Speculations from the Garden: Narrative Reticence and Theological Overreach in Interpretations of Genesis 3:1–6

by Greg Stiekes[1]

Biblical theology (BT) depends upon careful inductive exegesis. As a methodology, BT arrives at theological observations based on the historical development and thematic reading of the text.[2] But this does not mean that BT is a superficial overview of progressive revelation. Rather, good BT requires a deliberate, careful reading of the text in its grammatical, historical, literary, and theological context.[3] To underscore this thesis, this paper seeks to demonstrate that if the spadework underlying BT in any biblical text is misguided, it can lead to faulty emphases in our theological conclusions.

The case study for this assertion will be the fall of Eve narrative of Genesis 3. We will begin by noting the literary nature of OT narrative and the requirements it places on the reader. Next, we will analyze two common readings of the fall of Eve—that Eve misrepresented the command of God in conversation with the serpent, and that Adam was at Eve's side for the duration of the temptation. In this main section of the paper, I hope to demonstrate that speculation at these two points in the narrative can result—and in some cases has resulted—in theological overreach in biblical theologies of marriage and gender roles. Finally, the paper's conclusion will briefly analyze how the Apostle Paul himself makes use of the same narrative, modeling helpful restraint as an example for our own work in BT.

Reticence in Biblical Narrative

God chose to communicate his word through literary genres. Therefore, if it is our aim to rightly handle the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15), we must appreciate the genre of the biblical text under consideration. Interpreters, however, may exercise genre sensitivity more readily when reading, say, poetry and prophecy as opposed to narrative. Biblical narrative appears comparatively straightforward, familiar—an accessible account of people and events. But this appearance can be deceiving. The conventions of biblical narrative differ in important respects from those to which readers shaped by modern Western narrative—particularly the novel—have become accustomed. As Robert Alter explains,

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[2] Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 23. See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 3, who explains how systematic theology builds on the results of biblical theology.

[3] Millard J. Erickson reminds us that biblical theology is the "raw material" of systematic theology, requiring it to be "faithful to the teachings of the Bible." *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 26.

> Biblical narrative offers us . . . nothing in the way of minute analysis of motive or detailed rendering of mental processes; whatever indications we may be vouchsafed of feeling, attitude, or intention are rather minimal; and we are given only the barest hints about the physical appearance, the tics and gestures, the dress and implements of the characters, the material milieu in which they enact their destinies. In short, all the indicators of nuanced individuality to which the Western literary tradition has accustomed us—preeminently in the novel, but ultimately going back to the Greek epics and romances—would appear to be absent from the Bible.[4]

Jerome Walsh further distinguishes between the chronological events presumed by the narrative (the actual "story" behind the text) and the manner in which those events are recounted (the "narration"). These two are not identical.[5] The narrator's selection, arrangement, pacing, and presentation of events affect how readers perceive the story and its significance.[6] Biblical narrative, for example, is sometimes dischronological. Authors are often more interested in arranging events for theological emphases than in preserving strict chronological sequence.[7]

For our analysis of Genesis 3:1–6, however, we must acknowledge what Alter refers to as the biblical narrator's *reticence.*[8] Narrative reticence is a selective withholding of explanatory, psychological, and circumstantial information. Readers must infer meaning from the words and actions that are narrated, even while recognizing that some questions remain permanently unanswered. A character's appearance, precise movements, feelings, motivations, personality, and even physical traits are usually not communicated directly, if at all.[9]

The most frequent reticence technique, according to Walsh, is the presence of "gaps and ambiguities" in the narrative—"gaps of fact, gaps of motivation, and gaps of continuity."[10] Meir Sternberg may explain the genre best when he describes biblical narrative as a carefully controlled "system of gaps."[11] The narrator supplies certain facts, temporarily withholds others, and leaves still others permanently unresolved.

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[4] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Basic, 2011), 138.

[5] Jerome T. Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative: A Guide to Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 20–21.

[6] Ibid., 67–68.

[7] Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Narrative Books: The Israel Story* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2023), 27.

[8] Alter, 138.

[9] Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (1983; repr., Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 27–30, 38. Berlin compares two narratives that contain Bathsheba. In the story of David's adultery (2 Samuel 11–12), Bathsheba is treated as noncharacter, incidental to the plot. Her feelings and motives are never mentioned. But in the story of Bathsheba and Abishag (1 Kings 1–2), Bathsheba becomes a full-blown character, seen mainly through the dialogue. Alter, 140, says, "Character can be revealed through the report of actions; through appearance, gestures, posture, costume; through one character's comments on another; through direct speech by the character; through inward speech, either summarized or quoted as interior monologue; or through statements by the narrator about the attitudes and intentions of the personages, which may come either as flat assertions or motivated explanations."

[10] Walsh, 81.

[11] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 228.

