

## A Genesis Gender Bias?

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**NRSV Genesis 2:7** Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground,<sup>a</sup> and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup> Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil....

**Genesis 2:15** The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. <sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

**Genesis 2:18** Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." <sup>19</sup> So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup> The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. <sup>21</sup> So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. <sup>22</sup> And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man....

**Genesis 3:1** Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" <sup>2</sup> The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup> but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" <sup>4</sup> But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; <sup>5</sup> for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Do some translations of the Bible that you may know and love have an anti-woman bias? The story of Adam and Eve, the garden and the serpent and the fruit, is one particularly fraught with controversy. No doubt it has been

interpreted in the past as stigmatizing Eve (and by extension women in general) as an evil source of temptation, entrapping the defenseless male. Julie Faith Parker, an accomplished Bible scholar, wants to counter these misinterpretations, and has offered a detailed exegesis of this passage.<sup>1</sup> She focuses especially on 3:6b, “and she also gave some [of the fruit] to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.” Many translations omit the words “who was with her,” and Dr. Parker sees this omission as providing a license for misogyny. Does it really do this?

I will try to reconstruct her argument as best I can, although I find it not entirely clear. In essence, without these two words indicating that Adam was present during the temptation and eating, one is likely to conclude that Adam was the unwitting, ignorant victim of Eve’s machinations. There is no doubt the text has been interpreted misogynistically by some, notably Jerome, Tertullian, and even the author of 1 Timothy, as Dr. Parker points out. But is this really the fault of omitting those two words?

Dr. Parker begins her presentation by stating:

This article reveals how English translations of Gen 3:6b (“and she gave also to her husband with her and he ate”) frequently isolate the woman by failing to translate עִמָּה (“with her”) in this verse.... While some translators consider עִמָּה insignificant in Gen 3:6, this article argues that neglecting to translate this word has important ramifications. Bibles that do not mention that Adam was “with her” facilitate interpretations that excuse the man and condemn the woman.<sup>2</sup>

She cites fifty Bible translations, noting that over a third of them omit the words “[who was] with her.” (The word עִמָּה literally means “with her”; “who was” is understood from the context.) Particularly notable for this omission are the RSV and NJPS, especially since these translations fall into the category of “formal equivalence,” trying to match as closely as possible the wording of the original.

Why is this so important? Without an explicit statement that the man was “with her,” the reader will supposedly get the impression that Eve surrendered to the temptation all on her own, consumed the fruit forbidden by God but that the serpent tempted her to eat anyway, then later offered it

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Faith Parker, “Blaming Eve Alone: Translation, Omission, and Implications of עִמָּה in Genesis 3:6b,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132, no. 4 (2013), 729-47.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 729.

to Adam, an innocent and hitherto uninvolved third party. Thus the onus for the transgression appears to fall squarely and exclusively on Eve. This is Dr. Parker's argument as best I can understand it.

If an interpreter is determined to spin the story against the woman, no doubt he will do so. But does the omission of those two words really make a difference? And are translators who leave them out somehow suspect? My answer to both of these questions is no.

According to Dr. Parker we have these two possible interpretations:

1. Eve was on her own during the temptation and the eating, and Adam was an innocent victim who only appeared later.
2. Adam was with her the whole time, possibly when the serpent tempted Eve and certainly when she ate, so was equally a party to the "crime."

Which of these interpretations is most likely supposedly will depend on the presence or absence of that one Hebrew word meaning "with her."

Let's look closely at this, by examining three translations of the critical verse. The first is a literal English translation of the Hebrew. The second is the NRSV. The third is the RSV.

And the woman saw that the tree is good for food and an object of craving for the eyes, and the tree is desirable to make one wise, and she took from its fruit and she ate, and she gave also to her man with her and he ate. (English literal)

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. (NRSV)

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, and he ate. (RSV)

One can see that the literal translation doesn't flow very smoothly. Dr. Parker states: "Most enigmatic, however, are formal committees of erudite biblical scholars who explicitly adopt a word-for-word (or formal

equivalency) approach and yet refrain from translating עִמָּה.” This is misleading. Even a “formally equivalent” translation cannot be word for word. If the translation does not result in idiomatic English it will not be practically useful, and no two languages will ever correspond word for word when expressed in their native idioms.

