In Loving Memory
of Myra Jean Kraker Worst
my very dear friend
and beloved late wife
of my husband John Worst

Sit tibi terra levis
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“Appreciation is a wonderful thing,” wrote Voltaire. “It makes what is excellent in others belong to us as well.”

How true these words are as I acknowledge my heartfelt appreciation for the professional excellence that I continue to experience at Baker Publishing Group. This excellence is not simply their own, but it belongs to me as well. Ours is a collaborative effort on every level and on every project. I’m sure this collaboration begins at the top of the organization, but for me the one who pulls everything together is Executive Editor Robert Hosack. His insights and efforts in bringing an idea to life and nurturing it from manuscript to bookshelf are commendable indeed.

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Regardless of this remarkable collaboration, my name alone, for better and for worse, appears on the cover, and thus I take full responsibility for its contents, including errors.
Introduction

What if there had been no story?
No Abraham and Sarah, no Isaac and Rebekah,
and no Esau and Jacob, and no Rachel and Leah.
What if no one had remembered?
What if no one had cared enough to write it down?
What if there had been no God of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel,
and the ten generations from Noah to Abraham had never existed?
What if there had been no creation and there was only chaos and the void?
What if God himself was only a hole in the darkness?
Anne Roiphe, Water from the Well

What if, indeed, there had been no story—no Bible that has brought balance and richness and spiritual direction to countless faithful through the ages? And where else in history or literature could we find such an assortment of colorful women as in the Bible? And where could we find women whose issues and aspirations are as contemporary as our own? From Eve to Phoebe and Priscilla, these women seek to understand and serve God and to deal with sin and personal struggles in their lives. It’s all in the Bible, whether anger, infertility, rape, incest, adultery, mental illness, marital problems, racism, sister

Ruth A. Tucker, Dynamic Women of the Bible
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rivalry—even idolatry and murder. Almost any problem we can imagine is found among these women in the pages of Scripture. But we also find joyful celebrations and ingenuity and quick wit and cooperation and courage and sacrificial ministry.

Some of these fascinating women in both the Old and the New Testaments are not even named. We know them only by a description or a feminine pronoun. She is buried in the book of Judges, this unnamed daughter of a man whose name is either mispronounced or misspelled or entirely forgotten. Her story is shocking. She is her daddy’s little girl—absolutely adored. Then in an insane set of circumstances her world is upended. Is she slain as a ritual sacrifice by her doting father, or is she forced into a lifetime of secluded celibacy? The text is unclear. Jephthah’s daughter, forever nameless, is just one of the captivating women in the Bible.

How we might wish the Bible came with footnotes expanding the stories and points of view of these female characters. But even the women who have become household names are barely known to us. That the Bible offers few biographical details, however, is not necessarily an obstacle to the one who wishes to draw inspiration and understanding from its pages. In fact, one might argue that the power of the text is often bolstered by its very brevity. The purpose of the writers, rather than to simply present biography, is to relate events or perhaps put forward beliefs and laws of behavior and worship. So we’re frustrated when we discover their profiles are so puny.

When I was growing up, we took the Bible seriously, and so it ought to be. But there is also a place for fun and even hilarity. If we don’t laugh with the writers of the Bible, we will surely cry because almost every book is soaked in blood and sadness. In fact, we join with generations of old who see right through the desolation into the very heart of humor. We imagine the patriarchs and their descendants sitting around campfires telling and retelling these same stories, sometimes slapping their knees and howling with laughter. So also women baking bread and drawing water reminding each other of Rebekah and Rachel and Rahab. What merriment these recollections would bring.

Women comprise a distinct minority—often a marginalized minority—in the biblical text. Of the some three thousand named Bible characters, fewer
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than 10 percent are women. But positioned as other, they play a key role. They are the ones who bring new blood into the family of God. Israelite men marry them. Such stalwarts as Esau, Judah, Moses, Boaz, and King David marry outsiders. The prophet Hosea marries a prostitute. Jesus interacted with a Samaritan as well as a Syrophoenician woman. And of course Jesus himself had outsider blood running through his veins. This only serves to make the women of the Bible approachable and authentic.