Such reticence inevitably gives rise to what Sternberg calls "gap-filling" on the part of the reader. "This gap-filling," says Sternberg, "ranges from simple linkages of elements, which the reader performs automatically, to intricate networks that are figured out consciously, laboriously, hesitantly, and with constant modifications in the light of additional information disclosed in later stages of the reading."[12] Much of this gap-filling occurs almost involuntarily. Readers connect successive actions, imagine physical settings, infer motives, and supply unreported transitions without necessarily recognizing that they have done so. Moreover, this means that readers will fill in the gaps differently. As Walsh observes, "The narrator supplies the reader with the potential for many variant stories; it is ultimately the reader who determines which of those variants to actualize."[13] Walsh's description of the reader's encounter brings us to the crux of the interpretive issue. Because the narrative does not specify every detail, readers will inevitably form mental representations of the events that differ at precisely those points where the narrator has remained silent. This means that when they read the story, readers will imagine, or "actualize" the narrative events in their own way.[14] Such reconstructions must therefore be disciplined by the explicit statements of the text and by its literary, historical, and theological contexts. The interpreter must also distinguish carefully between what the text states, what it reasonably implies, what it merely permits, and what it leaves unknown.

With this in mind, we turn to the narrative reticence at work in Genesis 3:1–6 (ESV).

> [1] Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" [2] And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" [4] But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. [5] For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." [6] So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

When reading this account, we form a mental picture of the scene. Our minds supply spatial relationships, gestures, expressions, pauses, and movements that the narrator does not describe. These details may arise from a preexisting mental image shaped by sermons, children's literature, or centuries of Western religious art. Many influential depictions of Genesis 3 show a naked Adam and Eve standing together beneath the tree, often with an apple in Eve's hand and a serpent coiled around one of its branches. It is therefore understandable that readers might actualize the narrative in this familiar form. The question, however, is whether the text itself establishes that scene.

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[12] Sternberg, 228.

[13] Walsh, 81.

[14] When Walsh speaks of "actualizing" a variation of the story, he is drawing upon the language of reader-oriented literary theory. In other words, a narrative is not experienced until a reader mentally constructs the world that the author has presented.

Consider the narrative gaps. Where did the serpent come from? How did it have the gift of speech? Why was it opposed to God's command? The account offers no answers.

Where did the serpent's conversation with the woman take place? It actually makes little sense that the serpent was coiled in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:17). Based on her own words, Eve knows that she was not supposed to go near that tree. She also describes the tree as being "in the midst of the garden" (3:3). Why would she have to point out where the tree was located if she had been standing beneath it? The fact is, we are not told where this conversation took place.

How did Eve know that the tree was off-limits? God instructed Adam about the tree before Eve was created (Gen 2:16–18). Did God give Eve the information personally? Did Adam tell her?

How much time passed between Eve's conversation with the serpent and her disobedience in eating the fruit? Did she reach for the fruit soon after the serpent stopped speaking? Did she have to go into the middle of the garden to find the tree and did she spend much time contemplating the idea of eating it? Hours? Days?

What was Adam's location during the conversation? Was the woman entirely alone? Was Adam nearby for all or part of the exchange? Did he join her only later? Verse 6 says that she gave the fruit to "her husband with her" (לְאִישָׁהּ עִמָּהּ), but the precise narrative force of this expression must be established rather than assumed. Also, what did Eve say to Adam to convince him to eat it? For when God confronts them after their sin, he says to Adam, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife" (Gen 3:17). Yet we have no details of this conversation.

What Genesis 3:1–6 actually tells us, then, is comparatively restrained, and we must therefore exegete with care. Some additional conclusions may constitute necessary or well-grounded inferences; others may be plausible reconstructions that the text neither confirms nor excludes; still others may amount to unsupported speculation. The crucial methodological point is that these categories must not be confused—especially when the reconstruction of an unreported detail is made to bear theological weight.

Inferences and Speculations in Genesis 3:1–6

As the point of departure for this section, we turn to the Charles Simeon Trust resources for homiletical training.[15] In their "First Principles" course, Lesson 1, David Helm teaches the core exegetical standard he calls "staying on the line." If the Word of God is a straight line, he says, our exegesis must stay on that line. We must not go above the line by adding to the Word, nor should we

[15] The Charles Simeon Trust is named for the faithful Anglican pastor and commentator, Charles Simeon (1759–1836), who persevered in a difficult ministry for over fifty years in Cambridge, England. Founded in Chicago by David Helm, R. Kent Hughes, and Jon Dennis, the Charles Simeon Trust is an effective ministry that seeks to train pastors and teachers to exposit the Word of God faithfully and carefully. Their website states: "The Charles Simeon Trust was founded to promote the growth of the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world by training up the next generation of biblical expositors. We accomplish this single focus through three initiatives: Workshops, online training, and the Chicago Course on Preaching. Each aims to increase the confidence and ability of pastors and Bible teachers to rightly handle God's Word. We want each person to be convinced that God's Word is powerful and eager to teach it to their people" (simeontrust.org/about).

go below the line by subtracting from the Word.[16] The emphasis of this lesson is an excellent charge to uphold the sufficiency of the Scriptures.