And so some translators have decided, without any gender bias in mind, that translating “with her” literally does not result in the smoothest English rendering. “And she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate” (NRSV) is technically more faithful to the original text (well, maybe), but it is redundant. The RSV version without “who was with her” is better English. The redundancy works in biblical Hebrew, but it is not typical of the English language. In addition, translating the one Hebrew word עִמָּה as four English words “who was with her” does not necessarily produce a more accurate result. To a grammarian the Hebrew word is a prepositional phrase, but it is not a parenthetical explanation as it seems in the English translation; it is really only one little Hebrew word adding just a little additional emphasis to what the sentence already says. Adding the words “who was,” which are not in the Hebrew, turns this one little word into a clause, giving it far more weight in English than it has in the original. Even calling עִמָּה a “prepositional phrase” makes it sound like more than it is. Over-translating can be just as misleading as under-translating, if not even more so.

Before considering whether “who was with her” actually adds to the meaning of the sentence, I would just mention two similar examples, showing how the redundancy can work in biblical Hebrew, comparing a literal translation with a modern rendering:

#### Example 1: Ruth 1:7

וַתֵּצֵא מִן־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הָיְתָה־שָׁמָּה וּשְׁתֵּי כַלְתֶּיהָ עִמָּה וַתֵּלְכֶנָּה בְּדֶרֶךְ לָשׁוּב אֶל־אֶרֶץ  
יְהוּדָה:

And [Naomi] went out from the place where she was there, and two daughters-in-law with her, and they walked in the way to return to the land of Judah. (Literal)

So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. (NRSV)

We can already see a redundancy in the word “there” in the literal rendering. It is awkward in English but in Hebrew works perfectly well. The word translated “with her” in the literal version is עִמָּה, exactly the same word we find in Genesis 3:6. The NRSV supplies the word “living,” which is not in the Hebrew, and it does not translate עִמָּה (“with her”). The context makes a literal translation of this Hebrew idiom unnecessary. If the translation of Ruth were as faithful to the original Hebrew as Dr. Parker insists the translation of Genesis should be, it would say: “she and her two daughters-in-law with her.” Leaving out the “with her” subtracts nothing from the sentence’s meaning.

## Example 2: Genesis 33:1

וַיֵּשָׂא יַעֲקֹב עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה עֹשֹׂו בָּא וְעִמּוֹ אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ וַיִּסַּח אֶת-הַיְלָדִים עַל-  
לֵאָה וְעַל-רָחֵל וְעַל שְׁתֵּי הַשִּׁפְחוֹת:

And Jacob lifted his eyes and saw, and behold Esau comes and with him four hundred men, and he divided the children on Leah and on Rachel and on the two maidservants. (Literal)

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. (NRSV)

So far so good. The form עִמּוֹ “with him,” is so translated in the NRSV. But here is what the NIV does:

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants.

The NIV chooses not to translate “with him”; “coming with his four hundred men” means the same thing as “coming, and four hundred men with him” but is more concise and reads a little more smoothly.<sup>3</sup> The NRSV is closer to the actual wording of the Hebrew, but there is no significant difference in meaning. The choice is stylistic, not semantic. I would not fault the translators of the NIV on this account.

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<sup>3</sup> The NIV does say “with his four hundred men,” using the same preposition; however, the object of that preposition is “his four hundred men,” while the object of the preposition in the Hebrew and the NRSV is “him.”

Thus given the way Hebrew uses words, leaving out a particle like “with her” does not necessarily signify a change in meaning. But now we need to consider if in Genesis 3:6 the choice whether or not to include those words actually affects the meaning.

Two different questions are in play, which at times seem conflated in Dr. Parker’s presentation: Was Adam present during Eve’s *temptation*, and was he present during her *transgression*. Dr. Parker suggests that the inclusion of עמה in the Hebrew text signifies possibly the former and definitely the latter. This bears a closer look.