In addition to the down-to-earth reality of these women, their symbolic wallop is enormous. Eve is a case in point, as is Mary. Perhaps more than any other biblical characters, they are suffused with symbolism, particularly through the course of church history. But they are surely not alone. Sarah and Hagar and Lot’s wife are cited metaphorically by none other than Paul—and Jesus himself.

The individual in Scripture whose persona takes on the most striking symbolism is arguably Jezebel, rivaled only by Judas. In John’s Revelation, she is a prophet in Thyatira luring people into false religious beliefs, even as Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, rallied the prophets of Baal and lured the Israelites into false worship. Today referring to a woman as a jezebel carries obvious negative connotations. Other symbolic women have very positive connotations, as Job’s daughters do. In fact, there is an international youth organization named Job’s Daughters. Their website (www.jobsdaughtersinternational.org) explains the symbolic nature of the name: “Job’s Daughters is based on . . . Job 42:15, ‘And in all the land were no women found so fair as the Daughters of Job.’”

Job’s wife, on the other hand, symbolizes the lament summed up in one’s disappointment with God. “Curse God and die” are her most memorable words. The Proverbs 31 woman is a grand composite of the faithful and competent wife. The Song of Songs is packed full of symbolism depicting most notably a sexually alluring woman. Gomer is a prostitute who becomes a prophet’s wife, a striking metaphor of Israel’s unfaithfulness.

The New Testament is also rich in symbolism. Mary is the ultimate icon of purity. The woman of Sychar stands in for the seeking sinner set free. Richard Blanchard’s song lyrics of “Fill My Cup, Lord” speak for themselves. The first line is familiar: “Like the woman at the well I was seeking . . .”1 She, like Mary Magdalene, represents the fallen woman.
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Men, of course, are depicted similarly. Adam’s symbolic significance is immense as is Father Abraham’s. Joseph is a type of Christ. The patience of Job is a common figure of speech, and Judas represents the ultimate betrayal. In Sunday school when we sang “Dare to be a Daniel,” no one had to ask what being a Daniel meant. The prodigal son and the good Samaritan also stand as powerful symbols. Yet, for their numbers, women rank high in symbolism, and failure to recognize this richness diminishes any study of them.

Nevertheless, the symbolic dimension of these women must not be their defining measurement. In Eve we must see far more than a temptress who offered her husband forbidden fruit. Mary is more than a pregnant virgin. And both are far more than mothers, as some books on biblical women categorize them. They are complex women who deserve another look, despite the brevity of their stories.

As we peer into these fascinating lives, it helps when we exercise our imaginations and ask more questions than we answer. In fact, I often think it is helpful to steal a sentence from Spinoza (the eminent seventeenth-century philosopher). He writes that the purpose of the Bible “is not to convince the reason, but to attract and lay hold of the imagination.”

We will become ensnared in a dense thicket if we demand that everything we find in these pages pass the test of reason. Some things, pure and simple, just don’t make sense to a rational questioning mind. That’s okay. Such is not the purpose of Scripture.

Likewise, we ought to be wary of the kind of sermonizing that too easily simplifies and sterilizes these characters—sermonizing, for example, that pegs women like Mary and Martha as opposites who are easily categorized as personality types. Their lives, however, are full of joy and sorrow and perhaps boredom, consumed with daily activities involving family, friends, and neighbors. That they lived in a very different time and culture utterly foreign to what most of us experience is easily ignored.

Ruth A. Tucker, Dynamic Women of the Bible

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Cultural differences are truly vast. Today in the West, for example, women often choose not to marry or to delay pregnancy or forgo motherhood altogether. Those with infertility issues have medical and adoption options. Rarely are they defined by their barrenness, as was often true in biblical times. Imagine defining Oprah by her lack of children. But in the Palestine of three thousand years ago, she would have been perceived in a very different light.

