

Out of Eden

Two authors seek to tackle the meaning of our biblical origin story – and the results are mixed **By Tibor Krausz**

IN THE Bible’s myth of creation, God starts off by reversing the natural order of things. Rather than having the first woman give birth to the first man, the Creator fashions Eve from Adam. Stranger still is the fact that Eve is a mere afterthought in His creation, introduced into it only on behalf of Adam to ease his loneliness and serve him as his “helpmeet” in the Garden of Eden.

Eve’s creation proves to be a mistake. A wily serpent with the gift of the gab convinces her to eat from the forbidden fruit on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eat she does and coaxes Adam into doing the same. Their divine progenitor isn’t amused. He sentences the couple and all their future offspring – all of us – to a life of toil and misery with inevitable death at the end of it. We’re barely into the Good Book’s first few verses and our kind is off to a bad start.

Or maybe not. It’s these sinfully attained godlike powers of knowledge that enable us to view the world with the divine powers of reason, even if this ability came at the cost of eternal life. We’ve gained some and we’ve lost some. Yet viewing the creation myth as factual cosmogony, as many of the faithful are wont to do, is missing the point. The Bible’s human origin story is concerned much less with logic and biological reality than with morality and religious etiology. Its main concern is to explain why the world is the way it is. Why are we born to die? Why do women suffer in childbirth? Why do we have to labor hard for a living? And, curiously, in a just-so tale of sorts, why do snakes crawl on their belly?

As the biblical authors saw it, these facts of life were punishments for the disobedience of history’s first couple, who defied God and threw a wrench into His handiwork. This is the Bible’s very first theological theme and it remains dominant for the rest of the book. The fortunes of humanity – and especially of the Jews, whom God elects as his chosen – rise and fall in direct

proportion with their obedience to His will. Fealty to the Almighty’s will brings prosperity; rejection of it warrants divine retribution. Always and unerringly. And it all started with Adam and Eve.

At its core the Bible is simply the epic tale of humanity’s willful defiance of God’s will and the Creator’s constant attempts to steer His profligate creations back onto the right path, at times through munificence, at other times through fire and brimstone. The biblical idea of our built-in recalcitrance culminated in a whole new religion, Christianity, when the apostle Paul, who primarily laid the new faith’s theological foundations, pronounced the salvific sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to have been atonement for Adam and Eve’s primal disobedience.

Science has long debunked the notion that humans were created fully formed as a pair of adults one day some 6,000 years ago. Yet the story of Adam and Eve continues to fascinate Jews, Christians and Muslims the world over. Millions of believers gain comfort from the idea that we can trace our lineage back to a single couple who were created in God’s own image. Our actual origins – we’ve evolved from single-celled organisms through an endless series of evolutionary trial and error – tend to hold far less romantic appeal.

In two new books, two Jewish-American authors set themselves the task of unraveling the continuing hold of the Bible’s origin story on the popular imagination. In “The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve,” Stephen Greenblatt, a Jewish-American prominent literary historian, treats his subject like a muralist. He paints on a large canvas to sketch a grand pointillist portrait of Adam and Eve as seen through the eyes of numerous exegetes, historians, writers and artists down through the centuries. The result is an often fascinating if, at times, overly discursive work.

In “The First Love Story: A Journey Through the Tangled Lives of Adam and

Eve,” Bruce Feiler, a best-selling author, acts more like a miniaturist. He zeroes in on a single aspect of the Genesis tale, portraying Adam and Eve as the protagonists of the world’s first literary romance. They were a loving couple who can teach us a lot about devotion, forbearance and spousal commitment, Feiler says.

A bit New Agey, that? Indeed. The author of several popular books on the Hebrew Bible, Feiler offers up insights such as this: “The only thing more forceful than hate is love.” And this: “Loneliness is a key part of unhappiness; togetherness is a key ingredient to happiness.” Adam and Eve, Feiler posits, were “made for each other” and their immediate descendants, too, “went looking for their match.” Perhaps. Yet he seems to forget that by necessity they did so incestuously, seeing as there were no other humans around yet on Earth apart from the first man and woman’s family – which somewhat mars the image he’s trying to convey of wholesome lovey-dovey idyll at the dawn of history.

