

Re-Imagining Eve

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ABSTRACT

These two quilts were created to provide a fresh look at the story of Adam and Eve by forcing the viewer to return to the text and rethink the traditional interpretations that have dominated our society for thousands of years. They are part of a larger series of quilts that seeks to give new voice to Biblical women. The first quilt, *Creation*, attempts to deemphasize the creation story in which woman is made from man's rib by providing an alternate interpretation to the story that has been used to justify women's inferiority. The second quilt, *The Garden*, asks the viewer to reconsider the traditional representation of Eve as evil and weak by making the viewer face a thoughtful Eve who knowingly reaches for the fruit of the tree of knowledge to increase her wisdom.

Creation

The book of Genesis begins with two distinct creation stories. In the first (1:1 – 2:4a), the world is created in seven days. On the sixth day, humans are made, man and woman, in God's image. In the second story (2:4b – 2:25), though, man is created first and placed in the garden. Only after all the animals are brought before him and deemed unfit companions is woman made from one of the man's ribs. These stories are often conflated, and we are often taught as children that woman was created from man's rib on the sixth day. Yet when we look at the text, it is clear that the second story is not a more detailed telling of the first; rather, it is its own, separate story.

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Creation illustrates these stories: the right side of the quilt represents the Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a, and the left side represents Genesis 2:4b – 2:25.¹ The format of the quilt was inspired by a visit to the Whitney Museum of American Art, where quilts from Gee’s Bend were exhibited. The quilts of Gee’s Bend, created by African American residents of a small Alabama town, often resembled traditional American and African American quilt patterns, but deviated from these patterns to create unique and striking works of art. The vibrant colors and playful forms transform patterns which have been seen many times before into something all their own. I was looking for a way to represent the story of

creation through the art of quilt-making when I stumbled upon this exhibit. One of the difficulties I was having involved resolving the differences between the two creation stories.

The Rabbis of the first century of the Common Era often came up with creative interpretations of the Biblical text in order to explain difficult passages, apparent contradictions, or to fill in the gaps where the Bible may leave things unsaid. While many of these stories, called *midrashim*, attempt to resolve the differences between the two creation stories, none of them are able to unite them into one seamless story.

This problem was floating around in my head when I saw “Bars and String-Pieced Columns,” viewable at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=970364>. I realized that I didn’t need to resolve this conflict or choose one story. I could show both stories, and emphasize the disunity between them.

Instead of using two vertical columns to illustrate the two creation stories, I decided to separate the stories with a triangle, both to add visual interest and to represent the wedge between the stories. The wedge, however, is not a true triangle, as it does not come to a point at the bottom, and thus it shows that the stories do not meet each other, even in the end. The green fabric used for this wedge was chosen for a number of reasons. The moss green separates the two sides without standing out too much. It recedes slightly, so that it does not attract too much attention. The swirling pattern adds to the chaos and confusion that exist within this gap between the creation stories,

and to further emphasize this confusion, I quilted a few of these swirls.

The first creation story is straightforward. The Bible clearly states what God did each day: God created light and dark on the first day; separated the waters above from the waters below on the second day; and gathered waters so the dry land appeared and created grass, plants and trees on the third day. God created lights in the sky to rule the day and night on the fourth day; created sea creatures and birds on the fifth day; created cattle, wild animals and humans on the sixth day; and rested on the seventh day.

Starting at the top left side of the quilt, each day of creation is pictured. The days are separated by ¼” midnight blue and ¼” yellow stripes, representing the statement: “there was evening and there was morning,” which indicates the separation between each of the days of creation in Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a.



I used fabrics to represent the different days and chose images to represent what was created on each day. My choice of fabric for the seventh day is, perhaps, the one which may be called into question. I chose to represent Shabbat with a mottled yellow fabric with a small flower print, because to me, Shabbat is a day of light. The soft yellow reminds me of the Shabbat candles, and it is a calming color. Solid yellow, however, does not provide the depth or importance that I felt Shabbat should hold. The flowers and mottled yellow added the desirable softness and depth.