Unlike their male counterparts, women of the Bible, with the exception of the Virgin Mary, are rarely associated with incredible miracles or fantastic feats. No woman builds an ark and then packs it full of animals. No woman calls down plagues on whole populations, nor does she command the waters of the Red Sea or the Jordan River to separate for easy passage. No woman kills a giant with a slingshot and a stone. For her, the sun does not stand still. No woman is ever swallowed by a big fish, nor does she even snatch a coin from the mouth of an ordinary-sized fish to pay taxes.

Nevertheless, while the circumstances surrounding these women typically relate to domestic life, their stories are no less interesting than those of their male counterparts. True, their wombs are opened by God, including the jaw-dropping instance when Sarah becomes pregnant in her old age. But for the most part, because of their very ordinariness, the women are often easier to relate to than the men in the Bible.

That is not to say that the Bible, even when it focuses on women, is easy to understand. There are countless questions that arise as we read through the text. How do Adam and Eve fit into the scheme of prehistoric humanity? Was there no evil in this world before Eve reached for and then ate the forbidden fruit? How could Adam have lived nearly a thousand years? Did Sarah actually give birth in her nineties? For the inquisitive reader, the issues are almost endless. The simplest response is that the Bible is a sacred book loaded with miracles and mysteries. But many readers want more-specific and concrete answers. This volume does not address these matters, thoughtful and valid though they may be. We leave these issues to experts, while here we embrace the mystery.

This book is ideally read in small groups, where there is greater opportunity for interaction and understanding. But some may say: we need an expert. We need a scholarly Bible teacher. Perhaps. But biblical experts
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often disagree among themselves. A group setting offers an opportunity to ask questions and stimulate thinking. “Questions to Think About” conclude each chapter, some serious, some more frivolous and fun.

If I were in a book group studying this volume, I would welcome points of view that differ from my own. And I would be eager for someone to challenge my own perspective. As a college and seminary professor for some three decades, I have learned to love the lively discussions in class and the wide-ranging points of view. I can only hope such would be the atmosphere among groups digging into this presentation of biblical women.

I seek to avoid making these women over into my own image, but I do recognize my own subjectivity. We all must take care not to fall into this temptation. Deep down we unconsciously remake them, if not in our own image, then into our ideal portrait of what a woman should be. I want to shout: Leave them alone! Rahab is a prostitute. Get over it! We must take her as she is. No matter how hard we try, we simply cannot remake her into a virtuous massage therapist.

So also with many other biblical women. Poor Mary. She has suffered the most. From the early centuries to the present, she has been idealized as the perpetual virgin fossilized into a saintly statue or, if not that, the definitive model of a perfect submissive woman. We will see that she was a sturdy, strong-willed, small-town girl who seamlessly developed into a respected Jewish matriarch. We seek to imagine her not as a saint but rather as a neighbor who might be sharing a recipe for stew or giving us some tips on keeping the tomato hornworm at bay.

We imagine best what we know. My imagination, like all imaginations, arises out of my own worldview, one formed in the northern Wisconsin farming community in which I was raised, never far away from the country church on the corner of County H and Lewis Road. My worldview has been stretched by such diverse cultures as those found in East Texas; Newark,
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New Jersey; Crown Point, Indiana; Kijabe, Kenya; Moscow; and Singapore, places where I set up temporary residence. For twenty-eight years, I made my home in an integrated neighborhood in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and after that in a nearby river-rat neighborhood on a floodplain in Comstock Park, where I am writing today. Add to that a slew of Asian, African, and Latino students, and you might think I am a model of diversity. Far from it. Open these pages, and a white middle-class woman is writing every line.

I long to be truly multicultural. Indeed, how many times have I popped in next door to weep my pain in Claretha’s arms and sit at her kitchen table eating ribs and fried chicken? I have loved her as I’ve loved no other neighbor in my entire life. But there is no way I can enter into her worldview or that of any other black women transplanted from Mississippi, and surely not Kenyan or Korean women. So it is left up to other writers to situate these women in settings that are even closer to biblical cultures than mine is. May this book then be one that spawns many such volumes, each with its own cultural flair.

