Book Review

Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2017), 432 pp., \$27.95, ISBN: 9780393240801.

The title *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* suggests that its subject is the trajectory of an empire that reached its peak of power long ago and then fell into decline, leaving behind monuments admired but no longer revered, coins collected but no longer spent, and myths remembered but no longer believed. This analogy of rise and fall is not quite accurate, as evidenced by the hardy persistence of fundamentalist religious groups around the world, the financial and political clout of such groups, and the construction of new monuments to the literal interpretation of Genesis, such as the Creation Museum in Kentucky. The empire, though its boundaries have shifted, endures.

Greenblatt traces the origins of this powerful story to the well-documented influence of Mesopotamian mythology, especially the epic of *Gilgamesh*, on Jewish religious culture during the Babylonian captivity. Drawing our attention to the political context in which Genesis emerged, he describes its opening verses as an affirmation of monotheism that ‘turned the ancient origin story upside down’ (p. 63). Genesis decisively shifts the role of the woman from one who civilizes to one who corrupts. In *Gilgamesh*, a temple prostitute tames the wild man Enkidu with sex and introduces him to such accoutrements of civilization as bathing, grooming, and beer. In Genesis, Eve corrupts Adam by sharing the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and both become ashamed of their nakedness before they are punished for their transgression and driven out of paradise. As Greenblatt sums it up, ‘What is a triumph in *Gilgamesh* is a tragedy in Genesis’ (p. 63).

Without spending much more time on the further evolution of this story in the Jewish tradition, Greenblatt jumps ahead to the early Christian texts that concerned Adam and Eve in the first centuries of the common era. For example, a text called ‘The Apocalypse of Adam’ exalts Eve as a teacher and liberator. Adam says of Eve, ‘She taught me a word of knowledge of the eternal God’ (p. 66). And that knowledge was exalting in its power: ‘We resembled the great eternal angels, for we were higher than the god who had created us and the powers with him, whom we did not know’ (p. 66). Other intriguing textual fragments from this period, such as the Gnostic ‘Gospel of Eve’, are not discussed in Greenblatt’s survey, but they indicate that other visionaries defied orthodoxy by embracing Eve’s quest for knowledge as both heroic and liberating. Because Greenblatt has set himself the task of tracing the canonical history of this narrative, it is understandable that he has less to say about these alternative interpretations of Genesis. However, such apocryphal and allegorical interpretations of the story remain relevant, not only to how we think about religion, but to how we think about science, nature, and sexuality (Deese 2017).

Although he briefly recounts how Adam and Eve are depicted in the Qur'an, Greenblatt's primary focus is the trajectory of their story within the broader history of Western Christianity from late imperial Rome to the advent of the Darwinian revolution in the nineteenth century. With a fine sense of drama, Greenblatt explores the personal lives of two of the most influential religious thinkers to wrestle with Genesis, Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century and John Milton in the seventeenth. In each case, he finds a peculiar psychological dynamic behind their very influential interpretations of the story. For Augustine of Hippo, a starkly literal interpretation of Genesis was necessary to justify the theologian's rejection of sexual feelings that would rise and fall in ways that he could not consciously control. This rejection became the foundation of Augustine's insistence that original sin was irrevocably transmitted to every single human being through the sexual intercourse that led to their conception. Greenblatt ties Augustine's horror at human sexuality to his unusually strong attachment to 'his sainted mother' Monica (p. 119). Given the enormous influence of Augustinian thought on sex and original sin across many denominations of Christianity, the psychological tensions that shaped his interpretation of Genesis would cast a very long historical shadow, and Greenblatt does a magnificent job of describing those tensions.

The drama that earns the most sustained attention in *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* concerns John Milton and the extraordinary hopes that he invested in the ideal of a harmonious marriage. Milton resolutely preserved his virginity far into adulthood, enduring the ridicule of his sybaritic classmates at Cambridge and keeping his mind's eye fastened on a vision of marital bliss that he associated with the perfect love of Adam and Eve before the Fall. The dramatic collapse of Milton's first marriage inspired him to write *The Doctrine of Discipline and Divorce* in which he scandalized his contemporaries by using the ideal of marital bliss presented in Genesis to support an argument for the legitimacy of 'peaceful divorce' for incompatible spouses (p. 178). It was during his third marriage that Milton, now completely blind, composed *Paradise Lost*. Praising this epic as 'one of the world's greatest poems', Greenblatt argues that Milton's devotion to detail ironically fed growing doubts about the credibility of the story as depicted in Genesis (p. 203).

Exploring how the story has been embraced by believers across millennia, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* deftly analyzes how it was used to illustrate and affirm a set of religious ideas with profound political consequences. Among these precepts were the necessity of work, the subjugation of women, and especially original sin. Throughout, Greenblatt strikes an admirable balance between appreciating the beautiful and sublime dimensions of how this story has been *told* and dissecting the grim reality of how it has been *used* as an instrument of power. Because Greenblatt strikes this balance so well, his book is both a powerful work of scholarship and a pleasure to read. Nevertheless, there are times when the reader feels as Eve must have felt when she eyed the forbidden fruit of knowledge and felt the nagging sense that there must be more beyond this garden.

And there is. If we consider any story primarily as an instrument of power, its fortunes will rise and fall in direct proportion to how many people accept it as the literal truth. For this reason, the main arc of Greenblatt's narrative extends from Augustine's literal exegesis in the fifth century to the Darwinian revolution in the nineteenth century. Greenblatt acknowledges the allegorical approach of Philo of Alexandria, when he discusses Augustine's determination to suppress that

interpretation (pp. 91-97). Nonetheless, allegorical readings of Genesis were never entirely eclipsed, and they have formed the basis of subversive and even incendiary interpretations of the Adam and Eve story, from the Gnostics to our own time. It would be an excellent thing if someone with Stephen Greenblatt's gifts were to survey the allegorical and apocryphal versions of the Adam and Eve story that have never fallen, precisely because they never rose to the status of an orthodox mythology in the first place.

R.S. Deese
Division of Social Sciences
Boston University
rsdeese@bu.edu

References

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