The silver pin depicting man and woman was also carefully chosen. It is stated in the text that on the sixth day, God created humans “in His image.”² This led me to consider using color blocks to represent man and woman, as I used them in the second creation story. But because all of the other images used to represent the objects created in the first story were literal, I felt that the color blocks would break the flow of the story. I therefore decided to use images that would cause no confusion for the viewer. Finding appropriate fabric, however, was not an easy task. Moreover, I wanted to emphasize the importance of the humans. They were not just another creation on the

sixth day; they were commanded to rule over the other creatures. Thus, I decided to use the pin to represent the male and female created on the sixth day. They stand out from the quilt, in both a visual and a literal sense, and together, they rule over the other creatures.



I also took Michael Fishbane’s discussion of the “inner symmetry of the days of creation”³ into account in the construction of the quilt. Fishbane points out that “the first three days present the creation in its generalities, and the second three days present those of its features which specifically impinge on the human habitat.”⁴ I therefore wanted to show the symmetry through the juxtaposition of specific fabrics. The first day, light was created, and on the fourth, the luminaries. The heavens were separated from the sea on the second day, and on the fifth day, birds, the creatures of heaven, and fish, the creatures of the sea, were created. Dry land appeared on the third day, and on the sixth day, land animals and mankind were created. To emphasize this connection between the first and fourth days, I reproduced the angle between light and dark of the first day in the curve of the sun on the fourth day. In addition, I divided both the second and fifth days horizontally, to repeat the division of heaven and sea on day two in the creatures of heaven and sea on day five. And finally, the green of the trees and plants from the third day are repeated in the backgrounds of the fabrics used for the sixth day, when the land animals were created.



Just as the left side of the quilt tells the story of Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a from top to bottom, the right side tells the story of Genesis 2:4b – 2:25 in the same way. In this second creation story, the man

was created first. I chose the hand-dyed brown fabric for the man because he was created “from the dust of the earth.”⁵ This same brown extends both down the left side of the column and along the bottom, to show that this creation story seems to be framed by and focused on the man.

After the man was created, God planted a garden and placed the man in the garden. The green floral print represents the garden, and here the brown triangle symbolizes the placing of the man in the center of the garden. After the garden was planted and the trees were growing, God realized that “it is not good for the man to be alone.”⁶ God responded by creating “all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them.”⁷ The animal fabric shows a few of the animals made as companions for the man. But, because “no fitting helper was found”⁸ for the man among these animals, the brown fabric triangle does not invade the animal block.

Finally, God created a woman from the man’s rib as a fitting partner. I chose a hand dyed purple fabric to represent the woman for several reasons. First, because the woman was made from the man, I wanted to use the same type of fabric. Yet the woman is a separate entity and clearly different from the man, so the fabric should not be too similar, so they don’t blend together. I decided on purple because I wanted a bold color to stand for the strong female character that would soon emerge in this woman, but I also wanted to avoid the typically “feminine” colors of pink and red, and the connotations they may yield. The brown curve in the purple block represents the man’s rib, from which the woman was created.

It is this story of the woman’s creation that is most often remembered and used as a justification for the inferiority of women. The argument is often made that man was created first, and therefore males are naturally superior to females, although this argument is weakened by the fact that humans were made after all other animals, yet were to “rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”⁹ The assignment of dominion or superiority, then, does not depend necessarily on the order of creation. It is also argued that woman is subordinate to man because she was created from the man’s own rib. To counter this negative perspective, biblical scholar Phyllis Trible points out that the woman is unique because she is “built of raw material from the earth creature, rather than from [just] the earth.”¹⁰

Despite the emphasis often placed on this creation story, the fact remains that this is only one version of two narratives that account for the creation of woman. A considerable effort has been placed on reconciling the differences between the two creation stories in Genesis. Rabbi Jeremiah ben Leazar suggested that God created the first man a hermaphrodite.¹¹ Rabbi Samuel ben Nah-



man argued that “[w]hen the Lord created Adam, He created him double-faced, then He split him and made him of two backs, one back on this side and one back on the other side.”¹² This argument plays on the word *tzela*, which although it is normally translated as “rib” in this story, is generally translated as “side” elsewhere in the Bible. “Jubilees . . . maintains that the ‘female’ created on the sixth day of creation was in fact Adam’s ‘rib,’ a female entity that existed inside Adam.”¹³ Tribble dismisses all of the above speculations by noting that “the shift from singular to plural pronouns shows clearly that *ha-adam* is not one single creature who is both male and female but rather two creatures, one male and one female.”¹⁴