When my editor initially proposed this project to me, my first reaction was: Is there a need for another book on women in the Bible? Enough already! But then I began perusing what is available, and I found mainly fictional volumes or profile overviews (mostly A–Z) that left me wondering and wanting. The truth is, I’m still wondering and wanting, but I have come to appreciate these women as I never have before. What incredibly fascinating individuals they are. Why hadn’t I long ago dug deeper into their lives?

So as we unleash our imaginations and begin this journey by considering the reality as well as the symbolic nature of biblical women, let us get

Annie Dillard and the Art of Biblical Imagination

A blur of romance clings to our notions of “publicans,” “sinners,” “the poor,” “the people in the marketplace,” “our neighbors,” as though of course God should reveal himself, if at all, to these simple people, these Sunday school watercolor figures, who are so purely themselves in their tattered robes, who are single in themselves, while we now are various, complex, and full at heart. Yet, some have imagined well, with honesty and art, the detail of such a life, and have described it with such grace, that we mistake vision for history, dream for description, and fancy that life has devolved.

Annie Dillard, Holy the Firm, quoted in Pilgrim Souls

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ready for the ride of our lives. We must never be fooled, however, by as-
suming we truly understand them. We hardly know our own selves. How
can we possibly know these elusive women of millennia past? All we can
do is to invite them to live again and be ever grateful for the enrichment
they bring to our lives.

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” . . . She is
clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come. . . .
Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her
praise at the city gate.9
If I were an accomplished portrait artist, my primary subject would be Eve. I would set my pastels aside and paint her in living color. My painting would never be mistaken for one by the great sixteenth-century artist Lucas Cranach, whose Eve is a thin, flat-chested, demure Caucasian lady offering Adam an apple. My Eve, rather, is a robust and voluptuous black woman with toned arms. She has unblemished ebony skin with a sheen that glistens in the sun filtering through the tropical rainforest. She is lying on a bed of moss, attired only in flowering hibiscus and ferns, her long legs and breasts partially exposed. Her hair is lush, her lips full and slightly parted, her eyes sparkling, her head tilted. The expression on her face is one of bemusement as much as utter contentment.

Eve is typically depicted in art and defined in commentaries by her sin—her one-time fall from grace. I look back on my own life and can easily enumerate temptations to which I have succumbed. How would I feel if the most egregious of these sins were what defined who I am? I understand such defining of individuals like Susan Smith, who is remembered—if remembered at all—for her crime of drowning her two young sons. But
Eve? Really? She was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, the Bible says, and she ate the fruit and urged Adam to sample it as well. Sure, she disobeyed God’s clear commandment. But haven’t I also, even more blatantly than did Eve?

Eve’s persona is ever so scantily revealed in Scripture. Although there are more books featuring her than any other biblical woman aside from Mary the mother of Jesus, her story commands very little space in the canon. She is featured in less than two full chapters of Genesis (2:22–4:2, 4:25). Yet Eve grabs our imaginations. She’s inquisitive and feisty as the woman who stands forever as the mother of us all.

Noah’s wife has an entirely different role to play, but in a very significant sense, she too is the mother of us all. In fact, she is the only woman in the Bible besides Eve who could be considered as such.

Eve: Mother of All Living

Like Adam, weeks or months earlier, Eve had awakened to an environment that must have seemed both strange and natural. She is seeing and breathing and smelling for the first time. A baby breathes and begins to smell and see things as weeks pass. Sitting, walking, talking, and understanding come much later. Was Eve created with a capacity for all adult aptitudes? Did she naturally stand up and walk about? Did she greet Adam as though he were an acquaintance or friend? Or was she fearful or shy? Any attempt to re-create Eve’s first moments of life is, of course, purely speculative.
Eve and Noah's Wife

But if she is to have meaning for our own lives, we are well served by a questioning imagination.

