WHAT’S THE MATTER WITH EVE?
THE WOMAN AND HER SENTENCE IN ANCIENT JUDAISM

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Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy con-
ception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to
thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. (Gen. 3:16, KJV)

Not long ago I heard a young Anglican priest refer in his sermon to
what he called “Paul’s misogyny.” The way that he stated his conviction
without embarrassment or elaboration led me to suspect that he had
never really explored the matter of Paul’s understanding of women,
and that he was either making a summary judgement based on a super-
ficial reading of an epistle, or repeating something he had been taught
in seminary. His presumption regarding Paul’s character is, of course,
widely shared. As Susanne Heine has written: “In feminist literature
Paul is […] clearly the most attacked person in the New Testament: he
has been made responsible for all the misfortunes of a Christian tradi-
tion which is hostile to women and indeed leads to neurosis.”¹

One of the problems with such characterizations of many ancient
authors, for they are not limited to Paul, is that they are overly naive and
individualistic. That is to say, they are too quick to assign psychological
motives and to regard an ancient author’s convictions as tendentious.
Most judgements of the former are based on unwarranted speculation,
while judgements regarding the latter do not appear to acknowledge the
fact that in many ancient cultures novelty was not a virtue. This is not

¹ Susanne Heine, Women and Early Christianity, trans. John Bowden (London, 1987), p. 82. An example may be cited from Karen M. Rogers, The Troublesome Helpmate: a history of misogyny in literature (Washington, 1966) p. 9: “[Paul] was the first Biblical writer to emphasize the misogynistic implications of the Jahvist’s account of the Creation and Fall. He gave unprecedented emphasis to the Fall, in part no doubt because the story gave support to his natural misogyny, in part because it was the cornerstone of his theology; without the Fall there would have been no need for redemption by Christ, and hence no need for his own mission. The more catastrophic the Fall was, the more important it became to exonerate Adam as much as possible by placing the major guilt on Eve.”
to deny that one may find a diversity of viewpoints represented among ancient writers. But the differences which exist between authors should not be allowed to obscure what they hold in common.

The following essay is an attempt to do just this with respect to ancient Jewish interpretations of the divine sentence on Eve (Gen. 3:16). The study will begin with an examination of the verse in the Hebrew text and the Versions, and then canvass the tradition as it appears in subsequent Old Testament and Second-Temple Jewish texts. The essay will conclude with some tentative suggestions about the shape of the tradition surrounding the figure of Eve based on this particular text. It is to be hoped that this brief exploration will help to provide an interpretative context for the writings of Paul and other early Jewish and Christian authors.

**Genesis 3:16 in the Hebrew Text**

This verse occurs within the broader context of God’s verdict on the other two malefactors in the Edenic tale. Unlike the serpent, however, the woman is not cursed directly. Rather, she receives a sentence of punishment which affects her role as a mother and wife. The sentence begins dramatically with an infinitive absolute which gives the sense of “greatly multiplying.” There are two other instances of this infinitive absolute in Genesis (16:10 and 22:17). In each case God is the subject of the action and the context is the birth of children. But whereas the multiplication of children is in view in these passages (and, indeed, is regarded as a divine blessing), in 3:16 what is multiplied is the woman’s זרה ובנה and עצבת.

The first term, עצבת, has been variously translated as “pain,” “hardship,” and “distress.” It is drawn from the root עצב, meaning ‘pain,’ but as Carol Myers notes, of the fifteen places the verb עצב is used,

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4 Phyllis Trible notes that the address to the woman lacks the accusatory formula, “because you have done this”; she comments that this is because Eve had already been interrogated by God (Gen. 3:13). *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, (Philadelphia, 1978), p. 126. However, Trible does not appear to note that the man was interrogated too, yet the accusatory formula appears in his sentence (verse 17).