Other authorities have attempted to reconcile the tension between the two Genesis creation narratives in different ways. Rabbi Eliezer, for example, attempts to place the second story of creation entirely into the sixth day of the first story.¹⁵ This allows for the creation of two separate humans, male and female, both on the sixth day of creation, but it does not solve the problem of the conflicting order of creation in the two stories. If the second story fit completely into the sixth day, then plants and trees could not have been created on the third day. As we have seen, although many *midrashim* attempt to weave together the two creation stories, “no single reading . . . can account for all the data”.¹⁶ By separating the two creation stories, I hope to deemphasize the second narrative of the creation of woman, giving equal weight to both stories and showing that the two cannot be reconciled.

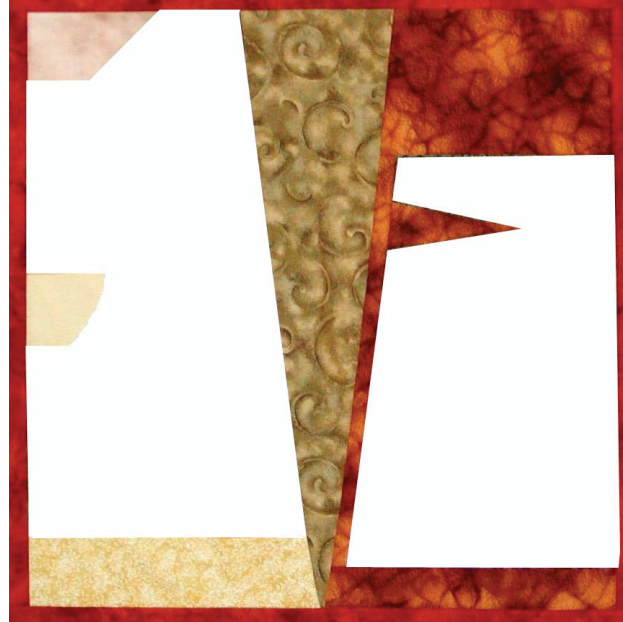
The orange border symbolizes God, who surrounds both the conflicting stories of creation and the chaos of the *midrashim*. This border shows that God is not divided by the two stories, nor does anything separate God from His creations. The process of choosing a fabric to represent God was an interesting adventure. I asked many people what color they imagined when thinking of God. My father said sky blue, because you look to the sky to speak with God. My mother and several friends said pure white, which makes sense to me but doesn’t work as a quilt border. White can represent purity, the indescribable, or all of the colors that are contained in white light. But the border of the quilt needs to frame and contain the piece in addition to making the piece “pop” when hung on a white wall. Others said gold, silver, and red. The number of different answers shouldn’t surprise us, because there is truly nothing in this earth that can describe God, and we all try to use different earthly images to describe the indescribable.

In an attempt to find the impossible, my mother and I went to a fabric store in Cheshire, CT, in search of God. I immediately eliminated several categories of fabrics. Solids cannot describe the depth of God, and prints are too defining. I therefore decided to focus on the mottled fabrics. Many of the fabrics were too light, too dark, or too weak. I needed a strong, deep color. When I pulled the deep orange from the shelf, I looked at my mother and she said, “I think you found God.”

Once the quilt was designed, I debated over some of the details of construction. I was uncertain which creation story I should place on the left, and which I should place on the right. According to source criticism, the first story found in Genesis was actually written second,¹⁷ so I

considered placing the second story on the left. This order would also work if the quilt was “read” from right to left, as Hebrew is read, since Hebrew is the original language of the Genesis stories themselves.