Eve has no way of knowing that she had been formed out of this man-creature’s rib. Nor would she have had any means of fully understanding, even if she did indeed hear him say, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” All the text reveals about her is that she was naked and she saw him naked and she did not even blush.

Time passes—a day, a week, a month, a year or more—and Eve finds herself in the company of a snake. It apparently doesn’t occur to her to shriek. She has no fear nor, for that matter, surprise when the snake asks her a question. Only curiosity. How was she to know that snakes don’t talk? And, of course, this was no ordinary snake. This “serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made.” His question is straightforward, while at the same time shading the truth: “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

For anyone who is tracking only the verses about Eve, the question makes no sense. There are only two verses between her creation and this question. Say what? might have been her response. God had interacted and communed with Adam, but there is no indication that Eve had enjoyed this same privilege. She is on the ground floor of humanity at a time when God is walking through the Garden. But does she know God personally as Adam does?

It is clear, however, that she had learned from Adam about the forbidden fruit on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We now hear Eve speaking for the first time. In fact, this is the first time any individual in Scripture has actually engaged in a conversation. Adam had identified each creature as God paraded it before him, and he had identified Eve as bone of my bones and more. But Eve answers a question, and her response is unequivocal:

We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, “You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.”

Here she adds an interesting twist. God had previously said nothing specific to Adam about touching the fruit. It seems entirely possible that Adam, in his concern to keep his wife from eating the fruit, added this
restriction. As parents, we have all magnified restrictions to young children: *The stove is hot. Don’t touch it. Don’t even get close to it.* Adam’s concern for Eve and his awareness of her natural sense of curiosity might have prompted him to exaggerate the danger.

Now the snake speaks again. He doesn’t simply offer an opinion. He comes across as an authority—sounding to her as though he knows his way around better than Adam does. His words are presented as outright fact: “You will not certainly die . . . for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Had Eve thought about the matter, she might have already wondered why God would restrict them from eating from one particular tree, and she might have been tantalized by this tree of *Knowledge*. Today if there were a fruit that, for example, freed up brain cells so that we could store and remember more knowledge, we might be tempted to give it a try even if we were warned of the risk factors. This may have been similar to the temptation Eve was confronting. Indeed, she now sees that this fruit offers her an opportunity “for gaining wisdom.”

She touches. Nothing happens. She eats. Nothing. She gives some to Adam, who, by the way, was with her all along. He touches. Nothing. The moment he eats it, however, the scales fall off. Time stands still. Their eyes are opened. They suddenly have a *knowledge of good and evil* that they had not possessed before. They realize for the first time that they are naked, and in that instant they feel shame. Eve blushes. Had she looked like Lucas Cranach’s fair maiden, she would have been as red as a beet.

What, one may ask, was Adam thinking as he stood by listening to the serpent? This is not the place to try to sort out his thoughts, but needless to say, he didn’t jump into the conversation and talk down the snake. He neither defended God nor protected Eve. He simply stood by and watched his wife disobey God’s explicit orders. At this point, however, there is no thought of fussing and fighting over that shortcoming. They are so overcome with embarrassment by their nudity that they grab fig leaves, sew them together, and cover their private parts. Aren’t they husband and wife? Why the shame? After all, they are not in Times Square in broad daylight. Nevertheless, their naked bodies are now properly covered.
God’s warning had been unambiguous. All they can do is wait for the other shoe to fall. And fall it does. Indeed, the Fall is the subject of longstanding doctrinal disputations. The doctrine of original sin finds its origin in Adam and Eve. In the Reformed faith this sin takes on a magnitude of massive proportions when it is sandwiched on a theological grid between two other major concepts: Creation, Fall, Redemption. So now in both a personal and a cosmic sense sin has entered God’s perfect creation, and there is hell to pay.