First question: Was Adam present during the *temptation*, when the serpent spoke to Eve?

There is no indication that Adam was present when the serpent was speaking to Eve. The use of plural verbs during Eve’s conversation with the serpent proves nothing; the statements concerning the tree and its fruit are general, and Adam does not have to be physically present for those verbs to make sense. The words “with her” occur in 3:6, “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food... she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.” The serpent is gone by then. All we know is that Adam was “with her” *when she ate*. That event took place *after* the conversation with the serpent. How long after, we do not know, but it was after. The serpent says nothing to Adam and Adam says nothing to the serpent. The serpent has already exited the scene. So with or without the words “with her,” the meaning of the sentence does not change.

We also know that Adam was not present during the serpent speech because when God takes them both to task for their disobedience, this is what they say:

But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” (Genesis 3:9-13, NRSV)

The woman mentions the serpent but the man does not; he mentions only his wife and appears not to know about the serpent. Had they both been present with the serpent, having shared the same experience, their responses should have been identical: it was the serpent's idea. If the man had been tempted directly by the serpent he would have had no reason not to say so. He knew God had caught him red-handed, and he was in no position to lie to God about it.

Admittedly this scenario creates difficulties for a feminist interpretation, but it is what the text says. The first communication was serpent to Eve; the second was Eve to Adam. Some may spin this to pin the blame on Eve and exonerate Adam, but they too would be misunderstanding the text.

Adam's culpability stands whether or not he was actually present when the serpent spoke to Eve. The narrator tells us that Adam had been warned not to eat the fruit of the forbidden trees even before Eve was created (Genesis 2:17), so if anything he bears the most responsibility. Eve may have spoken to a serpent, but Adam got the word directly from God. Adam should have protected his wife but failed to do so.

Some modern interpreters see it differently. They maintain that the human being before the creation of the woman was not male but was sexually undifferentiated, or perhaps bisexual. This construal may appeal to our modern sensibilities, but it does not hold up upon close examination.

"Adam" does not occur in the text as a proper name. It is always *ha-adam*, with the definite article *ha*. There is no truly satisfactory way to translate this into English, but the NRSV and others have "the man," and that seems best. Some recent interpreters suggest "the earth creature" (since *adam* comes from *adamah*, meaning "earth") or something similar, a rendering with no implication of gender. This sounds more egalitarian, with "man" not preexisting "woman" but coming into being at the same time as she. But this is clearly counter to the meaning of the biblical text.

We read the following:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." (Genesis 2:18)

The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. (Genesis 2:20)

If this creature, *ha-adam*, were androgynous or sexually undifferentiated, it would be difficult to see why it would need a woman as a partner – the created “partner” did indeed turn out to be a woman. Clearly the text is saying that a man by himself is not enough; a woman also is needed. And in any case, the woman was not formed until *after* the part was taken from the man.<sup>4</sup>

We should also note that this same term, *ha-adam*, is used to refer to the man even after the creation of the woman. He is clearly male by then, and there is no reason to assume that the meaning of the word has changed. He is *ha-adam* both before and after the woman was created.

And so with or without עֵמָה in 3:6, the natural interpretation of the story is that Adam was not present during Eve’s conversation with the serpent. The presence or absence of עֵמָה makes no difference one way or the other.

Second question: Was Adam present during the *transgression*, when Eve ate the fruit?

Dr. Parker appears to consider this question the critical one. She states:

This small Hebrew word, עֵמָה, supplies essential information by indicating the man’s presence when the woman takes the fateful bite.<sup>5</sup>

More likely, עֵמָה resolves any lingering ambiguity about the man being with the woman when she eats.<sup>6</sup>

This part of Dr. Parker’s argument I find the most curious. Here again is the NRSV on 3:6: “She took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.” Of course Adam was with her when she ate. How else could she have shared the fruit with him? Clearly she did not throw it to him from across the garden.

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<sup>4</sup> The word translated “rib” in 2:21 [צִלְעַ] can also mean “side,” a more egalitarian, perhaps more palatable way to think of the creation of woman in this story.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 730-31.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 733.