However, after I sketched out the quilt with the first story on the left, my roommate, Audrey, pointed out that the blocks of fabric representing creation spell “EVE,” which I had not intentionally designed. Yet I found this reading appealing. Without realizing it, my interpretation of Creation placed Eve at the center of the stories. Instead of turning Eve into a villain or a secondary character, this quilt suggests instead that Eve is at the heart of Creation. The first “E” is formed by the first, fourth, and seventh days; the wedge forms a “V;” and the shape of the man forms an “E” in the second creation story. In order to ensure that the first “E” is visible, I made sure that the first, fourth, and seventh days were of a similar color and contrast value, while I chose fabrics that would ensure a distinct contrast with the other days. Thus, because of the content of these days, they are represented with yellow fabrics that are light in value, while the other days are constructed of darker fabrics.



It would still be possible to switch the columns and keep the word, “Eve,” but it would result in the visual separation of God from His creations by the man of the second story. I didn’t want to place man between God and His creations, because doing so may result in the confusion between God and man that many feel was the reason for the woman’s creation. The *midrashim* express concern that both the angels and the animals would confuse the man with their Creator,¹⁸ and thus woman was created as a means for delineating the separation between the two. For these reasons, I decided to place Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a on the left, and Genesis 2:4b – 2:25 on the right.

Through this depiction of the two stories of creation in Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a and Genesis 2:4b – 2:25, I hope that I have allowed the viewer to look again at the text. Looking at the text again is precisely what Nehema Aschkenasy believes is required, “independently of the myths, interpretations, and commentaries that have accompanied it from the first exegetical efforts to this day.”¹⁹ In addition, I hope that the viewer can see the “unity of the text, despite the dual versions it contains,”²⁰ not through the chaos which exists in the conflicting *midrashim* accounts, but rather through God, who embraces and surrounds both stories.

The Garden

I created the garden quilt out of a desire to present the garden story in a new light. As Tribble observes, the traditional reading of Genesis 3:1 – 3:7 “portrays woman as ‘temptress’ and troublemaker who is dependent upon and dominated by her husband.”²¹ Nearly every artistic representation of this scene, from both Jewish and Christian traditions, portrays Eve reaching for a piece of fruit – usually an apple – from a tree. A snake is wrapped either around the trunk of the tree or a branch, and Adam is often depicted standing nearby, looking innocent. Eve is therefore represented as being weak because she ate this fruit, and evil because she knowingly tempted Adam to eat as well. Furthermore, these qualities are transferred to all women, because the first woman is taken to represent all future women.

These widespread interpretations, however, do not have a legitimate basis in the text. There is no indication that Eve intentionally tempted Adam when she gave him the fruit. The text simply states that she “gave some to her husband, and he ate.”²² There is also no reason to believe that the first man and woman were meant to provide a template for all future men and women. This is simply not a necessary logical conclusion. Finally, the weak and naïve woman often associated with Eve is far from the decisive and thoughtful woman we find in the text.

Eve acknowledges the tree as “good for eating, and a delight to the eyes, and [sees] that the tree [is] desirable as a source of wisdom.”²³ As rabbinic literature scholar Reuven Kimelman notes, these “three characteristics contrast with the trees, which were originally described as only ‘desirable to look at and good to eat’ (2:9).”²⁴ The fact that Eve hesitates and considers the benefits of the fruit before she takes it and eats shows that she is not only capable of rational thought, but that she uses this ability to consider the serpent’s argument. “The biblical narrator pauses this terse, fast-paced storytelling to delve into the woman’s mind, giving us a glimpse into her reasoning and internal discourse.”²⁵ Furthermore, the fact that she considers the wisdom as a personal benefit to be gained shows “the woman’s intellectual hunger, her desire to augment her mind.”²⁶

It is the woman’s often overlooked desire for wisdom that I decided to focus on in my quilted interpretation of this story. In order to avoid the typical visual representation of Eve plucking an apple from a tree, I chose to use an open book to symbolize the tree of knowledge. By turning the tree into a book, Eve is then reaching for the knowledge and wisdom contained within. In the quilt, the serpent is holding the book open to Eve because he tempted her to reach for this wisdom.

