essence, polytheism believes in the possibility of usefulness of intermediaries, such as specific gods or a set of semi-divine forces.

Even the Hindu Scriptures (like those of most other “polytheistic” religions) recognize the existence of a supreme formless divine, the Atman, who cannot be reached by man except through the functional gods – which increase in number the nearer they get to the popular mind. And, of course, this is the perspective of the Bible itself. The first man is seen as a whole, the archetype of a direct relation with a single hidden God. The following generations “began to call on the name of God” and thus, according to a certain exegesis, indicated that men were beginning to attach significance to other forces – of nature, symbols, and images, whether genuine or false. A system of well-defined forces that provide a reasonable explanation for things is the product of an advanced culture, with a philosophy, science, astronomy, and so on.

This intellectual world of polytheistic religion – with all its sophistication and corruption – was the world in which the patriarch Abraham lived. He did not emerge from a pastoral world of wandering shepherds, uncouth and unlearned. He came from great cities, centers of culture and hubs of commerce. In these cities, there were banks and letters of credit, as in our own day, even if documents were written on bricks of clay. A world of elaborate civilization, already ancient and worldly-wise in its own way: Ur of the Chaldees, Babylon, Egypt It was a polytheistic, idolatrous urbanity, the height of an ancient culture, representing the most advanced ideas and the most refined concepts in science, art, and philosophy.

And in this world, the “modern” world of the ancient past, Abraham found himself believing in a single God. It was not a new discovery on his part; on the contrary, it was a reaffirmation of a very old truth, one that had almost been forgotten and was probably considered by his contemporaries as barbaric and primitive. Abraham was thus not an innovator but an ultraconservative, like someone belonging to a cult of ancient origin. On the other hand, Abraham did represent something very new: he was a prophet in that he called for a renewal of faith, a return (almost a repentance) to the divine Oneness. He tried to restore

the faith of a distant past; but his contemporaries probably saw him as a crude and rather old-fashioned preacher.

One of the proofs offered by the Bible itself is the meeting with Melchizedek, King of Salem (Jerusalem), priest of the supreme God. This passage implies that Abraham has companions in faith, that his religion is not his own private invention. These companions were to be found scattered in isolated spots throughout the world, such as this small city on the way from one great center of culture on the Euphrates to another on the Nile. What is more, all along the journey, Abraham called on the name of God; he built altars and sanctuaries and taught people the nature of the divine unity. What he did amounted to a cultural revolution in his time: he tried to revive what was considered an archaic remnant of a primitive religion, and to make it into a new system of faith.

Hence, Abraham was not really an innovator or someone proclaiming an entirely new concept of religious belief. He was simply the first person in a long time to relate seriously to an old religious outlook which was primary and genuine. He was a great man in his own terms – a leader of a tribe, a successful man of the world, a conqueror in battle, a fulfilled man in private life, and a thinker who was not subdued by adverse public opinion. In other words, he was a great leader who fulfilled the same function as in later generations would be attributed to a messiah – the restoration of the ancient system of right relations between man and the divine.

Abraham endeavored to release the precious truth from the hands of a small body of the faithful and to build a new sort of vessel to preserve it and to live it – a tribe, a community and family structure that would become a special nation. And this national unit would be able to renew the old faith in one God and keep it alive by grouping together and living according to its spirit.

For this purpose, Abraham wandered the face of the earth, gathering to him all those people who still believed and trying to awaken others to believe in the divine unity. He called on the name of God and preached to all to come to God. In short, Abraham was actually the first prophet to emerge from the ancient faith who taught it as something vital and true, as something to live by.