

## **EVE – THE FIRST FEMINIST: JOHN MILTON'S MIDRASH ON GENESIS 3:6**

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It is amazing that possibly the most important event in the history of mankind is related by the Torah in one curt, choppy verse: *So the woman, seeing that the tree was good for meat, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to get knowledge, took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also (gam) to her husband with her (imah), and he did eat* (Geneva Bible, 1564, Gen. 3:6).

However, the verse *is* fraught with ambiguity and implies a hiatus. The ambiguity rises from the use of both the word *gam* (also) and the word *imah* (with her). Each can indicate that Adam was right there alongside Eve when she ate the forbidden fruit and gave it to him to eat. Is there a troublesome superfluous word here needing exegesis? Is the addition of *imah* merely an intensive? Or does it hint at a different connotation?<sup>1</sup> To state the problem in other words: Was Adam alongside Eve and the Serpent when she ate the fruit, as reported in Genesis 3:6? If he was not there but was induced by Eve only later to eat with her, where was he and why? John Milton endeavors to answer these questions by composing what might be called a narrative midrash in Book ix of his *Paradise Lost* and along the way conveys a surprising characterization of Mother Eve.

John Milton (1608-1674) was a devout Puritan, with a deep respect for the Hebrew Bible which he learned to read in the original language at Cambridge University. Apparently Milton was what we would call a "peshat" reader of the text. Harris Fletcher in his *Milton's Rabbinical Readings* reports that he objected to commentators' designation of *keri* readings of the text (words spelled one way but read differently), insisting "that the text is sacred and can say what it pleases."<sup>2</sup> Milton had at hand the Buxtorf Bible, a Calvinist publication (Basel, 1618-19), which was not a translation, but the masoretic text of the Tanakh printed on the page in a central column flanked by Rashi's com-

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mentary on the spine-side and that of Ibn Ezra on the page-edge. Elsewhere in this volume, Buxtorf compiled commentaries by other medieval Jewish exegetes. Harris Fletcher mentions the hundreds of times that Milton evidently had recourse to these commentaries, especially that of Rashi, in the period when he wrote polemical essays on a number of subjects, like *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643).<sup>3</sup>

After years of writing poems and polemical essays, Milton began to search for a subject of breadth and significance worthy to be an epic poem, emulating his beloved classical epic poets, Homer and Virgil. He rejected subjects merely national, like King Arthur and his Round Table, finally latching onto that

Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit,  
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe  
With loss of *Eden*

— a project that was to grow into *Paradise Lost*, 10,565 lines, divided into twelve so-called "Books," of which the quotation above is the opening (I. 1-4). It was published in 1667.

Obviously, a knowledge of the Hebrew text of Genesis was essential. It is not difficult to imagine that he paid particular attention to Genesis 3:6. Here was a précis of what his epic was to be all about. The Buxtorf Bible provided him with both text and commentaries on the ambiguity and hiatus in Genesis 3:6. Writes Fletcher, "Several details, more or less minute in Rashi, have been elaborated by Milton into large and important portions of the poem."<sup>4</sup> But it was more likely that Rabbi David Kimḥi (acronym "Radak") offered more to the poet than Rashi did. Milton held Kimḥi "in highest respect."<sup>5</sup> Kimḥi's commentary gave Milton the clues from which to develop his midrash:

Afterwards, she gave [the fruit] to her husband, who was at one of the [other] places in the Garden, and brought to him from the fruit and informed him of the words of the serpent, and they [Eve and Adam] ate together. That it [the text, Kimḥi continues] says *imah* – thus it is that she ate twice and Adam once [emphasis mine].

For Milton, these are clarifications of the inherent ambiguities in the sacred text of Genesis 3:6 and also hints at perceiving what today could be called the feminism of Eve.

The first indication of the beginning of Eve's self-revaluation comes at line 214 of Book ix of *Paradise Lost*, where Eve proposes to her husband:

Let us divide our labors, thou where choice  
Leads thee, . . . while I  
In yonder Spring of Roses intermixt  
With Myrtle, find what to redress till Noon... (IX. 214-20)

Independence is what she craves.<sup>6</sup>

Adam does not agree. His argument is twofold: He praises her for the suggestion to divide their labors and thus do more of the work the Lord requires of them in the Garden, but still,

Nothing lovelier can be found  
In Woman, than to study household good,  
And good works in her Husband to promote. (IX. 232-4)

He expounds, however, upon a stronger reason for refusal than this litany of Woman's place in the marital union. Adam had been warned by a heaven-sent messenger (he tells Eve) that there is a subtle danger abroad,

Envyng our happiness, and of his own  
Despairing, seeks to work us woe or shame  
By sly assault . . . (IX. 254-6)

At this Eve bridles. She agrees that such an enemy may be wandering about in Eden with evil intent,

But that thou shouldst my firmness therefore doubt  
To God or thee, because we have a foe  
May tempt it, I expected not to hear. (IX. 279-81)

She argues that "Faith, Love, Virtue unassay'd [untested]" are meaningless (IX. 334-5). Not only independence, but respect, is what Eve craves. Ultimately, Adam relents – with misgiving, however. And so, after this first tiff of their married life, Eve goes off to her destined disobedience, as told in Genesis 3:6.

