I am a woman, I work in biblical interpretation, and I am not alone. This is the gripping truth presented in Amanda Benckhuysen’s book *The Gospel According to Eve*. She opens her work with the claim, “In the history of the church, there have always been those who have questioned notions of women’s inferiority and who have believed that the Bible intends woman’s full emancipation and equality” (1–2). The book then outlines the overwhelming historical testament of women interpreting the Bible, and specifically interpreting the figure of Eve, since the beginning of the church.

While many today diminish arguments for women’s leadership in the church by claiming that they are an innovation born of the twentieth-century women’s rights movements, Benckhuysen’s work traces the roots for women’s full equality back to the fourth century. For these interpreters, “the Bible, when interpreted correctly, is woman’s greatest advocate, encouraging women to embrace in Christ their full humanity as image bearers of God” (2). But this stream of voices has often been silenced or left in the margins. Benckhuysen sets out to “trace the history of this alternative reading of Scripture, reflected in the voices of women and their interaction with Genesis 1–3.”

The book is arranged thematically, emphasizing the dynamic activity of women’s voices and thought despite the barriers present to them. Beginning in chapter 2, Benckhuysen introduces women interpreters who used Eve to defend the worth of women. Women have long been represented negatively through media, art, and literature. During the early fifteenth century amidst the cultural awakening in Europe, the massive resurgence of Greek texts brought with it strongly misogynistic representations of women. Benckhuysen introduces us to Christine de Pizan (1363–c. 1430) who recognized that the representation of women in popular literature did not fit with her own experiences and would have a negative impact on her daughters, sisters, and friends. Christine was first to argue that Adam was meant to love Eve, rather than dominate her, because she was made from his side, a position of intimacy, mutuality, and equality. Benckhuysen then highlights six other women’s writings during the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries. These women interpreted Eve as a beacon of hope, redemption, and spiritual power, thus combating the cultural stereotypes that women were weak, foolish, dangerous, and irrational.

Chapter 3 focuses on women’s education. Women used Genesis 1–3 as a way to associate classical education with the cultivation of virtue, and more virtuous women would be beneficial for all society. This chapter includes summaries from Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Anne Wheathill, Marie de Gournay, Anna Maria van Schurman, Bathsua Makin, and Mary Chudleigh.

Chapter 4 groups writers who focused on marriage, wives, and mothers. The first writer highlighted is Mary Astell, who wrote bluntly about the reality of marriage during the eighteenth century. She believed that wifely
submission was not one of divine prescription but rather a prediction based on the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel. This chapter also introduces Lucy Hutton and her theology of sex, Elizabeth Clinton engaging with mothers and breastfeeding, and Hannah More on female philanthropy.

Chapter 5 is about women as preachers and teachers. Advocates for women in these positions have been left in the margins, but they have been active since the beginning. Margaret Fell believed that preaching was the responsibility of all Christians, a belief that became foundational in the Quaker movement. Other women highlighted in this section are Antoinette Bourignon, M. Marsin, Rebecca Jackson, Deborah Peirce, Harriet Livermore, Catherine Booth, and Frances Willard. Benckhuysen expertly covers the breadth of this debate and shows us that there have been traditions all along who have celebrated women in the pulpit as enriching to the Christian tradition.

Chapter 6 is on forming the character of children. It highlights eight women and their writings, including Sarah Hale, who is largely known for advocating for Thanksgiving as a national holiday. This chapter highlights the shift in women taking control of teaching children about the various elements of faith. As such these women had a great impact on the future generations of both men and women who grew up under their influence.

Chapter 7 highlights women advocating for social reform. This chapter illustrates the interconnectedness of human rights and women’s rights, especially in the abolitionist movement, the women’s suffrage movement, and labor reform of the nineteenth century. This chapter celebrates that the first wave of the women’s rights movement was started by Christian women as they rediscovered a new identity in God through Eve. Their advocacy for real social and moral reform moved the country towards impactful legislative change in combating racism and sexism.

Finally, chapter 8 examines the formation of gender ideologies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These women interpreters shared the assumption that being created equal to man necessitated social equality. Based on their study of Scripture, women pursued increases in women’s rights, protections, and freedoms. As women were admitted to universities and increasingly able to study the Bible for themselves, the rush of scholarship around equality led to new areas of research such as feminist interpretation. The increasing access to scholarship in the majority world also brings the global voices of Teresa Okure from Nigeria, Aruna Anandason from India, Filipino scholar Elizabeth Dominguez, and Latina theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz.

From Benckhuysen’s work, it is clear to see that egalitarian interpretations of Genesis 1–3 are not simply a cultural response to our current historical context, but rather lie at the heart of the creation story and are a key element in what it means for humanity to have been created equally in the image of God. The fact that women throughout time and history, largely undereducated and disconnected from one another, have come to similar conclusions only strengthens her argument. These women offered interpretations focused on equality and dignity in times and places where patriarchy was the rule of law.

Each chapter can be read alone or in a group, and discussion questions are provided in an appendix. This book is a good choice for Sunday school classes, church-related book clubs, or other reading groups interested in studying historical theology. The research is robust and scholarly, lending itself for use in the classroom, but it is also accessible to those with a beginner’s knowledge of theology who are looking to increase their depth and breadth on this topic.

This work is an important piece of the continued quest to uncover the historical voices of women. What The Gospel According to Eve shows us is that throughout the entire history of the church, individuals have been fighting to show that female subordination cannot be supported by Scripture. When the church succumbs to the limitations of roles based on gender, they are perpetuating patriarchal values which have no place among God’s people, who are marked by equality, justice, and mercy. The historical evidence presented in Benckhuysen’s work is enough to make every church reexamine their own doctrines and the historical developments that led to them. For anyone who has been told that equality of the genders is not biblically or historically based, you will find a great cloud of witnesses who have been highlighting the alternative view for centuries.

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