



## Women in the Bible

### Theme: Family

Genesis 3, 1 Timothy 2:8-15

A common theme throughout the texts we have read in this course is the question of family. Who has power in the family system? How does a family perpetuate itself? What values do we see lived out within the families of the biblical figures?

#### Family and Mortality in the Garden

The story of Adam and Eve after they eat from the tree of knowledge is the working out of mortality in creation. God initially commands Adam: "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:17). But Adam and Eve do not literally die on the day they eat the fruit. Instead, God shows the consequences of their actions. In so doing, God explains for the first time how man and woman will relate to each other and how they will inhabit their respective roles.

First, the snake will be cursed among the animals and crawl on its belly. In the ancient world, snakes were often a symbol of wisdom and even immortality. This may have come from their ability to self-regenerate; after all, snakes shed their old skin and appear to step into a brand-new body. It was not until long after the New Testament was finished that people began reading the snake in Genesis 3 as the devil or any force of evil at all. Within the text itself, the snake is the craftiest of the wild animals (Gen 3:1) but not anything more powerful than that.

The woman, in turn, will face harsher pain in childbirth, and her husband will rule over her. Her "curse" implies at least three things:

1. Childbirth existed, at least in concept, before their disobedience.
2. That process was originally painful but not as much as it is now.
3. A husband did not originally have authority over his wife.

Finally, the man's curse extends beyond his own body. "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life" (Gen 3:17). Before, food was going to be easy to come by, but now humanity will have to work to sustain itself.

Dr. Vayntrub suggests that this story is less about the prescribing of gender roles and more about the process of humans – and even the snake – discovering their mortality. The serpent has been moved closer to the ground. (The Hebrew word for “ground” here is *erets*, which can also be a reference to the underworld.) The woman’s ability to regenerate in procreation is connected to her mortality. Her ability to give life is also something to which she is subjugated; it may even kill her.

The curse of mortality is explicitly given to Adam. “You are dust, and to dust you shall return,” says God (Gen 3:19). A man’s fertility comes from coaxing food out of the ground. The food that sustains them comes from that place of their final resting. Like the woman, the man is subjugated to the very work that gives him life.

### Saved through Childbearing

The link between mortality and family continues in the New Testament, though in a different way. Mortality is not the fact of death as much as it is the threat of *eternal* death, without the salvation of Jesus Christ. The First Letter to Timothy explains: “Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty” (1 Tim 2:14).

In this passage, “the woman” is, at first, Eve. In the second sentence, though, “she” refers to all women. (Note that in Greek, the word for wife is the same as the word for woman, which makes a woman’s identity inextricable from her role as wife.) The author of 1 Timothy understands Eve’s mistakes to apply to all women. Similarly, many early Christians understood the mistakes of Adam to apply to all men, where “men” includes all of humanity. This idea is later developed into the doctrine of Original Sin.

What does it mean that women are “saved through” childbearing? This seems to be a different model of salvation than Paul’s “justification by faith,” as found in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans. (Scholars do not agree on who wrote 1 Timothy, but most believe that it was written by someone working in the style of Paul rather than Paul himself. Ascribing one’s work to the name of a major figure was a common practice in the ancient world called pseudepigraphy.)

But if we return to Genesis 3 and the question of mortality, we see that perhaps women are “saved through” childbearing in the sense that this perpetuates their family. Only after Adam and Eve have left the garden – after they have received their death sentence – do they beget their children. Family, lineage, and inheritance and therefore inextricable from the question of mortality.

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