

Parenting in Exile: The Pain-Love of Eve

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My interpretation of Gen 3:16 is based upon its context in the Garden story (Gen 2:4b–4:24), the Hebrew terms that comprise it, and the parallelism of 3:16b with Gen 4:7. Because context is so important for understanding, we must look closely at what precedes and follows, even and especially when the story into which Yahweh's (YHWH's) address to the woman is embedded is well known.¹

The Story

The Garden drama is the second, more earthy, creation story; it begins with the molding of the first farmer (*adam*) out of mud (*adamah*) and concludes with Cain's struggle with sin and eastward wandering (Gen 4:1–24). With someone in place to till and keep the ground (*adamah*), YHWH planted the first orchard (Gen 2:7–9) but then realized that its keeper should not be alone (Gen 2:18). After YHWH shaped from the ground animals of wild variety and the man then analyzed and named them, they saw none was a match for him (Gen 2:18–20). This problem was resolved when YHWH drew from man material to shape a wife (*Issah*). This made him not only a farmer, but also a husband (*Ish*). The first marriage was accompanied by exclamations of relief (“this at last”), equality (“bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”), and intimacy (“they were naked and not ashamed”). Indeed, they were of the same substance and a perfect match (*ezer kenegdo*, Gen 2:21–24).

Before the molding and naming of animals that ultimately resulted in the first marriage, two from one, *Issah* and *Ish*, tension was foreshadowed when YHWH forbade the single farmer from eating from one of the trees (2:16). Anyone would wonder how that would play out—YHWH pointing out and naming a tree in the middle of the Garden and saying, “do not eat.” We know human nature too well, as did the writer of this drama, to think nothing would come of a focus on a tree and a command against eating from it, with the threat of immediate death should they disobey (“in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die,” 2:17b).

We do not have to wait long. A crafty creature that YHWH made approached the wife, while she was with her husband (Gen 3:6b), and suggested eating from that same tree would make her God-like, “knowing good and evil.” So, sure enough, *Issah* accepted this, found other reasons to eat, and shared with her husband the beautiful fruit from the forbidden tree.

So far, the audience has been provided explanations for farming, marriage, and unashamed intimacy and a representation of the process of temptation (calling attention to the tree by forbidding its fruit, and a tempter, the serpent, who also focused on the tree to contradict YHWH). We also have a depiction of free will—the availability of the tree and the negative command that sets up the choice of whether to obey. An order could be followed or ignored. If they were puppets, no command would have been necessary. We see that even though the wife and husband were utterly dependent upon their creator for their lives, relationship, and continued sustenance, they chose to disobey. We see their free will was real and not an illusion. Although no term for sin is used in the story, we

can extrapolate the definition of sinning from this ancient drama: it means to disobey.

Their freely chosen move to disobey the command of their benefactor led to consequences, but not the immediate execution threatened by YHWH (“for in the day that you eat of it you shall die”). Instead, the immediate result was shame, and, as YHWH announces when he encounters them later, hard toil and suffering in raising crops and children. These will be unpacked below. Here also we find the first depiction of YHWH's mercy. They did not die that day, they lived on to give life to “all the living.” Neither, as the story continues to show, were they or their descendants separated from their creator. God followed up with them—YHWH continued to happen to them, encounter and speak to them and their descendants regularly and consistently. That's the biblical story!

No, instead of death, the husband gave his wife a new name, “Life” (Hebrew *Havah*, Eve), “because she was the mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20). Furthermore, YHWH made them clothing from animal skins (requiring bloodshed of innocent animals). And yet, they were out, exiled from the Garden! This foreshadows Israel's exile from their land of milk and honey. It does not mean that all people everywhere are born in sin, are tainted with sin, or are compelled to sin. Although Christian interpreters have tried to apply the story broadly to posit “a universal fall,” this story is more focused on Israel's ancestors and the parallel between the couple that started life in the Garden and Israel gaining, then losing, their land. When we do apply it broadly, it is clear that the man and woman chose to sin though they did not have to. And so it is with us.