As his centerpiece biblical example, however, Helm takes his students to Genesis 3. There he demonstrates that Eve "goes above the line" by legalistically adding to God's command (Gen 3:3; cf. 2:16–17). Eve does so, he points out, when she adds the phrase, "neither shall you touch it." On the other hand, the serpent "goes below the line" when he denies the truth of God's command and negates the punishment for disobedience (Gen 3:4–5). Meanwhile, says Helm, Adam was there the whole time, because Genesis 3:6 says, "She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate." Furthermore, because Adam had received the command from God about the tree (and Eve did not), it was Adam's responsibility to speak up and defend the truth—to "hold the line." But Adam abdicates his responsibility.

Yet is this the way the author of Genesis 3 intends for us to actualize the narrative? Is Helm making a proper inference, or is he drawing conclusions from speculation? It is not difficult to see that the serpent definitely goes below the line, for that is the point of the dialogue in Genesis 3:1b–5. But beyond that observation, the irony should not be lost on us that if there is no explicit evidence in the text that Eve goes above the line and that Adam is not holding the line, Helm's illustration risks moving above the very line he commends interpreters to follow. We will therefore explore these two claims in turn, that Eve added to the Word of God and that Adam stood there silently, abdicating his role.

Does Eve Go Off the Line?

In many interpretations of Genesis 3, Eve has been criticized for mishandling her defense of God's goodness and his command. We will look briefly at the shape of these accusations, how they impact biblical theology, and the arguments offered in their support.

There are two common criticisms regarding the last part of Eve's answer to the serpent at the end of Genesis 3:3, "Neither shall you touch it, lest you die." The first criticism is that Eve, in the words of Helm, goes "above the line." Eve adds to the Word of God, since God never said one could not touch the fruit (cf. Gen 2:16–17). Thus, Eve invents her own version of God's command.[17] Several explanations are offered for the addition. Eve is eager to make her point that they are not allowed to eat the fruit.[18] Eve is drawing her own logical conclusion.[19] Eve is trying to "set a law for herself," like a fence around the tree to make sure she never goes near it.[20] Fretheim believes that the additional

[16] This video lesson is free on the Simeon Trust website: https://simeontrust.org/lessons/staying-on-the-line.

[17] John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 204.

[18] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis,* AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 23.

[19] Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 69.

[20] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary,* rev. ed., trans. John H. Marks, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 88; and Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary,* TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 72. As noted above, Helm takes this same approach, charging Eve with legalism.

phrase shows Eve's anxiety about death. "She exaggerates because she wants to avoid death at all costs."[21]

Beyond these simpler explanations, others say that Eve's additional words show that she has acquiesced to the serpent's position. Gordon Wenham says, "[T]he woman has already moved slightly away from God toward the serpent's attitude. The creator's generosity is not being given its full due, and he is being painted as a little harsh and repressive, forbidding the tree even to be touched."[22]

The second common criticism of Eve's response to the serpent centers on her phrase, "lest you die" (Gen 3:3). This would actually be an example of Eve going "below the line." In the original command, God tells Adam in no uncertain terms that if he ever ate from the tree, he would "surely die" (Gen 2:17).[23] But Eve appears to soften the punishment by failing to say it like God said it. John Walton is concerned that Eve has "blurred an important nuance" by not speaking in definite terms about the penalty of death.[24] In fact, Martin Luther was quite stern about Eve on this point. In his commentary on Genesis, Luther asserted that Eve's failure to relate the punishment as God had "proves that she had turned aside from faith to unbelief." He wrote, "The devil had effectually persuaded her to think that God surely was not so cruel an one as to kill her for merely tasting a fruit! Hence the heart of Eve was now filled with the poison of Satan."[25]

Other major commentators are either silent on the matter of Eve's answer to the serpent or they remain ambivalent. John Collins writes,

> The woman reveals herself through her speech. A major interpretive problem is her reply in Genesis 3:3, where she has "added" the restriction "neither shall you touch it." Is this innocent or is it playing into the hands of the serpent's question of verse 1? I do not know if we will ever be able to know; this may in fact be an intentional "gap." It is also possible to detect a slight deflection of her commitment in her final phrase of verse 3, "lest you die." Does this dilute the solemn warning of 2:17? Again, it is hard to be sure.[26]

Interpreting Eve's response as a distortion of God's word, however, has consequences beyond the exegesis of Genesis 3:2–3. Once her paraphrase is characterized as an addition to, subtraction from, or weakening of the divine command, the first woman's only recorded theological statement becomes evidence of defective spiritual judgment. Eve is then portrayed not simply as one who was eventually deceived by the serpent but as an unreliable interpreter of revelation before she ever eats the fruit. This reconstruction can exert considerable influence upon biblical theologies of gender roles. Eve's supposed mishandling of the command may be used to suggest that women are unusually vulnerable

[21] Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible,* ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:360.

[22] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15,* WBC (Waco: Word, 1987), 73.

[23] The Hebrew idiom is actually מוֹת תָּמוּת or "dying you shall die."

[24] Walton, 204.