Both Eve and her husband hear the sound of the Lord walking in the Garden of Eden in the late afternoon as the sun is setting. They know the jig is up, and they hide. God calls to Adam and asks where he is. He responds that he was afraid and hid because he was naked. But God is on to him and asks where he got the idea that he was naked. Who told him? Before he can answer, God quickly moves to the heart of the matter, asking him if he has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam’s answer is classic. He places the blame squarely on Eve: “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

If Eve thinks Adam alone will be questioned, she’s mistaken. God speaks to her directly, asking her what she has done. Taking a cue from Adam, she blames the snake. Without missing a beat, God turns to the snake, not to question but to curse—make the snake the most cursed of animals. That the serpent will crawl on its belly and eat dirt is easily understood, but the second half of the curse is more confusing:

And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head, 
and you will strike his heel.  

Whether or not Eve had any notion of what this meant, theologians have since generally agreed that this is God’s warning that Satan, as represented by the snake, will be defeated by Christ, who will redeem the sins of the world. After cursing the serpent, God turns to Eve. Her life will never be the same. She will have pain in childbearing. Until this point, she apparently has no concept of pain. Things will also change in her relationship with her husband. She will have a desire for him, sexually and otherwise, and he will rule over her. Exactly how this rule would play out is not specified, but historically and even today in certain cultures women suffer severely under male domination and rule.

Eve also hears God’s words to Adam that the ground will now be cursed with thorns and thistles, and he will work by the sweat of his brow just to stay alive. Though God is speaking to Adam, this curse on the ground has also had profound implications for Eve and all women who have toiled in fields throughout biblical times and since.

Although Eve’s sin is not mentioned again in the Old Testament or in the Gospels, Paul refers to it in his letters. In 2 Corinthians 11:3, he warns fellow believers, men and women alike: “But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.” In 1 Timothy 2:14–15, the statement is less clear.

And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

One might wonder why it was that Adam ate the fruit if he had not been deceived. Did he act with full awareness of his rebellion against God? And how is a woman saved through childbearing? Paul states elsewhere that all are saved by God’s grace, through faith. So his words could hardly have reference to salvation and eternal life. Some have interpreted his words to refer to being physically saved. But that is also problematic. Have faithful women in any era been physically saved from the perils of childbirth?
Eve and Noah's Wife

Hardly. Overseas missionary women in past generations, for example, died frequently in childbirth, and not because of any lack of holiness and propriety. These verses have rightly been labeled one of the “desperately difficult” passages of the Bible.

Although Paul, speaking of Adam, states in Romans 5:12 that “sin entered the world through one man,” Eve as temptress has received the brunt of the blame. Writing in the early third century, Tertullian (c. 160–225) laid the guilt squarely on her:

God’s judgment on this sex lives on in our age; the guilt necessarily lives on as well. You are the Devil’s gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first foresaker of the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach; you so lightly crushed the image of God, the man Adam; because of your punishment, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die.8

Also reflecting on the first chapters of Genesis, the celebrated fourth-century “golden-mouthed” preacher, John Chrysostom, made the case that the man only was created in the image of God: “Therefore the man is in the ‘image of God’ since he had no one above him, just as God has no superior but rules over everything. The woman, however, is ‘the glory of man,’ since she is subjected to him.”9

Augustine, considered the greatest theologian of the first millennium of the church, took the argument a step further, tying Adam’s superiority not only to Eve’s subjection but also to her “small intelligence.”

That a man endowed with a spiritual mind could have believed this [the lie of the serpent] is astonishing. And just because it is impossible to believe it, woman was given to man, woman who was of small intelligence and who perhaps still lives more in accordance with the promptings of the inferior flesh than by the superior reason.10

There is surely nothing in the text that would indicate that Eve is of small intelligence, nor is there any evidence in the continuing biblical narrative that men have an edge over women intellectually. As for Eve herself, she is banished from the Garden with her husband. God is taking no chances for
fear they will try to return in order to “live forever.” So he drives them out to make a life in the deserted land east of Eden; there can be no return to the Garden for the gate is obstructed by “cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.”