The background fabric was chosen to represent the Garden of Eden. The beige color provided a good background for the scene while the green flower print immediately brought the Garden to mind. The green print used for the book cover represents the leaves of the tree of knowledge and the fabric of the serpent serves both as snakeskin and the trunk of the tree. Wire placed inside the serpent’s head, tongue, arms, and tail allowed me to sculpt these features and place them in the exact position that was most desirable. The green vines, which are quilted throughout all three layers of the quilt, serve the dual purpose of holding the quilt together and providing visual interest.

In addition, these vines gave me a kind of compositional guide for the placement of the flowers in the garden. The green fabric from the book cover is repeated in the border to represent the other trees of the garden, which all seem to blend together and become unimportant at this moment in the story, when the focus is on the tree of knowledge.

The use of an off-white glove to symbolize Eve reaching for the tree of knowledge was not an easy choice to decide upon. I wanted to get away from the typical representation of Eve as a pallid white girl with long blonde hair. In fact, I wanted to stay away from depicting Eve as a human, so there would be no one image that would immediately be brought to mind. I tried to come up with some symbol or color to represent Eve, but nothing seemed to work. Even after a trip to see Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, none of the symbols chosen to represent important women through the years sparked any inspiration on how to portray Eve. In Judy Chicago's groundbreaking feminist installation piece, a triangular table is set for 39 famous women from mythology and history. Each place setting depicts the woman's name with symbols and other images that relate to her life. Yet there was no symbol that I could pull from this piece that would both represent Eve and provide the urgency that I was seeking. I did not want to simply portray Eve near the tree; rather, I wanted to show that she was reaching for the knowledge it provided.

Eventually, I stumbled upon an off-white glove that had belonged to my grandmother. The glove seemed to work perfectly. It represents the hand of a woman, but it doesn't force any specific image of the woman it belongs to. In addition, the fact that it belonged to my grandmother also fit the image of the knowledge-seeking woman that I wanted to portray. My grandmother was a life-long learner, always searching for more knowledge through classes, books, and her own experience. She truly was like Eve in this respect, and she reached eagerly for whatever the tree





of knowledge had in store.

I placed wire in the glove as well, in order to ensure that the fingers were in a position that replicated a hand reaching for something that was just out of reach. I imagine this quilt to represent that moment of hesitation, right before Eve takes the fruit. This is the moment when she considers the fruit and decides that the knowledge that can be gained through eating it is worth the consequences that may result.

The next great decision that I needed to make involved what to place on the pages of the book. In order to decide what to place on the book, I needed to determine the nature of the knowledge that was gained through eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge – not an easy task. The text does not tell us what this knowledge was, exactly. We only know that “the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked.”[□] Many have speculated on the meaning of this verse. The Rabbis of *Genesis Rabbah* wonder if the man

and woman were rendered blind, because their eyes were not opened before.[□] They conclude that the man and woman were shown “how many generations they had destroyed”[□] through their disobedience.

Tribble sees the opening of their eyes as a fulfillment of the serpent’s prediction that “your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad.”[□] Yet Tribble points out that “...ironically, they know the opposite of what the serpent promised. They know their helplessness, insecurity, and defenselessness.”[□] This is a fascinating theory, but hard to depict in fabric.

Looking to other scholars, Kimelman also discusses this conflict between the serpent’s prediction and the outcome.

“The eyes of the two of them were opened” – just as the serpent had said. “And they knew” – seeing how the serpent had correctly predicted the first part, the response of the reader is primed for similar precision with regard to the second, namely, that they “knew that they were God(like) knowing ...” What a letdown to find out they only “knew that they were nude” (3:7).[□]

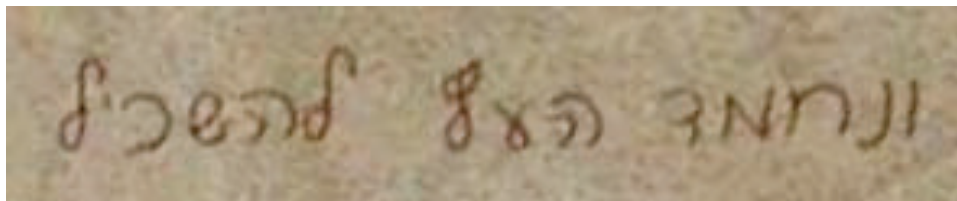
Kimelman concludes that the knowledge gained after eating the fruit is a newfound awareness of the difference between the two of them. “When Adam first saw Eve, he ... focused on similarities – ‘she is bone of my bones; flesh of my flesh’ (2:23). . . . The consciousness of difference, however, now created division, requiring a loincloth of fig leaves to mask what sets them apart.”[□]