There is one more element in this verse that Milton decides he must deal with in his midrashic narrative: That the fruit is physically attractive to the sight and luscious to the taste is obvious, but the verse tells us that Eve found

the tree *a tree to be desired to get knowledge (le-haskil – knowledge in the Geneva Bible; wisdom in JPS, 1985)*. The very word in the thought of a woman in Milton's seventeenth century sounds anomalous, and is further evidence of Eve's feminism. Indeed, it forms the major part of a soliloquy Milton composed for his character. Eve realizes she faces a dilemma:

But to *Adam* in what sort  
 Shall I appear? shall I make known  
 As yet my change, and give him to partake  
 Full happiness with mee [*sic*], or rather not,  
 But keep the odds of Knowledge in my power  
 Without Copartner? so to add what wants  
 In Female Sex, the more to draw his Love,  
 And render me more equal and perhaps  
 A thing not undesirable, sometime  
 Superior: for inferior who is free? (IX. 816-25)

Concepts like these and the very vocabulary referring to woman's equality and inequality – and, more extreme than that, "superiority," will not be heard publicly until the twentieth century. But there it is in the Bible, the term *le-haskil*, the reach for Knowledge that leads to all else. It is a legacy that Mother Eve left to all her daughters so that one day women will be great scholars, CEO's of banks and corporations, and prime ministers of nations old and young.

There is, in Eve's mind, another side to her dilemma. As Milton conceives of it in his midrash, she loves her Adam. What if the Serpent in one respect is wrong?

And Death ensue, then I shall be no more,  
 And Adam wedded to another *Eve*,  
 And live with her enjoying, I extinct;  
 A death to think. (IX. 830-31)

(It should be noted that these lines of Eve's soliloquy are a virtual translation of Rashi's comment on Genesis 3:6.) And so Eve comes to a decision in her dilemma: "Confirmed then, I resolve / *Adam* shall share with me in bliss or woe" (IX. 831-2).

Meanwhile, in Milton's midrash, Adam was weaving his own legacy to his sons in eons to come, even though he didn't know it. Although his foreboding

upset him, he persisted nevertheless to atone for the argument he had had with Eve. Regardless of who was right or wrong, he was hoping to make amends. While waiting for her to appear, he "wove / of choicest Flow'rs a Garland to adorn / Her Tresses. . ." (IX. 839-41) – so in long-after days, the husband will make amends by offering a bouquet of flowers to his wife. Joy envelops him when Eve appears, and immediately, enthusiastically, she gushes out her meeting the Serpent and the consequences accounted in Genesis 3:6. Adam is dismayed. "From his slack hand the Garland wreath for Eve / Down dropp'd" (IX. 892-3), and he intones: "How art thou lost, how art on a sudden lost. . ." (IX. 900). Now he faces his own dilemma: Should he say to Eve that he enjoyed her company, et cetera, but that the time has come to part? Or shall he disobey God Himself by eating the fruit she proffers? Finally, he chooses:

The Link of Nature draw[s] me: Flesh of Flesh  
 Bone of my Bone thou art, and from thy State  
 Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe. (IX. 914-16)

— the last lines of which Milton selectively quoted from Adam's words upon seeing Eve for the first time (Gen. 2:23). The very last words echo the last words of Eve's soliloquy. And Adam eats the fruit that Eve hands to him.

Thus Milton, with Radak's aid, completes his midrash on Genesis 3:6. The ambiguities are explicated, the hiatus filled, and Eve emerges as a feminist.

However, Milton's midrash includes an epilogue. There's another side to feminism which he faces in Book X of *Paradise Lost*. The only biblical ambiguity he seems to explain is in the verse: *Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden* (Gen. 3:23, trans. Geneva Bible). *Vayeshallehehu* is singular, which Milton cannot accept as exile for Adam alone. He explicated the word as evidently referring to both Adam and Eve, as *one flesh* (Gen. 2:24).

In Book X, Adam experiences paroxysms of guilt for disobeying God Himself, despair over being the father of an imperfect race of human beings for eternity, and angry wonderment why God gave him Eve – a "fair Defect"<sup>7</sup> – to betray him. He turns on Eve: "Out of my sight, thou Serpent, that name best / Befits thee" (X. 867-8).

Eve, on her part, having eaten the forbidden fruit, had acquired her own Wisdom. She understands her husband's feeling of helplessness. Eve resolves

to preserve her marriage – after all the Bible does say that *Man clings to his wife and they become one flesh* (Gen. 2:24). So she adopts a strategy of humility. She falls "humble" at his feet and pleads:

Forsake me not thus, *Adam*, witness Heav'n  
 What love sincere, and reverence in my heart  
 I bear thee. (X. 914-6)

As a "suppliant", she grasps his knees and admits her guilt. "Fault / Acknowledg'd and deplor'd, in *Adam* wrought / Commiseration; Soon his heart relented toward her." (X. 938-40). Milton, I think, is not suggesting as part of Eve's feminist legacy to her infinite daughters that Woman should always use a strategy of humility. Rather, his midrash illustrates the necessity of strategies in marriage.<sup>8</sup> When in his narrative he describes the moment of exile, Milton imagines:

They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow  
 Through *Eden* took their solitary way. (XII. 648-9)

#### NOTES

1. The new Jewish Publication Society edition of 1985 avoids the danger of ambiguity by blithely refraining from translating the word *imah* altogether: *She also gave some to her husband and he ate*.
2. Harris Francis Fletcher, *Milton's Rabbinical Readings*. (New York: Gordian Press, 1967) p.30.
3. See Fletcher, throughout and the reproduction of a page of the Buxtorf Bible at p. 59.
4. Fletcher p. 207.
5. Fletcher, p. 65.
6. *Ariel's Exegesis: A Reinterpretation of Genesis 2-3*. <http://arielsexegesis.wordpress.com>. Quotations from *Paradise Lost* in this article are from the second ed. of 1674; see facsimile title page (p. lvi) in the Merritt Y. Hughes ed. of the poem cited in note 8 below.
7. See Robert S. Jungman, "Eve as 'Fair Defect' Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book X", *Explicator* 65 (Summer 2007) pp.2-3.
8. In his own life, Milton's wife left him for a few years, but returned to him and built a normal family life. See: Merritt Y. Hughes, ed. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1935), Chronology. under year 1642.