At this point, we can only wonder about Eve’s personal relationship with God. What was it founded upon? It is true that, unlike many of us today, she actually had a one-on-one conversation with God, albeit short. But that was in the context of a dressing-down. She tries to defend herself only to learn of the pain she will endure the rest of her life. Her next encounter with God—though not verbal—is the equivalent of sirens, flashing lights, and armed guards preventing her from going back to the only home she has ever known.

But that is behind them. We now learn that Adam has “made love to his wife Eve.” She conceives, and when Cain is born, she credits God: “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.” She conceives again and gives birth to Abel. Apart from their sexual intimacies, nothing more is said or implied about the relationship between Eve and Adam. They are hardscrabble subsistence farmers barely eking a living out of the weed-prone rocky soil. After that the story line fades away.

No woman can read this biblical account without wondering how it was for Eve as she raised her boys, from teething and potty training to becoming responsible young men. There are many blanks to be filled in. Imagine telling your own story of raising children and moving from infancy to adulthood without any reference to the two decades in between. Was she a doting mother who was ever watchful of dangers, or did she let them spend hours unsupervised while discovering the world for themselves? If they are typical kids, she endures their terrible twos and years of mischief making and perhaps adolescent rebellion and butting heads with each other long before they arrive at their final showdown.

Then there is that devastating day. How much Eve might have known of her sons’ two different offerings to God is not disclosed. Were the boys spiritually inclined? Had she spoken to them about God and the perils of disobedience? All we know is that in an instant she becomes the first member of the most awful exclusive club a parent can ever join. She receives news that her own child is dead, her boy whom it seemed like just yesterday she
Eve and Noah's Wife

had cradled in her arms and nursed. And worse than that, her other son, her beloved firstborn, has killed him.

Unless a mother has buried a child, she is unable to enter this surreal realm of utter anguish. Those of us who have not can only try to imagine the stabbing pain that Eve endures. There are no words that encompass such grief, and the author of Genesis does not try. We are not privy to even a glimpse of her tears. How does she pull her life together after such a crushing blow? Does she go through the standard stages of grief? Does she ever speak of her dear sons again? Life goes on—the day-to-day grind of eking out an existence. Amid the gloom, she conceives once again, and Seth is born. She is a woman who knows deep sadness, but we can also imagine her as a woman who knows how to celebrate moments of joy and laughter.

The joy and pain no doubt continue as Eve eases into her role as a grandmother. Cain has been banished from east of Eden to become a wanderer—wandering in the land of Nod, where his son Enoch is born and his grandson Irad. Fast forward three generations to Lamech, who like great-grandpa Cain (four times removed) has a fight and kills a man. Was Eve still living, and did she hear about this murder? In the meantime, she has had another grandson, Enosh, the son of Seth.

The Bible does not say when Eve died or how old she was. Adam, as far as the text reveals, had no other wife than Eve and, besides Seth, “had other sons and daughters.” He died at age 930.

Noah’s Wife

Though her three sons are named, she is not, nor are her three daughters-in-law. But we are curious to know more about this nameless woman. Noah is a very old man, five hundred years old to be precise, when he begins building the ark. What was she doing in those centuries before, or might she have been a few hundred years younger than he? How would she have felt about his building such a vessel? Did he explain to her that his marching orders came directly from God? At this point in time, there is no evidence that God was verbally interacting with people on a regular basis. Did she think her husband had gone stark raving mad?
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Once the ark is constructed, there are other concerns that affect her far more than had the procurement of gopher wood. (That indeed may have been the main topic of dinner conversation for decades on end.) Now the old man is out lassoing antelope. The neighbors’ eye-rolling has progressed to head-shaking and just plain pity—at least for her. For them it’s a show. Their gathering to watch the daily activity is a social diversion. The usual routine of manual labor, broken only by drunken, rowdy vice, is itself marked by boredom. Now there’s something to talk about.