[25] Martin Luther, *The Creation: A Commentary on the First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis,* trans. Henry Cole, Luther Still Speaking (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1858), 207.

[26] C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2006), 172.

to theological error and should not be teaching others, even though the NT encourages them to have some teaching roles (Titus 2:3–5; Acts 18:24–26; 2 Tim 1:5; 3:14–15). Thomas Schreiner rightly warns that such reasoning can imply that women are "ontologically and intellectually inferior" to men and thereby call into question the goodness of God's creation.[27]

But should Eve be censured for her response to the serpent? For going off the line? Consider these observations. First, there is no indication in the narrative that Eve says anything wrong. The narrator never explicitly indicates that Eve's wording is erroneous, never faults her for failing to reproduce the command verbatim, and never presents her response as the beginning of her deception. Rather, it is the serpent alone about whom the reader is warned (Gen 3:1a). When we compare the serpent's words to God's words, we can track his perverse cunning:

Genesis 2:16–17 (God)	**Genesis 3:1b (The Serpent)**
And the LORD God commanded the man, saying,	Did God actually say,
"From every tree of the garden, מִכֹּל עֵץ־הַגָּן	"You shall not eat לֹא תֹאכְלוּ
you may surely eat אָכֹל תֹּאכֵל	from any tree in the garden"? מִכֹּל עֵץ הַגָּן
but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat." לֹא תֹאכַל	

In the original command, God prefaces the prohibition regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil within his generous permission. He tells Adam literally, "From every tree of the garden, eating you may eat."[28] As illustrated above, however, the serpent subtly conflates God's gracious gift with the prohibition itself: literally, "*Not* you shall eat of any tree of the garden." With a deviously placed לֹא "no" or "not", the generous blessing מִכֹּל עֵץ "from *every* tree" becomes, with no change in the Hebrew consonants, a grudging injunction against eating "from *any* tree."[29] Furthermore, the serpent also moves the words מִכֹּל עֵץ הַגָּן "from every/any tree of the garden" from the beginning of the sentence,

[27] Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 238.

[28] The Semitic idiom represented by an imperfect verb preceded by an infinitive absolute (e.g., אָכֹל תֹּאכֵל, "eating, you may eat") in order to intensify the action or express affirmation ("you may *surely* or *freely* eat") is well known. See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 584–86.

[29] Georg Fischer, *Die Anfänge der Bibel: Studien zu Genesis und Exodus,* SBAB 49 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 2011), 40, says that the serpent twisted God's permission in Genesis 2:16 into its opposite.

as God spoke them (Gen 2:16), to the end of the sentence, further weakening the impression of God's liberality.[30]

By contrast, the woman's response substantially preserves the shape of God's command in a way that is remarkably consistent with the way he originally presented it:

Genesis 2:16–17 (God)	**Genesis 3:2b–3 (Eve)**
"Of every tree of the garden, מִכֹּל עֵץ־הַגָּן	"Of the fruit of the trees of the garden מִפְּרִי עֵץ־הַגָּן
you may surely eat אָכֹל תֹּאכֵל	we may eat. נֹאכֵל
but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע	But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden וּמִפְּרִי הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹךְ־הַגָּן
you shall not eat from it לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ	God said, 'You shall not eat of it, אָמַר אֱלֹהִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ
for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת:	neither shall you touch it lest you die.'" לֹא תִגְּעוּ בּוֹ פֶּן־תְּמֻתוּן:

Here we can observe several differences between the words of Eve and the words of God—so many, in fact, that we must wonder whether they are simply stylistic.[31] So how far are these differences to be pressed? Does the narrator really want us to come away with the idea that Eve adds to or distorts God's command? Or could he intend for us to observe that she is staying true to God's command, earnestly expressing her intention to obediently avoid that particular tree at all costs?[32] For example, does Eve's use of "lest you die" (פֶּן־תְּמֻתוּן) really weaken God's warning? The Hebrew פֶּן does not necessarily express doubt about whether an outcome will occur. It is less emphatic than "dying you shall die" (מוֹת תָּמוּת) but does not by itself demonstrate that Eve regarded death as less likely.[33] Again, nothing

[30] Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26,* NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 235.

[31] R. W. L. Moberly, "Did the Serpent Get It Right?," *JTS* 39, no. 1 (1988): 6–7, confesses the difficulty of knowing exactly what these variations mean, whether they are strictly stylistic.

[32] I concur with the nineteenth-century scholar, James Murphy, who lays no blame upon Eve for her response. Murphy writes, "The woman gives the natural and distinct answer of unaffected sincerity to this suggestion. The deviations from the strict letter of the law are nothing more than the free and earnest expressions of her feelings. The expression, 'neither shall ye touch it,' merely implies that they were not to meddle with it, as a forbidden thing." James G. Murphy, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Barnes' Notes (1873; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 114.

[33] BDB, s.v. "פֶּן"; *HALOT,* s.v. "פֶּן." See, for example, the use of פֶּן in Genesis 3:22, where God says, "Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—"; and Exodus 20:19, where the people cried out to Moses in fear, "Do not let God speak to us, lest we die."

in the narrative suggests that Eve should be blamed here. The differences between Eve's formulation and God's command are available for literary comparison, but the narrator supplies no explicit evaluation that turns those differences into moral or theological defects.