Feiler also shows a predilection for howlers. “[T]he first time a human speaks in the Bible,” he informs us, is when Adam first sees Eve and famously declares her “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). Yet just a few verses prior Adam already bestowed names on all living creatures, which he presumably did by verbalizing. Overall, Feiler’s focus is on placing Eve back into her rightful place at the heart (literally and figuratively) of the biblical Creation to rescue the Genesis story from its traditional role as a foundational document of male chauvinism. That’s a praiseworthy goal, even if, in its service, the author occasionally arm-twists the text into tortured readings.

Adam and Eve’s story is tersely told in the Bible without much detail, and its enduring power has lain largely in its flexibility to interpretation that Feiler himself exploits. You can read almost anything into it. It’s a

palimpsest whereupon ever newer readings can be imposed almost at will. For centuries commentators have duly used the story as an urtext for their preferences and prejudices. They've blamed Adam and Eve for our unquenchable thirst for knowledge, which they saw as the primary cause of unbelief. They've blamed the first couple for our penchant for lust, which they saw as leading to a godless state of mind. They've blamed the seductive daughters of Eve for the travails of the sons of Adam.

Others have sought to tease esoteric wisdom out of the ancient text. "Ascetics, brooding on the temptations of the flesh, studied the verses for hints of alternative ways that the first humans might have intended to reproduce," Greenblatt writes. "Physicians pondered the possible health benefits of a vegetarian diet of the kind our species enjoyed in the Garden. Linguists tried to determine the language that Adam and Eve spoke and to detect the traces of it that might be left."

Yet others, including prominent rabbis, proffered competing claims: that Adam was a giant; that he was born already circumcised; that he was a hermaphrodite (as per Genesis 5:2, which they took to mean that God created the first human both male and female in a single body). Still other exegetes argued that Adam and Eve were unsurpassably beautiful; others that they were skeletal beings, reduced to such a pitiful state by the gravity of their crime.

One early Christian Gnostic text, written in Coptic on one of the papyrus codices, which were unearthed in Egypt in 1945 from a clay jar buried in the desert, portrayed the snake of Eden as a Promethean liberator of humanity who opened the eyes of Adam and Eve to the possibilities of knowledge that their jealous creator had hidden from them. This was deemed a heretical notion by the Church, yet such probing commentaries touched a raw nerve: How were Adam and Eve to know they would sin by eating from the forbidden fruit of good and evil before they could know what was good and what was evil? And why did God place that tree in Eden at all if He didn't want his creations to eat from it?

And so it went. The Creation account's inherent contradictions vexed theologians. The possible location of Eden exercised the imagination of cartographers. The discov-

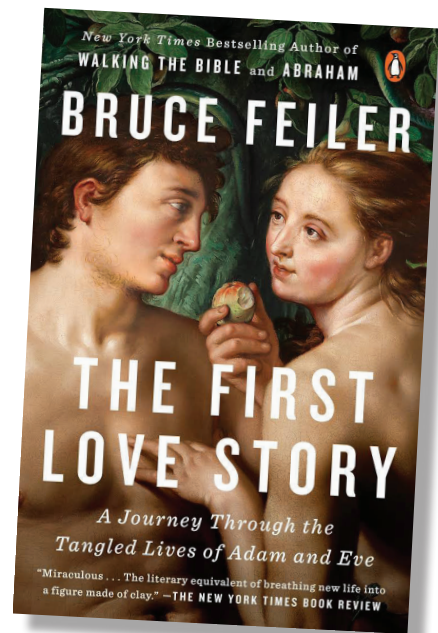
ery of the Americas spurred believers into trying to divine plausible explanations for the existence of these new worlds and their multitudes of hitherto unknown peoples whereof the Bible had nothing to say. The presumed bodily perfection of the human couple that God himself created inspired Renaissance artists to try and depict Adam and Eve as the embodiments of male and female beauty at its most sublime.

Such flights of fancy may well have been diverting but ultimately pointless, for the story of Adam and Eve, as we now know, has no basis in historical reality. It holds few real clues to a primordial state of human existence – save for a possible communal memory enshrined in the narrative that bore witness to a painful bygone transition from carefree hunting and gathering in nature's bounty to settled farming whereby people now had to grow their food "by the sweat of [their] brow" (Genesis 3:19).