If we subtract עמה from the sentence this is what we get:

וַתֵּקַח מִפִּרְיוֹ וַתֹּאכַל וַתִּתֵּן גַּם-לְאִשָּׁהּ וַיֹּאכַל

Literally, it means “And she took of its fruit and she ate, and she gave also to her man and he ate.” No temporal separation is implied. Even without עמה, the natural interpretation is that both eatings took place on the same occasion: “she did this, and she did that.” Three Hebrew verbs in close succession, one right after the other: “and she took,” “and she ate,” “and she gave.” Clearly this all took place as one single incident. To suggest that she ate on one occasion, then later on, at another time and place gave Adam to eat, is far-fetched and does not fit the flow of the text. The conjunction “and” connects the three actions, and there is no indication that any significant time elapsed between any of them. And then there is the word “also,” another connecting word, and not “later,” which would have separated the events. Eve ate, and also gave some to Adam: that is exactly what the text says, with or without עמה. It all takes place within one short, clipped sentence. It is not reasonable to suppose that only the inclusion of the words “with her” would prevent an unbiased reader from thinking these were two different occasions, with Adam present only at the second.

And even if we put עמה back into the sentence, it wouldn’t change anything. If we are going to be so loose with the text as to add an implied “later” between the two clauses, positing a temporal separation between Eve’s eating and Adam’s when none is indicated, then adding “who was with her” reinforces Adam’s presence only at the second event, when Eve gave him the fruit, and not the first, when Eve ate it herself: “She took of its fruit and ate; and sometime later she also gave some to her husband with her, and he ate.” The words “with her” will not negate a separation between Eve’s eating and Adam’s, if one is intent on assuming such a separation.

Note that the Hebrew does not say “who had been with her,” or even “who was with her.” It only says “with her.” Given the elliptical nature of biblical Hebrew one might even translate “she also gave some to her husband who joined her,” if one insists on separating the two eatings. The presence of עמה determines nothing one way or the other. Dr. Parker places much too much weight on the word עמה (which we should remember is a single word, not a clause as in most English translations). The natural interpretation, with or without that word, is that Adam was present both when Eve ate and

when she gave him to eat. Translating עמה explicitly is not necessary to establish this. The presence or absence of that word does not change the meaning of the sentence.

And again, a key point keeps getting lost: Does it even matter whether Adam was there when Eve ate? Yes, he could have tried to stop Eve, but clearly he was too weak and tempted himself. With or without עמה it was still Eve who gave him the fruit. But God already told him not to eat, he ate, case closed. He knew it was forbidden before Eve made the offer: as we've already seen, *he was warned even before this incident took place*. With or without עמה there are no grounds for placing blame solely on the woman. Both were warned, both ate, and both are responsible. And so the decision whether to translate עמה explicitly is stylistic, not critical.

Actually, Adam comes off very badly in this story. He is the first to receive the warning not to eat the fruit. He does it anyway, failing to remind Eve about the word he received from God. Then he fails to take responsibility for his own actions, blaming Eve when he already knew directly from God that eating the fruit was prohibited. Reading the story just as it is, without trying to bend the text to a more modern sensibility, does not allow for "blaming Eve alone." Those who read the text misogynistically are bending it toward their own anti-woman bias. This is clear from reading the story as a whole, and not focusing microscopically on 3:6. A misogynist commentator will spin the text against Eve no matter what it actually says. All the more reason to pay close attention to what the text actually says.

To wrap up, the use of עמה in the original sentence adds emphasis and is more poetic, but it does not change the basic meaning of the passage. *With or without עמה Adam was not present during Eve's conversation with the serpent. And with or without עמה Adam was present when Eve ate.*

### **Conclusion: Why this is important**

It is important to place Dr. Parker's presentation in perspective, because her treatment of some Bible translators is not quite fair. At best she seems to question their competence, and at worst she casts aspersions on their motives. Here are some quotes:

This investigation of עמה shows how translators collude (sometimes unintentionally) with culturally prevalent and historically pernicious depictions of Eve.<sup>7</sup>