Second, the literary feature of reticent gaps in the narrative should caution us against drawing conclusions from information we are not given. We do not know how Eve came by her knowledge of the command. The narrative does not report how the command was communicated to Eve, and differences between Genesis 2:16–17 and 3:2–3 cannot securely establish either the source of her wording or her moral condition reflected in it. Theologies should not be built upon an uncensured instance of reported speech.

Third, by what hermeneutical principle does the interpreter expect Eve to give a word-for-word rendition of God's command in the first place? We do not hold anyone else to this standard when they report previous dialogue in narrative.[34] That is not the way OT narrative works. In the case of the serpent, the narrator clues in the reader that his words must be weighed carefully (Gen 3:1a). But same is not true of Eve. In fact, it is we ourselves who may be in danger of overanalyzing the text and coming away believing something God has not said.

Does Adam Fail to Hold the Line?

Compared to the criticism of Eve's response to the serpent, there is far more discussion about Adam's alleged present-but-silent posture during the whole conversation, in both scholarly and popular literature. Again, we will look at the reasons for the accusation, how it has influenced biblical theology, and what we can say in response.

Several interpreters believe that Adam was standing with Eve or at least standing within hearing distance during the temptation.[35] As Kathleen O'Connor explains, Eve gives the fruit "to the man 'who was with her' all along, 'and he ate' (Gen 3:6)."[36] Everett Fox translates Genesis 3:6, "and gave also to her husband *beside her*,"[37] and Fretheim views Adam as a "silent partner" with Eve during the whole conversation.[38]

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[34] Contrast, for example, Abraham's servant repeating Abraham's instructions (Gen 24:3–8 and 37–41); or Abraham's servant recounting his conversation with Rebekah (Gen 24:17–23 and 45–47); or Joseph's brothers reporting his words to Jacob (Gen 42:7–20 and 30–34); or Moses' recollection of God's words concerning the golden calf (Exod 32:7–10 and Deut 9:12–14); or Joshua's condensing of Moses' command (Num 32:20–24/Deut 3:18–20 and Josh 1:13–15). Also consider all of the ways the words of Jesus differ between the writers of the Gospels, or how Luke changes the details of Paul's conversion with each telling (Acts 9:4–6, 22:7–10, 26:14–18). We never hold dialogue to the standard of exact wording unless the narrator clues the reader in that careful attention must be given, as in the case of the serpent.

[35] For examples, see Ziony Zevit, *What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 170; John E. Hartley, *Genesis,* NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 67; Beverly J. Stratton, *Out of Eden: Reading, Rhetoric, and Ideology in Genesis 2–3*, JSOTSupp 208 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 47–48; and W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis,* Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 45.

[36] Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Genesis 1–25A,* Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), 63.

[37] Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 21 (emphasis added).

[38] Fretheim, 360.

Several reasons are offered for this view. For one, after the author places Adam and Eve in close unity at the end of Genesis 2, there is no mention of their being separated before the serpent speaks in the opening verse of Genesis 3.[39] For another, the serpent addresses Eve using second-person plurals (e.g., "You [pl.] will not surely die"), while Eve answers with first-person and second-person plurals (e.g., "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden") as if Adam is standing with her the whole time.[40] But by far the most significant textual evidence for this view is the statement in Genesis 3:6b, "[S]he also gave some to her husband *who was with her*" (עִמָּהּ).[41] If indeed Adam stands mutely by during the serpent's conversation with Eve, then her part in the fall does not appear to weigh as heavily on her shoulders, since her husband was doing nothing, equally complicit, equally being led astray.[42] In fact, Julie Parker represents a popular view among some interpreters who believe that Eve is "deeply maligned" and overburdened with the guilt of the fall in part because commentators and especially modern translations of Genesis 3:6 ignore the presence of Adam in Eve's confrontation with the serpent.[43]

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[39] Jean M. Higgins, "The Myth of Eve: The Temptress," *JAAR* 44 (1976): 646; Elizabeth A. McCabe, "Answers to Unresolved Questions: A Close Look at Eve and Adam in Genesis 2–3," in *Women in the Biblical World: A Survey of Old and New Testament Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth A. McCabe (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), 12.

[40] Coleson, *Genesis,* 117. McCabe, "Answers," 10–11; Higgins, "Myth of Eve," 646. Higgins cites other evidence too; the most significant is the wording of Genesis 3:7, "Then the eyes of both were opened." She comments, "Since, strictly speaking, Eve's eyes should have been opened at the moment 'she took and she ate,' this verse (together with the variant versions mentioned in the preceding point) may be a trace of an earlier story in which man and woman are tempted, take and eat together. But there is no way we can be sure of this." This concession, "there is no way we can be sure," actually characterizes her entire discussion on the question of Adam's presence with Eve, and she finally concludes, "It is impossible to say for certain."