Aware of the Creation story's flaws and contradictions, exegetes like the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria chose to view it as a wellspring of allegory where seemingly mundane occurrences signified profound spiritual insights. Taking the text literally just posed too many waxing questions. Ultimately, however, these ancient mythicists lost out to literalists like Augustine.

CHANNELING THE apostle Paul, the 5th-century bishop of Hippo formulated the repugnant idea of "original sin" that he read into the story of Adam and Eve. In so doing, he did more than most to shackle the Western spirit to the yoke of endless mental self-flagellation for a "crime" committed only in a fictitious account of humanity's origins – as rival contemporary Christian exegetes like Pelagius, soon branded heretics, recognized. A pagan philosopher turned devout Christian, Augustine was a gifted but petty and self-absorbed man who took the Genesis account literally in almost all its details. As he saw it, we're all born miserable sinners in the vein of Adam destined for hellfire after death. Only faith in Jesus, a new Adam, can liberate us from this fate. As if.

Augustine has had a vast influence on Western thought, yet anyone passably educated already knows that. Thus it's questionable that it's worth Greenblatt's while to recount Augustine's conversion and



The First Love Story *A Journey Through the Tangled Lives of Adam and Eve*
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theology at length, which the author does in two whole chapters while adding little beyond what you can learn in a freshman's course on the subject. Elsewhere in the book, meanwhile, Greenblatt gallops through the centuries. A short tour of human origins pieced painstakingly together by paleontologists from various bone fragments (a piece of cranium unearthed here, a tibia discovered there) is followed by backward glances at the Babylon Exile, which gave rise to the Torah as a unified text with its universalist message of a previously tribal deity, Yahweh, now ruling supreme over all the nations of the world.

We encounter, briefly, the 19th-century German scholar Julius Wellhausen, who pioneered the seminal work of biblical scholarship known as the documentary hypothesis, before we drop in on the autodidact Victorian Assyriologist George Smith, who deciphered the Babylonian creation myth "Enuma Elish" from hitherto unintelligible wedge-shaped marks on ancient cuneiform tablets. It's all fine escapism, relayed with stylistic verve, even if we may not always come away with revelatory new insights.

The gist of these detours boils down to this: The anonymous authors of the Torah may have fashioned the story of Adam and Eve in response to the Babylonian creation

myth with its patricidal deities who conjured up the world from a shapeless void through murder, mayhem and incestuous intercourse. It was a case of literary one-upmanship whereby the Hebrew authors adopted aspects of their captors' cosmogony but fundamentally reshaped them: unlike Babylonian divinities, Yahweh came to be portrayed as a singular creative force who needed no help from fellow gods or goddesses to bring the world into being. He was an all-powerful creator who made the universe, and man in it, at will. The Torah's authors literally wrote all other gods out of existence.

Yet the Hebrew god's newfound singularity came with a heavy theological price. Now that Yahweh was not only the only true god but the only existing god, the problem of evil arose. If evil was not caused by malevolent deities, this singular allegedly benevolent, omniscient and omnipotent divinity must have been responsible for it. The question was why? The Hebrew authors' answer was that God meted out divine punishments to us, often in the form of genocide, for our sins. Whatever befell us was just deserts for our actions. We had no one to blame but ourselves. This theme already dominates the story of Noah and the Flood, in which humanity comes a cropper for its iniquity.

IN THE process, though, logic is violated. “[D]oing away with multiple gods introduces certain problems, starting with the notion of an all-powerful, all-knowing god who nonetheless repents what he has himself created,” Greenblatt points out. “Did the wise maker not anticipate what his creatures would do? [And] how could such wickedness have arisen from creatures made in God’s image?” There have been answers to such questions, mostly centering on the issue of free will, but they all sound rather forced – the futile attempts of rabbis, priests and theologians to square a philosophical circle.