During the last days before the deluge, Noah’s wife and daughters-in-law must have been busy themselves. While the men herded wild and domesticated animals into the ark, they would have been busy packing and preparing for a long voyage. They may have recoiled at the whole idea of it, but Noah’s authority apparently holds sway.

Then the day arrives. They are safe and secure inside, as their neighbors look on with as much amusement as bewilderment. Rain begins with an unusual suddenness. Noah paces back and forth on the inside decks, checking the peepholes. His wife peeks out as well. She’s never seen so much water. Their once-freestanding house is coming apart and floating away. Worse, she hears the voices of children and women she’s known all her life. They’re screaming for help. There’s nothing—absolutely nothing—she can do.

Those first terrible hours are forever etched in her psyche. Never is she far from the sounds of those cries for help. The weeks and months drag on. Eventually, however, there is hope of dry land once again. But the land is never really dry again, at least not in her lifetime. There is decay, that awful smell of rotting dead bodies, both animal and human. The thorns and thistles that Eve had encountered were but irritations in comparison to the land that Noah’s wife steps into. The smelly ark was no paradise, and if she had imagined it, there was surely no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Only a reminder of how bad it once was.

Concluding Observations

Eve as the mother of us all is hidden in the dense tropical ferns in paradise, barely visible to the naked eye. When she is banished from her lush
surroundings, she is almost lost entirely, fading into the distant rugged landscape. Wisdom warns us to say very little about her that could ever be confused with fact.

It is unfortunate that Eve has for so long been used as a political—or social—football. She has been kicked around more than any other biblical woman, beginning particularly with certain of the church fathers. During the Reformation, Catholic clerics labeled the outspoken Protestant Argula von Stauffer an “insolent daughter of Eve.” Anne Hutchinson was accused by Puritan divines of being “an Eve” who was influencing other women and trying to “catch their husbands also.”

In recent years, Eve has been branded the first feminist and hailed as the founder of the New Age movement for her desire for higher wisdom. She has been used to bolster both sides of the headship debate that has raged for years among certain Evangelicals. But if we are honest she eludes us—except in our imaginations.

Noah’s wife is rarely featured in commentaries or other writings. She became the butt of jokes, however, in medieval street plays that portrayed her as a nagging wife, refusing to leave her “gossips” and come into the ark until Noah grabbed a stick and hit her on the backside. It was an old joke even then, but it always drew a hearty laugh.

When we actually take the time to contemplate her, she is a pitiful character. While Noah would forever go down as a great man of faith, she would be no more than a footnote, perhaps her mournful cry echoed in the distant thunder. The rainbow of hope would be for future generations. Her soggy, putrefied world would be a constant reminder of deep sadness.

Questions to Think About

Have artistic renditions of Eve wrongly represented her? How would you describe her or paint her portrait? Would her nationality and features be similar to your own?

What issues and problems relevant to women today may have also confronted Eve? Is there anything in the biblical text that gives us insight into her relationships and emotions? Is there anything you can draw on that
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helps you understand the loss of a child? Have you or anyone you’ve known endured such a terrible loss?

In what specific ways has Eve been most egregiously misinterpreted since New Testament times? Are we also sometimes unfairly sized up by others? Does Eve remind us that we ought to ask ourselves how we will be regarded after we die?

Why do women have a reputation for shrieking in horror at the sight of a snake? Is that part of our DNA, or is it a learned reaction?

Do you suppose that Eve ever reminisced and longed for the perfection of Eden? Do you look back with nostalgia for the good old days?

Imagine yourself as Eve. How might you describe your relationship with God? Was God’s presence in some way closer and more readily available then than it is for us today? If you were to encounter Eve in heaven and had the opportunity to ask her one question, what would you want to know?

Does a paradise of perfection appeal to you? Would life be less exciting in such perfection?

Are you able to contemplate Noah’s wife and daughters-in-law and their terrible loss of extended family members and friends in the great deluge? Do you think that the horror of the flood is often diminished in Noah’s ark picture books and various ark-related kitsch?