[41] Several Hebrew grammars traditionally translate וַתִּתֵּן גַּם־לְאִישָׁהּ עִמָּהּ with "she gave also to her husband (who was) with her," taking עִמָּהּ as a prepositional phrase modifying the noun, אִישׁ. See, for example, Paul Joüon, *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1947), 400 (§132a), "à son mari (qui était) avec elle"; Wilhelm Gesenius, et al., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (1910; repr., Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 427 (§131t), "unto her husband with her (= her husband who was with her)"; Ludwig Koehler, "וּשְׁאָר יָשׁוּב und der nackte Relativsatz," *VT* 3 (1953): 84–85, "ihrem Mann, der bei ihr war"; and Waltke and O'Connor, *Hebrew Syntax,* 74, "her husband (who was) with her."

[42] Towner, *Genesis,* 45, believes that painters as far back as the Renaissance have depicted Adam's passivity under the same tree as Eve who is taking action. Likewise, Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 113, criticizes Adam for his inactive role. Trible says, "Throughout this scene the man has remained silent; he does not speak for obedience. His presence is passive and bland. The contrast that he offers to the woman is not strength or resolve but weakness. No patriarchal figure making decisions for his family, he follows his woman without question or comment."

[43] Julie Faith Parker, "Blaming Eve Alone: Translation, Omission, and Implications of עמה in Genesis 3:6b," *JBL* 132 (2013): 729–47. Parker makes the latest and most thorough case for the view that Adam was with Eve during the conversation with the serpent, citing several Hebrew grammarians for support. However, her essay is mainly a criticism of translations that have failed to bring out that Adam was "with" Eve, especially those which fail to translate עִמָּהּ altogether, ostensibly encouraging the view that Eve bears most of the blame in the Fall. E.g., the NEB (1970) translates the sentence, "She also gave her husband some and he ate it"; the RSV (1952): "She also gave some to her husband, and he ate." Parker suggests that the Latin Vulgate, which fails to translate the Hebrew preposition in Genesis 3:6b, betrays Jerome's strong feelings against women (see pp. 736–37). She also critiques in some detail the translation committees for the RSV and the NJPS translation of the Tanakh, both of which do not mention that Adam is with Eve in Genesis 3:6 (see pp. 742–47). To her point, there are several major commentators that appear to pass over the entire question of Adam's presence with Eve, including Atkinson, Alter, and Steinmann.

Many authors writing a biblical theology of marriage and gender roles draw upon the supposed silence of Adam, thus shifting the focus of the narrative from the climax of eating the fruit and thus sinning against God to the blunder of Adam leading up to the Fall. For example, Raymond Ortlund asserts the following:

> Mark well what the text says and what it does not say. The text does not say, ". . . she took some and ate it. Her husband, who was with her, also took some and ate it." What actually happened is full of meaning. Eve usurped Adam's headship and led the way into sin. And Adam, who (it seems) had stood by passively, allowing the deception to progress without decisive intervention—Adam, for his part, abandoned his post as head. Eve was deceived; Adam forsook his responsibility. Both were wrong and together they pulled the human race down into sin and death.
>
> Isn't it striking that we fell upon an occasion of sex role reversal? Are we to repeat this confusion forever? Are we to institutionalize it in evangelicalism in the name of the God who condemned it in the beginning?[44]

The striking problem with Ortlund's progression of events is not so much theological as it is methodological. He begins with a legitimate textual observation (they both ate), moves toward a plausible inference (Adam stood by passively), then turns a speculative reconstruction into a theological observation as a polemic against egalitarianism. His overreach begins when he says, "Eve usurped Adam's headship and led the way into sin," implying that Eve assumed Adam's authority while he was likely standing there. If this is true, then Adam heard everything the serpent said, could have intervened, but allowed his wife to be deceived. Thus, Ortlund reasons, Adam "abandoned his post as head," while Eve took over. This observation leads Ortlund to make a major theological leap. "Isn't it striking," he says, "that we fell upon an occasion of sex role reversal?" With this, he has rewritten the Fall not as Eve acts first, then Adam follows her into sin; but as Eve exercises male authority, Adam assumes the female role, and humanity falls through sex role reversal. This progression has precarious implications for a theology of marriage and gender roles because the inference is taken from the key moment when humanity fell. Carried to its logical conclusion, would this not caution us that the wisdom and counsel of women should be seen as subversive and that a man must always speak up and insist on his way about things? Does this mean that a wife influencing her husband will always constitute role-reversal? I doubt that Ortlund would concur. So, while he is correct that Adam bears a distinctive responsibility and that the creation narrative establishes roles between men and women, Ortlund builds his view of the fall on a narrative gap that allows him to recast Adam not as the keeper of the garden but as a passive eyewitness to the temptation.

