

EXCERPT

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The Gospel According to Eve *A History of Women's Interpretation*

October 29, 2019 | \$25, 272 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5227-7

The Gospel According to Eve traces the history of women's interpretation of Genesis 1–3, readings of Scripture that affirmed women's full humanity and equal worth. Biblical scholar Amanda Benckhuysen allows the voices of women from the past to speak of Eve's story and its implications for marriage, motherhood, preaching, ministry, education, work, voting, and more.

The Implications of Eve's Story for Life Today

Years ago, when I was a campus minister, a young woman came into my office and asked if I would help her understand some Scripture texts she had been studying in her English class. She was not a Christian and had minimal exposure to the Bible, making it a difficult read. Even so, when I asked her what she thought about what she was reading and about the Bible more generally, she quickly indicated that she had no interest in the Bible as a religious text because "the Bible is not good news for women." To some, this may be a bewildering statement. Of course the Bible is good news for women. In Christ's death and resurrection, there is forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God. All who believe in Jesus will be saved. That is the promise of Scripture.

While this is true, the gospel tends to come to women with strings attached. In many Christian communities, following Jesus for women also means subscribing to a gender ideology that subordinates women to men and circumscribes women's activities to "divinely ordained" roles in church, home, and society. While men gain freedom in Christ to live for Jesus, women assume the yoke of a new law, restrictions, and requirements assigned to them for being the "weaker" sex. The argument is that these restrictions and requirements are God's will for women as revealed in Scripture. To ignore them is to reject God's divine commands and to undermine the authority of God's Word, the Bible.

Not all interpreters of Scripture, however, believe the Bible espouses the "domestication" and subordination of women. In the history of the church, there have always been those who have questioned notions of women's inferiority and who have believed that the Bible intends woman's full emancipation and equality. For them, the Bible, when interpreted correctly, is women's greatest advocate, encouraging women to embrace their identity in Christ, their full humanity as image bearers of God. Unfortunately, this stream of interpretation within the history of the church has often been marginalized and ignored, leaving many to believe that the matter is quite settled. To accept the Bible as authoritative is to affirm women's distinct status as the "weaker vessel."

This book seeks to trace the history of this alternative reading of Scripture, reflected in the voices of women and their interaction with Genesis 1–3. Often when a matter is considered settled, as a rule of thumb, it ought not to be broached again unless there is new evidence. In this case, the new evidence is a history, a chorus no less, of women's voices that have been buried over time that raise serious challenges to traditional readings and to the gender ideologies that these readings have spawned as well as offering compelling re-readings that highlight the dignity, worth, and full humanity of women. These women in history wrote not out of a pressure to be politically correct, nor as an accommodation to a secular feminist movement. Instead, they wrote to explain to the church how its ideas and ideals of femininity were hurting the daughters of Christ and compromising their physical safety and well-being. Certain that this was not what a good God intended for them, these women offered their own interpretations of Scripture to encourage the church (and society) to rethink their convictions about the nature and role of women.

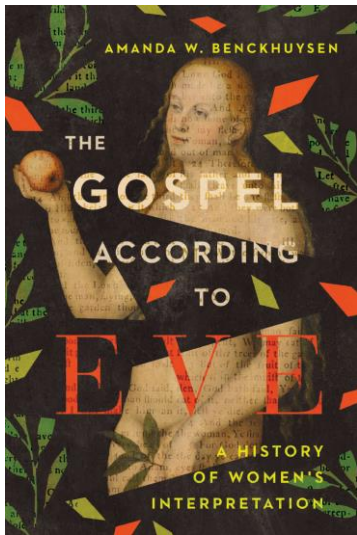


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Today, women continue to struggle with the limitations and expectations placed on their gender in the Christian community. In many, particularly in evangelical churches, the pulpit and leadership structures remain closed to women. Even in churches where women can be ordained, female pastors experience limited access to positions of senior leadership in churches or within the denomination as a whole. Unspoken ideals of femininity, often associated with child rearing and domestic activities, leave a growing number of women struggling for acceptance and welcome. And many churches continue to convey to women that they are responsible for men's sexual misconduct, reinforcing notions that women's bodies are dangerous and shameful. The point is that the Christian community continues to struggle with affirming and celebrating women and women's gifts and callings. Given the high stakes of this issue for the church's witness, the long history of harm against women justified by interpretations of Scripture, and the struggles women continue to face in the church and society, it may be time for the Christian community to take up the conversation again about what it means that God created human beings male and female. My hope and prayer is that this survey of women's voices, their critiques, their re-readings, and their testimonies will enhance this conversation, deepening our understanding of the Scriptures and opening our eyes to what the Scriptures say and don't say about gender distinction.