All this happened to the new people *before* any children were born to them. YHWH's address to the not-yet mother in the middle of the story—Gen 3:16—foreshadows Eve's losses outside of the Garden of Delight (*Eden* means delight). Once her two sons were grown, she suffered the loss of both of them. Keep this in mind as we focus on this verse.

Genesis 3:16 has usually been viewed as the explanation for mothers' pain in childbirth, for husbands' dominating their wives, and for patriarchy's prevalence (male rule) in most cultures throughout time. Simply put, this is what *all* women get for the first woman's disobedience. Translations and interpretations that limit the meaning of 3:16a to labor and delivery miss the significance of YHWH's address, describing the sad consequences of disobedience. But Gen 3:16 represents much more, a longer view of family life and mothers' pain-love for their children. Although conception, pregnancy, and childbirth are certainly early aspects of producing progeny and parenting them, Gen 3:16a describes the ongoing pain involved in raising children throughout their lives.

Hebrew Terminology

Here is Gen 3:16 in my word-for-word translation of the Hebrew, following the order of the Hebrew words. After the initial statement,

“To the woman (*ha-issah*) he said,” the lines are numbered for ease of reference:

Line 1 Increasing I will increase
Line 2 your suffering and your conceptions.
Line 3 In suffering you will produce/parent (*yalad*) children
Line 4 and to your husband [is] your desire
Line 5 but he may rule you.

In the first line, “Increasing I will increase,” both Hebrew words, *harbah arbah*, are based on the verb *rabah*, “to make large numerically or great in prestige, riches, influence, knowledge, or years of life.” Repeating *rabah* in different forms intensifies the action of increasing or making great. The English translation could say, “I will indeed make very great your pain (and toil)” or “I will greatly increase . . . your toil/suffering (*esev*) and your conceptions (*heron*).” Imagine the character of YHWH shouting, “I will really, really, really intensify your suffering (or toil) and the numbers of your conceptions!” *Rabah* can also be used as an adverb and adjective to mean, “very much, great, large, learned, honorable.”

In line two, God first mentions the increase of the woman’s *‘issabon* (the reverse apostrophe represents a Hebrew letter with no English equivalent), a noun (*esev*) formed from a verbal root meaning “to distress, upset, grieve.” Carol Meyers points out that the verb is used in fifteen places, and, in fourteen, it refers “to psychological or emotional discomfort, not to physical pain” (104–5).² Meyers prefers the translation “travail” because of the near association of the description of the man’s hard physical labor immediately following. The hardness of their future lot in life will be physical, emotional, and mental (107–9). “Travail” or “hard toil” are also good translations of *esev*.

The announcement that YHWH would *increase* the woman’s suffering/toil and number of conceptions assumes these would have been part of her life, but to a lesser degree, had she not disobeyed. She was meant to be her husband’s partner in caring for the orchard—the Garden of Eden—but now, along with farm work with him outside of the Garden, the suffering and toil of her pregnancies and child-raising would also increase.

Furthermore, the English translations of Gen 3:16a that say that YHWH planned to increase her “pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children” (NRSV), must be revised because of the meaning of *heron* (“conception”) and *yalad* (“beget, parent, raise children”). Although it may seem natural to many interpreters that the passage intended to explain the origins of the pain of labor and delivery, the increased toil/suffering is not about the hours of labor and delivery only. A survey of the use of *heron* throughout the Hebrew Bible demonstrates that it does not mean “childbirth, childbearing” but “conception, pregnancy” (e.g., Jer 20:17); that is, the initiation of pregnancy, not its end stage. Thus, as noted above, “conceptions” or “pregnancies” is the correct translation of *heron*, the number of which YHWH will greatly increase along with her suffering. Here *heron* is a possessive plural noun, “your” (the woman’s) conceptions or pregnancies. Their number will be increased greatly over what they would have been.