An even clearer example of narrative overreach comes from a popular 1990s book by Larry Crabb titled *The Silence of Adam.* In Crabb's treatment, the interpretation of a silent, passive Adam becomes programmatic. Crabb builds a tenuous case for his belief that Adam was at Eve's side for the entire

[44] Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1–3," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism,* rev. ed., ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 144.

temptation.[45] He then reasons that Adam was "a silent man, a passive man . . . physically present but emotionally absent."[46] Ultimately, Adam's silence in Crabb's reconstruction is the central reason God punished him. "He never reminded [Eve] of God's word. He never called her to a larger vision. He did not join his wife in battling wits with the serpent. . . . Adam disobeyed by failing to speak with the serpent and with his wife. He was absent and passive. His silence was symbolic of his refusal to be involved with Eve. And God punished Adam for his silence."[47] The problem is that God does not say Adam was silent, nor that he failed to confront the serpent, nor that he was emotionally absent. Crabb is building a theology of how men should behave toward their wives. He rightly encourages godly obedience and moral courage. But he is building his theology on gaps in a reticent narrative, not on the clear statements of Scripture.

Moreover, when weighing the evidence, it is far from clear that Adam is standing with Eve while she speaks with the serpent, or even overhears their conversation.[48] The introduction of the new information at the beginning of Genesis 3:1 indicates a fresh scene in the narrative and does not demand that Adam still be present with Eve any more than does the shared use of plurals in Eve's conversation with the serpent. In fact, Wenham demonstrates that the preposition עִם could be a reference merely to Adam's association with Eve in following her example in the eating of the fruit.[49] There is also the matter of the waw-consecutive imperfect verbs that begins the clause, "and she gave also to her husband" (Gen 3:6b). The waw-consecutive represents a sequential development in the narrative, advancing from her eating to her giving but supplies no indication of Adam's location during the preceding dialogue.[50] So, even if the translation, "her husband [who was] with her" (לְאִישָׁהּ עִמָּהּ)

[45] Larry Crabb, Don Hudson, and Al Andrews, *The Silence of Adam: Becoming Men of Courage in a World of Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 90. "There are four reasons why we believe Adam was present at the temptation: (1) his silence fits the immediate context in Genesis 1–3; (2) Genesis 3:6 says he was there; (3) the style of the entire account recorded in Genesis 3:1–7 suggests Eve turned immediately to Adam and gave him the fruit; and (4) other men in Genesis lived out this age-old problem of Adam's silence, suggesting that his silence became a pattern in his male descendants." It is not expedient to respond to these reasons, as they are built largely on conjecture, with the only linguistic argument being that Genesis 3:6 says Adam was "with her" when she ate the fruit. Arguments against the presence of Adam during the temptation will be offered below.

[46] Ibid., 91.

[47] Ibid., 97.

[48] The weakness of the view that the presence of עִמָּהּ necessarily means Adam was "with Eve" in Genesis 3:6 is illustrated by David E. S. Stein, "A Rejoinder Concerning Genesis 3:6 and the NJPS Translation," *JBL* 134 (2015): 51–52, who takes only four brief paragraphs to dismantle Parker's entire argument (see note 43 above). Stein answers, (1) There is hardly a motivation among the NJPS translators to downplay Adam's culpability; (2) Eve's eating and sharing with Adam are two separate acts in the Hebrew text, and could have just as easily happened at a different time and place; (3) the NJPS is not a formal equivalence translation; and (4) misogynistic interpretations will occur no matter what the translation, if people desire to read the text in this way.

[49] Wenham, Genesis, 75–76. Also, Cassuto demonstrates from the MT that expressions such as "with her" or "with him" "occur as a rule when a person is said to associate himself in a given action with someone who leads him." E.g., "You shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you" (Gen 6:18; cf. Gen 7:7; 13:1). There is no reference to the time they went into the ark as individuals. The preposition indicates that they were together as a family unit, not that they had to move in unison. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis,* trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961), 1:14.

[50] See the discussion on the use of the waw in Waltke and O'Connor, *Hebrew Syntax,* 523–25.

is most accurate, the language does not demand that Adam be with Eve for the conversation with the serpent.[51] Furthermore, when they must answer to God in the aftermath of their sin, Adam reports only the conversation with his wife (3:17), while Eve reports her conversation with the serpent (3:13b). This observation may suggest that two separate, private conversations are assumed by the narrator, but once again he is not forthcoming on this much-debated detail.

The Innocence of the Prelapsarian Couple

The original innocence of Adam and Eve—their prelapsarian state in which they were both *posse peccare* and *posse non peccare*—is a final factor that has not yet been taken into account. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith (4.2),

> After God had made all other creatures, He created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfil it; and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change. Beside this law written in their hearts, they received a command, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; which while they kept, they were happy in their communion with God, and had dominion over the creatures.

