

Holly Morse, *Encountering Eve's Afterlives: A New Reception Critical Approach to Genesis 2–4*

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Carol A. Newsom

Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA (cnewsom@emory.edu)

Anyone attempting a study of the reception of the biblical figure of Eve faces the daunting task of how to deal with the sheer quantity of material. Recognising that a comprehensive assessment is not feasible, Morse has constructed an engaging way of selecting and presenting a broad but often fresh set of sample texts and images organised according to three broad themes – sin, knowledge and life. She adapts the trope of curated ‘galleries’ in which a focal image is dialogically engaged through the placement of other images that can bring into prominence certain potentialities in the original. In Morse’s work the biblical text functions as the focal image for each of three ‘galleries’.

For each main theme Morse begins by closely examining the biblical text to see what in fact it says relevant to the topic of sin, knowledge or life. In every case Morse demonstrates that the biblical text is far more ambiguous than tradition and popular perception recognises. Nevertheless, she carefully demonstrates precisely where each line of interpretation links itself to *something* in the text. None of the traditions is an arbitrary imposition on the text; but each is selective in a manner that serves the broader interests of the interpreter. Thus any notion of a ‘true’ or even a ‘definitive’ interpretation of the figure of Eve becomes deeply problematic.

The theme of Eve as the conduit by which sin and death entered the world is perhaps the most common and persistent interpretation, even though, as Morse shows, the actual text is far from clear either as to responsibility for the decisive act or even its significance. Morse demonstrates how interpretive choices in antiquity reread the text selectively to construct an image of Eve as intellectually inferior, seductive and arrogant, becoming a ‘monstrous mother’ of death and devilry. What is distressingly missing from this chapter, however, is any account of the writings of the learned women of the Renaissance who argued subtly and with exegetical skill against such interpretations – Isotta Nogarola, Moderata Fonte, Archangela Tarabotti and Aemilia Lanyer. That a ‘gallery’ of interpretations of Eve in relation to sin and inferiority could be curated without the presence of these figures is simply inexplicable.

When Morse turns to the theme of Eve and knowledge, readers likely find themselves on less familiar ground, even though the theme of the acquisition of knowledge is fundamental to the text itself. Drawing on ancient Near Eastern and biblical sapiential traditions, Morse demonstrates the deeply grounded positive association of women as channels of wisdom. In post-biblical antiquity, however, it was the gnostic writers who developed the model of Eve as spiritual helper of Adam who enables his enlightenment. The gnostic myths vary considerably, however, as do Eve’s roles in them. Although this strand of interpretation is not attested in orthodox Christianity or in Judaism, the association of Eve as a figure of knowledge is reclaimed in modern feminist engagement with Eve. Morse’s primary example is the reinterpretation of Eve in the novels and stories of Angela Carter.

Perhaps the most complex account of Eve is the development of Eve's motherhood. Already the biblical text narrates her birthing of Cain, Abel and Seth, noting Adam's naming her 'Eve' because she is 'mother of all the living'. Eve's motherhood was a far more prominent theme in the history of interpretation than is normally recognised, though Morse documents how it might be turned in a negative or a positive direction as Eve was alternately depicted as mother of the evil Cain or the victimised Abel. Eve's roles as nursing mother and caregiver come to be a significant means of interpreting Genesis 3:16 and Eve's suffering in bearing children. These roles are paralleled to Adam's role as farmer in early depictions of the consequences of the 'curses' of Genesis 3. Morse also documents the complex mutual interpretation of Eve and Mary as grieving mothers, an interpretation of the two figures as complementary rather than antithetical figures. Indeed, some artistic depictions of Eve mourning Abel are modelled after artistic tropes of the *Pietà*.

Perhaps because Morse's book is necessarily selective, and every reader is likely to object that some author, artist or tradition is omitted, this book would serve as a superb textbook for a course on the reception of Eve. It is careful, well-argued and well-documented. It can serve to launch any number of exegetical, historical, hermeneutical, aesthetic or cultural debates. We are all in Morse's debt for curating this excellent exhibition on Eve's afterlives.

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