The suffering involved in raising the children who result from these numerous conceptions will also be increased—line three. *Yalad*, used here of the woman, is also used for fathers begetting sons in all biblical

genealogies. The term cannot be confined to women’s experience of childbirth; fathers also *yalad* children. This future mother will bring up many children with hard work and suffering and will raise them to adulthood and know and love them as long as they live.³

Now we will examine the second part of the consequences to the woman clause, YHWH’s words to the wife before she was named Eve and before she became a mother, Gen 3:16b. Throughout history, husbands have “ruled” wives, and patriarchy has subjected women and children, realities well-known to the producers of Genesis and to the rest of us. Nonetheless, God’s description here is of the possibility—the potentiality of this woman’s husband ruling her, even though she desires to do the same. Genesis 3:16b refers to a power struggle, as exemplified not only by the Hebrew text of this verse, but also through its parallel in Gen 4:7 where YHWH warns Cain that sin’s desire is for him—to rule him: “And for your husband [is] your desire, but he may be able to rule you.”

In the first clause, there is no verb meaning “is” or “will be.” Hebrew works like this; when there is no verb, a being verb must be supplied and usually it is the present tense “is.” The verb in the second clause, “rule, dominate,” is in a grammatical form called “imperfect,” sometimes translated into English as a future-tense verb because it is not confined to the past or present. It describes an unfixed, potential situation: may or will be able to, possible but not determined. (It is certainly not an imperative for which the English would use “must, shall, will.”) In some contexts, “will” works for the imperfect, but not for this one, because “will” in English suggests this is a prediction or even a prescription: “This is the fate for both of you!” But the Hebrew imperfect does not indicate a fixed, prescribed situation. It is not commanded, imperative, required, nor destined for the husband to rule the wife. It is an unfortunate possibility. Their disobedience led to a shift from harmony to struggle.⁴

Genesis 4:7 as a Parallel

We have only to look a bit further in the story to another address by YHWH to a human that provides insight to the meaning of this one. The structure (order of words, tenses of verbs) of Gen 4:7, YHWH’s intervention with Cain, is exactly the same as Gen 3:16b—a parallel. This happened not *after* Cain sinned, but *before*. Abel had followed his older brother in sacrificing to YHWH by offering the best parts of his flocks, while Cain had offered the produce he had cultivated from the ground. YHWH regarded Abel’s offering, but not Cain’s. Cain was very angry and his face fell (Gen 4:3–6). YHWH noticed this and confronted Cain, giving him the chance to consider his options and reminding him that he could rule over the sin that sought to rule him.

Genesis 4:7 reads as follows, with its second half given in Hebrew word order and with numbered lines: “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door. . . .”

Line 1 And for you [is] its (sin’s) desire
Line 2 but you may rule it (sin).

Again, this is exactly the same construction and word order as Gen 3:16b. The subjects and objects (here they are all pronouns) are different. YHWH was informing Cain that he could rule over sin, in spite of its desire to rule over him. Recall Gen 3:16b.

And for your husband [is] your desire
but he may rule you. (the husband could rule the wife)

As we know, Cain did not rule sin. Sin ruled him; it desired him and overcame him. Cain could have ruled over sin and suppressed his anger, but instead he killed his brother in spite of YHWH's direct intervention to inform and warn him. Cain met God but ignored God's advice, so "in spite" can be the more serious way, "spiting YHWH (by ignoring divine intervention), Cain killed his brother."

Thus, "rule" must be considered potential in both cases—a negative option for the husband in Gen 3:16 and for Cain in Gen 4:7. Although many commentators assume the wife's desire for her husband was sexual or her desire subjugated her to him in general and to his sexual advances in particular, given the context it is likely that her desire was to rule him, just as sin's desire was to rule Cain. Sin's desire for Cain was hardly sexual nor did sin seek to please or serve him—sin personified wanted to control him. Although I recognize the different context allows for differences in meaning (Gen 3:16a was about children), at the very least, a struggle for domination must be considered a strong possibility for interpreting Gen 3:16b. Their oneness and harmony had been affected by their mutual choice to disobey YHWH.