In writing about Adam and Eve's state of innocence, Thomas Aquinas explained, "[O]ur sensual appetite, wherein the passions reside, is not entirely subject to reason; hence at times our passions forestall and hinder reason's judgment; at other times they follow reason's judgment, accordingly as the sensual appetite obeys reason to some extent. *But in the state of innocence the inferior appetite was wholly subject to reason:* so that in that state the passions of the soul existed only as consequent upon the judgment of reason."[52] Later, Calvin expressed a similar understanding when he wrote,

> The integrity with which Adam was endowed is expressed by this word, when he had full possession of right understanding, when he had his affections kept within the bounds of reason, all his senses tempered in right order, and he truly referred his excellence to exceptional gifts bestowed upon him by his Maker. And although the primary seat of the divine image was in the

[51] The fact is that the author simply does not give enough details for the reader to know exactly how every event in the narrative unfolds. As mentioned earlier, artwork representing the fall typically depicts Eve and the serpent, sometimes with Adam, under the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But the author never even says that this is where the conversation takes place. In fact, if Eve believes that even touching the fruit would cause her to die, she may have been nowhere near the tree when the serpent approached her. The account in Genesis 3:6, "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food," etc., may indicate that Eve went to see the tree after her conversation with the serpent and had time to contemplate her new knowledge before she took of the fruit and ate. Likewise, the author simply does not say where Adam was during this time, whether near or far away; only that he was with Eve when she gave him (some of) the fruit, and he also ate.

[52] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* vol. 1 (Dinslaken: anboco, 2016), I, q. 95, art. 2 (emphasis added).

> mind and heart, or in the soul and its powers, yet there was no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some sparks did not glow.[53]

Nevertheless, a theme that often appears in the writing of those who believe Eve added to God's Word or that Adam abdicated his role is the idea that the woman and the man sinned before the Fall. In the examples above, Eve is seen as a legalist, one whose heart immediately acquiesces to the serpent's words or who does not truly believe God will punish her. Luther even accuses Eve of unbelief. Adam fares far worse. He has failed as a husband and a leader, refusing to nurture and protect his wife, watching idly as the serpent has his way with Eve and, finally, submitting to his wife's leadership and joining in her sin.

The first couple's state of innocence does not resolve the narrative gaps. It cannot prove that every word of Eve's response was faultless, nor can it establish that Adam was absent during her conversation with the serpent. Adam and Eve were upright but mutable, capable of transgression. Their original integrity does, however, raise the evidentiary threshold for assigning moral failure before the narrative itself identifies transgression. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve possessed no indwelling corruption or inclination toward evil. Consequently, charges that Eve had already become legalistic, unbelieving, or spiritually unreliable—or that Adam had already failed morally as a husband by silently permitting the serpent's deception—should not be inferred from details the narrator does not report. In truth, Adam and Eve's prelapsarian innocence renders these accusations much more difficult to believe.

Moreover, accusations against Adam and Eve that are not grounded in the narrative risk contradicting Scripture concerning the locus of the sin of the Fall. According to the Genesis 3 narrative, the first sin was not a lack of faith, carelessness in handling God's command, or failure as a husband. The first sin was eating the forbidden fruit.

Conclusion

Narrative gaps of fact, motivation, and continuity are a feature of the reticence of biblical stories. The reader should be aware of them. But they should never be used to construct a biblical theology. Our biblical theologies should be founded upon clear statements in and unambiguous inferences from God's Word. We should remember that the "Scriptures themselves set the standard for what biblical theology is and how it ought to be done." [54]

The apostle Paul offers us insight into this methodology. In his own use of the Creation and Fall narratives, he models due restraint. For example, in 1 Timothy 2:12–14 he grounds his argument only in what Genesis states or strongly implies. "[12] I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. [13] For Adam was formed first, then Eve; [14] and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." To support his prohibition in verse 12, Paul draws on three truths from Genesis 2 and 3. Adam was formed before Eve (Gen 2:7,

[53] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1:235.

[54] Andreas J. Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), 3.

21–22); Eve was deceived (Gen 3:13); and Adam was not deceived. This last truth is not stated verbatim in Genesis, but Paul draws it from the narrative as an authoritative inference, not a conjecture supplied from one of its gaps. In Genesis 3:12, Adam claims, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." But in 3:13, Eve explains, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." Thus, the narration itself says only Eve was deceived.

Likewise, Paul appeals to the fall-of-Eve narrative in 2 Corinthians 11:3 when he says, "But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ." This statement gives us insight into Paul's view of the fall of Eve. The serpent's "cunning" comes directly from Genesis 3:1a, and Eve's deception from 3:13. As Paul then draws the parallel with the Corinthians, he implies that Eve herself was also "led astray from her devotion" to God. This implication is also a strong and defensible inference from the narrative.

What Paul does not do is appeal to Eve's alleged mishandling of God's command, or to Adam's supposed silence during the serpent's conversation, or to imagined internal motives and unreported events. He builds theology from what the text reveals, not from what it leaves unsaid.

Because biblical theology seeks to trace the progressive revelation of God's purposes through Scripture, it necessarily depends upon sound exegesis of individual texts. Theological synthesis can rise no higher than the exegetical foundation upon which it is built. When interpreters import assumptions into a narrative, infer details not supplied by the text, or mistake possibility for certainty, those conclusions often become incorporated into broader theological systems. We must exercise similar wisdom and scholarly restraint, lest speculative readings of particular passages exert a disproportionate influence on biblical theology as a whole.