Many interpret the knowledge that was gained to be sexual in nature. Biblical scholar Ilana Pardes refers to the “‘knowledge’ they acquired back west in the Garden” which resulted in the

birth of Cain and Abel.[□] Another scholar, Mieke Bal, sees the wisdom gained as the “ability to accept the human condition – namely, sexuality and death.”[□] “Another commentator understands knowledge of good and bad to be ‘the capacity to make independent judgments concerning human welfare.’”[□] Others interpret the knowledge as a “transition from childhood to adulthood or ... [a] growth in human culture.”[□] Furthermore, “for the Rabbis, Wisdom is virtually synonymous with Tora[h],”[□] and if this is true, then perhaps Eve learned all of Torah through eating the fruit.

In the end, I decided to use an off-white, flower-print fabric to wrap the foam used as the pages of the book. The flowers and leaves on the pages represent those of the tree. I decided not to place anything else on these pages for several reasons. First, scholars remain uncertain as to the exact nature of the knowledge gained. Second, Eve herself was most likely unsure of exactly what the knowledge was that she was reaching for.

I wanted this quilt to allow the viewer to rethink the text, and force him/her to consider the knowledge that Eve was reaching for, without deciding for the viewer what this knowledge may have been. In order to further guide the viewer to consider this scene, I embroidered the words



דמחנה ליכשהל יעה (and the tree was desirable for wisdom) from Genesis 3:6. These three words describe the moment that I wanted to depict

through this quilt: the moment when Eve considers the fruit desirable to gain wisdom, and decides to reach for this wisdom.

This series of quilts is meant to provide a fresh look at the story of Adam and Eve by forcing the viewer to return to the text and rethink the traditional interpretations that have dominated our society for thousands of years. The creation quilt attempts to deemphasize both the second creation story of woman taken from man’s rib, and the foundation of women’s inferiority that has been read into that text. The garden quilt forces the viewer to face a thoughtful Eve who knowingly reaches for the fruit of the tree of knowledge to increase her wisdom. This quilt therefore



invites the viewer to rethink the traditional formulation of Eve as evil and weak. In this way, I created a visual narrative through these quilts that engages the Genesis narratives on new terms.

Notes

1 All biblical citations and translations refer to *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

2 Genesis 1:27.

3 Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts* (Rockport, MA: Oneword Publications, 1998), 10.

4 Ibid.

5 Genesis 2:7

6 Genesis 2:18

7 Genesis 2:19

8 Genesis 2:20

9 Genesis 1:28

10 Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 96.

11 *Genesis Rabbah* VIII, 1 (trans. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, London: The Soncino Press, 1983).

12 Ibid.

13 James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 85.

14 Trible, 18.

15 *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* XI (trans. Gerald Friedlander, New York: Herman Press, 1965).

16 Reuven Kimelman, "The Seduction of Eve and the Exegetical Politics of Gender," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1.

17 Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 25, 246.

18 Burton L. Visotzky, *Reading the Book: Making the Bible a Timeless Text* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 198.

19 Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 122.

20 Ibid.

21 Trible, 73.

22 Genesis 3:6

23 Genesis 3:6

24 Kimelman, 8.

25 Aschkenasy, 126.

26 Ibid, 127.

27 Genesis 3:7

28 Genesis Rabbah XIX, 6.

29 Ibid.

30 Genesis 3:5

31 Tribble, 114.

32 Kimelman, 9.

33 Kimelman, 10.

34 Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 40.

35 Pardes., p 30.

36 Sally Frank, "Eve Was Right to Eat the 'Apple': The Importance of Narrative in the Art of Lawyering," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 8 (1996): 94.

37 Kimelman, 22.

38 Visotzky, 210.