Genesis 3 is a picture of loss, and 3:16b, as further illuminated by Gen 4:7, indicates the loss of the intimacy and harmony the first married couple had enjoyed before they ate. After eating, they first felt shame, an entirely new concept (Gen 2:25, 3:7). Then, when questioned by YHWH, they practiced blame (Gen 3:12–13). Then, as YHWH turned from the serpent to the woman in announcing the results of their failures, he said the husband and wife would seek to control one another, with the husband typically being able to do this. Both scenes, one in and one out of the Garden, are part of the same story and have the same speaker, YHWH, who shaped the man, then the woman, and later opened her womb so that she would say, "I have acquired (*kayin*, hence "Cain") a man with the help of YHWH" (Gen 4:1).

Thus, in my view, just as God's words of warning perceived a struggle for dominance between Cain and sin in Gen 4:7, in Gen 3:16b God's address to the woman pronounced the same between herself and her husband. While still in the Garden, the couple (and the serpent) heard God's judgments regarding what awaited them in the future. The once harmonious partnership between husband and wife would now include struggle for rule. These few words, even fewer in Hebrew, announce the beginning of an adversarial relationship between the wife and the husband, along with the difficulties, hard work, and suffering they will experience in tilling the ground, and in producing and raising a family.

Consider the other stories and metaphors about mothers' desperate pain-love in Scripture: Hagar (Gen 16, 21), Sarah (Gen 21), Rizpah (2 Sam 1:1–14), Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:16–25 and 1 Kgs 1), "Rachel weeping for her children" (Jer 31:15, Matt 2:8), and Mary at the crucifixion of her son (John 19:25–27).

Conclusion

Receivers of Scripture have always attempted to apply its stories to themselves and their own conditions, relationships, and observations about individuals, families, communities, and historical trajectories. And well we should. We recognize that throughout time both mothers

and fathers endure the hard work and suffering involved in survival, gaining sustenance from the ground and its crops, feeding their families, and negotiating relationships with each other and with their children.

Mothers and fathers both know the pain-love of raising children that lasts throughout their lives. Parents are vulnerable to pain *because* of their love. Mothers, whose babies' cells remain in their inner organs for decades, whose bodies are forever changed by carrying their children, feel this uniquely. But fathers, of course, also experience great love for their children. Nonetheless, Gen 3:16 represents YHWH speaking to the first woman, who became the mother of all the living. Genesis 3:16–19 differentiates the consequences for the man and woman; they are not identical, but both involve suffering.

We also know well the struggles for control and influence between wives and husbands and the lack of equality in many male-female relationships. Unfortunately, this passage has often been used to promote that inequality, providing excuses for hierarchy and too often, abuse. Instead, it could and should be used to promote equality in relationships between wives and husbands, mothers and fathers, and females and males; equality, not identity.

Notes

1. God is always called *YHWH Elohim* (Eng. "the LORD God") in Gen 2:4b–4:24.
2. Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford University Press, 1988).
3. Paraphrasing Meyers (91, 101–2, 106): Hebrew contains a well-developed semantic field of birth language that includes words for different stages of reproduction: Conception (*heron*), pregnancy (also *heron*), and childbirth (*yald* has a range of meanings related to reproduction and raising of offspring). Although *heron* is translated as "childbirth" here by many English translators, it is indicative of conception and the continued pregnancy, not labor and delivery leading to birth. Thus, *heron* means the initiation of pregnancy rather than with its duration or conclusion. Again, "in its verbal form, the word regularly means to become pregnant, that is, 'to conceive,' rather than 'to be pregnant.' Used in close association with words for intercourse, it does not refer to the sexual act itself but indicates the physiological condition that was the desired result of intercourse in Israelite society" (102). In the second line of 3:16a, *yld* is also a general term for having children, applied to either or both parents. The verb is used transitively, meaning that "it refers to the status of parenthood" (106).
4. An imperative would denote that it shall or must be so; but this is the imperfect—not past, not present, but tenseless, implying possibility: "But he will be able to or he may master you."



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