Literalism can kill – literally. Much of religious eschatology in the monotheistic religions derives its *raison d’être* from the spiritual quest to “repair” the world by returning it – if necessary through the cleansing agents of destruction and extreme violence – to a pure and godly state of being that allegedly infused the world before the Fall. Feiler’s thesis that the story of Adam and Eve is primarily meant to teach us about marital obligations, gender equality and the

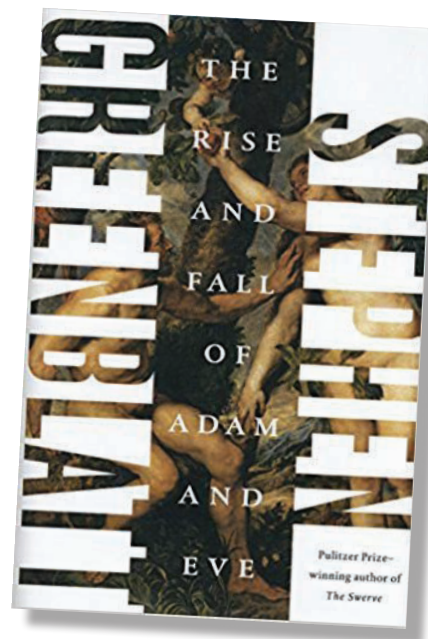
like have got lost on quite a few readers.

Instead, time-honored misogyny has drawn heavily on the Adam and Eve story. In rabbinic Judaism conjugal procreation has been seen as a divinely mandated duty enshrined in the Genesis command to “be fruitful and multiply.” Not so in normative Christian thought, influenced as it was by lifelong celibates in the Church who fulminated against the crimes of carnal desire that Eve supposedly introduced into the world through her wanton concupiscence and which now irredeemably tainted all her daughters. The medieval witch hunts were inspired by just such vile notions.

For many pious Christians, Adam and Eve made for a cautionary tale about lust and so abstinence was seen as a prime virtue. Tormented ascetics battling their demons of fleshly temptation were held up as exemplary servants of Jesus, himself a reported celibate. As it was with Adam and Jesus, so it was with Eve and the Virgin Mary: one was a sinful creature who caused our downfall, the other was a sexually unsullied paragon of virtue who saved us sinners from ourselves. “This elaborate counterpoint helped launch over the centuries an astonishing array of images: drawings, book illuminations, sculptures, frescoes, and paintings,” Greenblatt writes. “On the left side of the great eleventh-century bronze doors at Hildesheim, Eve nurses Cain, while on the right Mary nurses Jesus.”

Many such comparisons had distinct antisemitic undertones with the sinful Eve standing in for Jews, the enemies of true believers. In our age, it’s Islamic fundamentalists who obsess over their ideals of female purity and seek to shield Muslim women from the male gaze lest men be tempted into sinful acts as Adam once was. It’s also they who are more likely to see Jews as congenitally malevolent beings who are the descendants not of Adam and Eve but of “apes and pigs,” as the Quran has it.

Here and there, in both books, come delightful nuggets about zealots and eccentrics who not only took Adam and Eve’s story literally but decided to act it out. Shortly after the English Civil War, Greenblatt writes, a band of Protestant radicals who called themselves “the Diggers” and followed a charismatic tailor turned cowherd launched a proto-socialist commune in Surrey, where they sought to recapture



The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve
 Stephen Greenblatt
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the classless egalitarianism of Eden. They cultivated commonly owned land together and held communion *au naturel* in the style of Adam and Eve. They were soon chased away by local landowners who looked askance at this unusual social experiment.

Centuries later, a German physician and her dreamy lover, a schoolteacher, hatched a scheme to leave their spouses and relocate to a small volcanic island in the Galapagos where they could prance around in the nude and live like Adam and Eve in Paradise. This they did in 1929 but not before the doctor had replaced his teeth with steel dentures for greater durability in the face of the wear and tear brought on by the avid vegetarian’s penchant for prolonged mastication.

Soon news of their adventure spread and other escapists began showing up on the island. They included a temperamental fabulist who claimed to be an Austrian baroness and arrived with three of her lovers. “[W]ithin two years,” Feiler writes, “two people were dead and two more people” – the “baroness” and one of her lovers – “were missing in what is widely regarded as a double homicide.”

Hell, the latter-day Adam and Eve wannabes learned to their cost, really is other people. Did they unwittingly discover a subversive message hiding in plain sight in the Bible?: that, all told, it might have been better if in creating people God had left it at the first two. ■