



Jo Ann Davidson*

We have lingered long within the first three chapters of Genesis. First, we paused in wonder at the “crowning act”

of God’s creation—Eve. Her appearance in Genesis 2, along with Adam’s enthusiastic reaction, highlights the glorious perfection of God’s creation. Thus, the sudden appearance in Genesis 3 of the sly serpent, who insinuates that the woman shouldn’t be so trusting of God’s instructions, abruptly signals that, even before Eve and Adam sin, God has an adversary.¹

Last time we pondered the costliness of salvation and hints in the Genesis text that God’s salvific initiative commenced the very day of the Fall. This time we pause at the three punishments that God pronounced that fateful day, one each to the snake, the woman, and the man. As Jerome Walsh describes it:

“Each decree imposes two punishments, one involving an essential life function, the other a relationship. The snake is cursed in his mode of loco-

The Problematic Judgment on Eve

motion—simply to move from one place to another will require groveling. He is punished too in regard to the women whom he misled: the relationship of

trust he so painstakingly effected will become undying enmity.”²

God also addresses Adam and Eve, “passing sentence” on each separately. Here, let’s examine the divine judgment on Eve, the more problematic. Too often Genesis 3:16 has been used to argue that women are suspect because of Eve’s succumbing to the serpent’s subtle enticements.

“And of course the more Eve is identified as the source of sin, the more urgent becomes the need to control, subdue, and dominate her. Eve is seen as representative of her sex, and thus all women are regarded as requiring subjugation to wiser

*Jo Ann Davidson is a wife, mother, and Assistant Professor of Theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

and superior male figures.”³

Is this what Genesis 3:16 is really implying?

Certainly, what God is declaring here is of utmost importance. The poetic language used heightens the intensity of the communication.⁴ As God speaks, we become aware that sin has changed *everything*. Whereas on the sixth day of creation, God pronounced equality between Adam and Eve (“Let Us make man in Our image. . . let *them* have dominion” (Gen. 1:26, NKJV),** He now says to Eve: “Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (chap 3:16, KJV).

This sentence rankles modern feminists who (after centuries of masculine oppression) now refuse any semblance of male domination. Moreover, Genesis 3:16 is often understood to mean that all men are to rule over all women. However, the text speaks solely of the husband/wife relationship. God speaks to Eve of her husband—“your man” in the Hebrew.

Ellen White comments:

“Eve was told of the sorrow and pain that must henceforth be her portion. And the Lord said, ‘Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.’ In the creation God had make her the *equal of Adam*. Had they remained obedient to God—in harmony with His great law of love—they would have ever been in harmony with each other; but sin

had brought discord, and now their union could be maintained and harmony preserved only by submission on the part of the one or the other. Eve had been the first in transgression; and she had fallen into temptation by separating from her companion, contrary to the divine direction. It was by her solicitation that Adam sinned, and she was now placed in subjection to her husband.”⁵

Yes, Genesis 3:16 announces unequivocally that the husband is to “rule the roost,” a most unwelcome pronouncement in this 20th century. So what do we do with it? Deny it? Accept it uncritically? I think the best approach is to seek understanding of what God means by “rulership.” What man generally means may not be what God had in mind, as Ellen White hints:

“Had the principles enjoined in the law of God been cherished by the fallen race, this sentence [to Eve], though growing out of the results of sin, would have proved a blessing to them; but *man’s abuse of the supremacy thus given him has too often rendered the lot of woman very bitter, and made her life a burden.*”⁶

So the problem lies not in God’s judgment on Eve, but rather in a pervasive misconception of “rulership.” And because it was so very difficult for sinful minds to comprehend its meaning, God Himself came down to demonstrate it.

“You know that the rulers of the

Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matt. 20:25-28, emphasis added; see also Phil. 2:5-8).

I heard Alberta Mazat⁷ state this headship principle in contemporary idiom at a seminar: “It means, among other things, that the husband is the first to take out the garbage and the first to say ‘I’m sorry.’”

Not a popular position, to be sure. Feminists scorn male dominance in any form. Others misapply Genesis 3:16 by implying that because the husband is the head of the home, all women must be under the headship of men in the church. However, the truth lies somewhere between these two views. Genesis 3:16 is clear: as a result of sin, God has placed husbands in headship over their families (fully intending this arrangement to be a blessing to the family). Thus husbands are under obligation to exhibit the blessings of that divine headship.

Does this headship extend to the church family? Rather than applying the husband headship principle to church organization, the New Testament states that Christ is the head of the church. The prime analogy used

is not the family but the human body with its many parts functioning under the head, who is Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Ephesians 5:30; Galatians 3:28, 29, etc.).

Enough on Eve. Next time I want to introduce you to a modern “Mother in Israel” who attends our little country church in Eau Claire, Michigan. I may not be able to put you in the pew with her, but I’ll share some of the inspiration of her life. □

**Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible texts are taken from the New King James Version.

REFERENCES

¹A sudden shift of mood in Hebrew narrative indicates that a new matter is being probed.

²Jerome T. Walsh, “Genesis 2:4b-3:24: A Synchronic Approach,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 96, No. 2 (1977): 168.

³Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 75, 76.

⁴Hebrew poetry doesn’t rhyme and thus is not apparent in a translation unless indicated by a formatting distinct from that of prose. Poetic pronunciations of judgment are a significant characteristic of the Old Testament. Up to 40 percent of the Old Testament is couched in poetic language including all (even the harshest) of the major prophetic passages.

⁵Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1958), p. 58; emphasis added.

⁶_____, *The Adventist Home* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1952), p. 115, emphasis added.

⁷Author of *That Friday in Eden, Captivated by Love*, and *Questions You Have Asked About Sexuality*. Also, more importantly, my beloved mother.