—Taken from the introduction



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Q & A

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Amanda W. Benckhuysen (PhD, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto) is Johanna K. and Martin J. Wyngaarden Senior Professor of Old Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary and a researcher in biblical interpretation and reception history.

Gender Ideology and Interpretations of Eve

What led to your interest in studying and now sharing about the various interpretations of Eve throughout history?

Amanda W. Benckhuysen: In my study of the history of interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve, I came across women and men in history who challenged the traditional reading that used this story to reinforce notions of female weakness and female subordination. As early as the fourteenth century, women interpreters in particular resisted this reading of Eve and offered their own readings that focused on Eve as Adam's partner and companion, created as fully human with all the dignity, value, responsibility, and authority that that entails.

What a shock to come across this alternative reading of Eve so early in the history of the church. I had somehow come to believe that egalitarian readings of Genesis 1–3 were an outgrowth of our times, cultural pressures, and influences on biblical interpretation. Here, however, were interpreters from a much earlier time period, when patriarchy was culturally accepted, suggesting that Scripture calls the Christian community to a different way of relating as men and women, to relationships of equality, mutuality, and shared governance, recognizing in each other our status as image bearers of God. As a woman who has personally been affected by gender debates in the Christian community, it was profoundly healing and encouraging to discover a countertradition in history that advocated for a more positive take on Eve and subsequently on women as a whole. The countertradition claimed that rightly interpreted, the Bible spoke of God's great love and care for women and commitment to their full flourishing. Furthermore, to encounter women in history who interpreted Eve in this way helped me feel not so alone in my work of advocating for greater respect, value, and acceptance of female leadership within the Christian community. It helped me see myself as continuing the work of a great cloud of witnesses who went before me, who sought to speak the truth in love about gender relations. Because I was so deeply blessed by discovering these women interpreters, I felt it important to share with others and make their stories and their work accessible to the body of Christ with the hope that others would be encouraged as I was.

What is your main thesis in *The Gospel According to Eve*?

Amanda: What is distinctive about my approach is that I address the question of what the Bible says about women through the lens of the history of interpretation. It is commonly held today that the push for gender equality in the church is a reaction to the culture. What I argue (or illustrate) in this book is that throughout the history of the church, there have been those who believed the opposite, that is, that female subordination and the limitation of women's roles was a capitulation of the Christian church to a patriarchal culture. Rightly interpreted, these interpreters suggest the Bible supports the full equality of women and men.

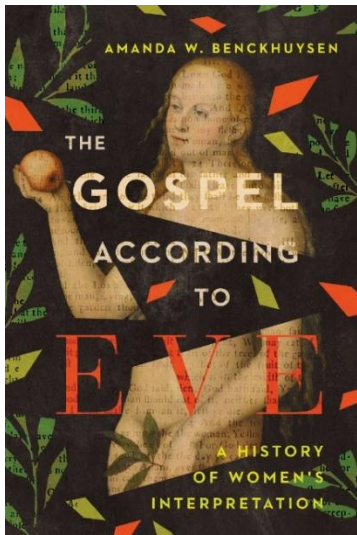


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Who did you have in mind as you were writing this book?

Amanda: The target audience are those in the Christian community—whether lay persons, theology students, or clergy—who are interested in what the Bible has to say about gender relations. Because each chapter has questions at the end, it is a great resource for an adult study or women's book study in the church. It would also function well as a text for a college class in gender studies at a Christian college. I have used the material in a seminary course on the history of interpretation of Genesis 1–3.

What do you hope your book contributes to the study of and discussions regarding gender ideology?

Amanda:

- This work on women's interpretations of Eve provides a history of women's thought about the story of Adam and Eve and how that impacted and shaped gender ideology.
- It gives insight into the discussion and debate about women and the Bible as it unfolded among the general population (lay persons), outside the academy and ecclesiastical authorities.
- It suggests that in the history of the Christian church there always was pushback against traditional interpretations of Eve and resistance by women (and men) in the church to notions of female inferiority.
- It illustrates how social location and personal experience influence the way readers read and interpret texts, what they see and hear in the text and what they choose to ignore.



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