CHAPTER 2

Interpretations of the Fall Narrative

2.1 Introduction

The Fall narrative is presumed to be the foundation of woman's inferior status and tainted character in Jewish and Christian societies, because of her supposed instigation of the primeval source of sin and death. In this chapter I propose to dispute this mindset and to demonstrate, through a critical and meticulous line-by-line scrutiny of the relevant biblical text, that an interpretation unbiased by preconceptions of gender characteristics does not even hint at such a conclusion. Instead, the account clearly places the primary human responsibility upon the man, as can be seen from the quite neutral portrayal of the woman's actions, and the much more judicial and punitive approach taken by God with Adam and the serpent in the incident's aftermath. The majority of scholarly studies on the status of women concentrate on Christian, rabbinic, and Qumran literature, and critical analysis of the primary biblical source has often been lacking or absent altogether. For instance, John Collins analyses the relevant verses of Gen 3:1–24 from a primarily theological viewpoint, ignoring textual critical analysis. For example, he writes that God gave them [my italics] “strict instructions regarding one tree” (at Gen 2:16–17), an incorrect statement that may not be significant theologically but is obviously critical in judging the woman's guilt to be minor, since Eve was not yet created when God gave His instructions to Adam, and to him alone. This fact is crucial in establishing the primary guilt. In fact, the author of Jubilees, having a preconceived notion of the woman's guilt and being aware of the significance of this and many other biblical passages that contradict his theory, simply changed them, adapting them to his prejudiced opinion. These sometimes blatant changes indicate that a more impartial reading of the biblical text affirms the contrary, and thus supports my proposed interpretation.

This chapter will consider other aspects of the presumed biblical attitude toward women and discuss relevant scholarly studies on these topics. For instance, one does not encounter derogatory comments about women in Scripture, undermining the assumption that such prejudice is scriptural in origin. As far as can be determined from the scarce Qumran writings on

1 John J. Collins, Genesis 1–4, 166–178.
2 Ibid., 169.
these issues, it would seem that Qumran scholars took a more straightforward approach to scriptural interpretation than the later rabbis, and also had a more neutral view of women. Finally, given the ample rabbinic writings from a variety of genres on the interpretation of the Fall and its ethical and halakhic ramifications, it will be possible to develop a more elaborate perspective on rabbinic attitudes toward men and women and their underlying philosophy and theology. The midrashic technique certainly brought more layers to interpretation but also, as I will argue, reflects an underlying pragmatism: insisting, for instance, that women “cover up” in public might implicitly stigmatize them as temptresses, but may also have seemed more effective in preserving family stability in the social conditions of the time than attempting to police the unruly male libido.

2.2 The Biblical Text: Problems and Interpretations

2.2.1 Close Textual Analysis of Gen 3:1–14

The story of the Fall begins: “Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made” (Gen 3:1). Scripture’s emphasis on the fact that the serpent is the shrewdest of all animals, an apparently superfluous detail, proves to be a decisive factor in determining which of the characters involved is mostly to blame for the sin and the consequent calamity. Indeed, beginning the narrative with this detail indicates the author’s sympathetic attitude towards the woman, displaying an understanding for her falling into the trap of this wily character, who skillfully frames the discussion to attain his goal. Indeed, since the serpent is probably aware that God’s

3 Genesis = [Be-reshit]; LXX translates this word as “cunning,” KJV “subtil” and JPS “the shrewdest.”

4 Hartley, Genesis, 65 writes that “its [the serpent’s] skeptical approach drew the woman into discussion and opened her to considering that God might have acted out of self-serving motives.” But nevertheless, “the woman wisely sought to correct the serpent,” stating that God permitted them to eat from any tree, except one. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis, 189 proffers another perspective of the serpent’s astute approach in achieving his goal of making man fail. By exaggerating God’s prohibition, the serpent attempted “to create in the woman’s mind the impression that God is spiteful, mean, obsessively jealous, and self-protecting,” as he indeed implies in Gen 3:5. Blenkinsopp, Creation, 73 writes: “We can readily understand that, confronted by such a formidable interlocutor, the woman had little chance of winning the verbal duel.”

5 Hamilton, ibid., writes: “The serpent would have learned about God’s commands from the humans.”