Most enigmatic, however, are formal committees of erudite biblical scholars who explicitly adopt a word-for-word (or formal equivalency) approach and yet refrain from translating עמה. This is the case with the Standard Bible Committee, which translated the RSV, and the translation committee responsible for the 1985 Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (NJPS).<sup>8</sup>

While Alter left out “with her” inadvertently, the Standard Bible Committee did so knowingly. For a few translators, like Jerome, this decision seems intentional to emphasize the woman’s culpability. Some translators simply follow previous Bible versions that do not say the man is “with her” without realizing this omission. Other translators, aware that they do not convey עמה, have merely viewed this word as unimportant; however, it is highly significant. Translations that fail to convey that the man is “with her” when the woman eats the fruit enable readers to excuse Adam and condemn Eve.<sup>9</sup>

Translators should beware of imposing androcentric biases and should guard against linguistic choices that skew the text against women.<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Parker reserves special criticism for the RSV and NJPS. While some translators may have omitted עמה inadvertently or ignorantly, the RSV translators did so “knowingly.” They and the translators of the NJPS should have known better. Such translations “enable readers to excuse Adam and condemn Eve.” They “impose androcentric biases” and their linguistic choices “skew the text against women.” These are serious charges.

And they are unfounded, as has been shown. An unbiased reader would be highly unlikely to think, upon reading the RSV’s “she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate,” that Adam was not there during both eatings. The words “and also” are in the Hebrew, indicating a second action that naturally follows directly upon the first. Biased readers will “skew the text” no matter what the text says, as has been the case with tendentious exegeses throughout the history of the church. If a commentator produces an outlandish interpretation, it is not the fault of the conscientious translator.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 731.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 742.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 747.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

I have seen an audience stirred to outrage at the thought that translators with a hidden agenda might deliberately produce Bibles harmful to women. In a video presentation offered through the Marble Collegiate Church, Dr. Parker mentioned examining the notes of the RSV translation committee and finding that the words “with her” appeared in the draft but were crossed out. “What do you know?” she said, “They saw it, they knew it, they translated it, and they crossed it out, so it doesn’t become published.” While she admits we cannot know for sure what motivated the committee, she appears to question their motives, pointing out that the discussants were “all white guys” and continuing, “I think this is how they knew the story, that Eve is the one responsible for all this, and so that’s the way they translated it.”<sup>11</sup> This is bound to elicit anger toward these translators, in my opinion needlessly.

These speculations are not helpful. The true issue at hand is whether literally translating a Hebrew idiom produces the most idiomatic English. That is all. People may differ as to which rendering falls best on the ear, or as to how literal a translation should be. But misogyny, even if just by suggestion and not outright assertion, should not be read either into the text of the translation or into the hearts of the translators who produced it.

Finally, I am in complete sympathy with the concern of feminist scholars to address past misogynistic tendencies in the church, including the emergence of such tendencies in biblical interpretation. As Dr. Parker points out, lives have been at stake. But such concerns should not determine our understanding of the text itself, or induce us to bend the text until it says what we want it to say.<sup>12</sup> Reputable scholars have chosen to render Genesis 3:6 in different ways for honorable reasons. There are some spots in traditional translations that were not produced so honorably. Genesis 3:6 is not one of them.

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<sup>11</sup> Julie Faith Parker, “Eve: Why I Love Her and You Should Too,” video presentation, Marble Collegiate Church, October 5, 2022, [www.marblechurch.org/calendar/9176/eve-why-i-love-her-and-you-should-too-with-rev-dr-julie-faith-parker-online](http://www.marblechurch.org/calendar/9176/eve-why-i-love-her-and-you-should-too-with-rev-dr-julie-faith-parker-online).

<sup>12</sup> In the video presentation just cited Dr. Parker stated that a bad interpretation of a biblical text is one that is “harmful.” But who is to say what is harmful? How do you translate the story of the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19 in a way that is not traumatizing? What is acceptable to one reader may be triggering or harmful to another. Perhaps such concerns should be anticipated in making lesson plans, but they should not determine our exegesis.