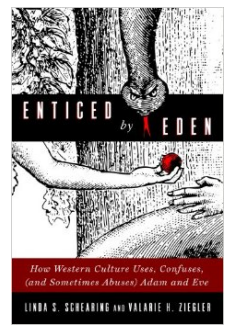
Enticed by Eden: How Western Culture Uses, Confuses, (and Sometimes Abuses) Adam and Eve, by Linda S. Schearing and Valarie H. Ziegler



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In their 1999 textual anthology *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*, authors Linda S. Schearing and Valarie H. Ziegler (along with Kristen E. Kvam) analyzed the reception of Genesis 2–3 through the twentieth century. In *Enticed by Eden*, they narrow their focus from the broad sweep of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interpretation to the contemporary United States (with a handful of exceptions, such as the analysis of a Belgian beer advertisement on page 128), and at the same time take an ethnographic turn from the world of literary and theological texts to that of vernacular culture, particularly the subcultures of conservative evangelical Christianity and of advertising. This book examines appearances of the biblical Adam and Eve in such diverse contexts as popular devotional literature, evangelical Christian dating (or anti-dating) and mar-

ital manuals, "girl culture," the "stay-at-home daughter" movement, online dating sites, the Christian Domestic Discipline (CDD or "wife-spanking") subculture, jokes, advertising, and the adult entertainment and novelty industry. As in *Eve and Adam*, the focus is on the place of the biblical text in discussions of gender.

The book's six chapters are divided into two parts based on the distinction between "recreating" and "recycling" the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, with the principal difference between these two modes of engagement being that the re-creators (conservative evangelicals looking to enact a "complementarian" or hierarchical vision of "biblical manhood and womanhood"), unlike the recyclers (humorists, advertisers, and purveyors of adult entertainment and products), grant the biblical text normative religious status and authority, while the latter invoke the text simply as a "cultural artifact" (93). The hallmark of the book is the wide diversity of the data and the authors' acumen for identifying obscure, fascinating, and sometimes repulsive corners of evangelical subculture and then describing the data incisively, scathingly, and often with a good deal of wit and humor. The data are collected not only from published books, but also from internet discussion lists, commercial websites, and blogs. The book is effective in documenting a wide range of conservative Christian discourses in which the story of Adam and Eve crops up, and it is therefore an enriching and intrepid extension of the project begun in *Eve and Adam*.

Chapter 4 ("Laughing At Adam and Eve"), which begins the "recycling" portion of the book, is the most extensively theorized chapter. The authors analyze the ways in which the Adam and Eve story is deployed in sexist, feminist, and post-feminist humor. This is also the chapter that most effectively brings critical exegesis of the biblical text into conversation with popular appropriations, and most clearly uncovers the exegetical inferences and irregularities behind modern retellings of the Adam and Eve story. For example, on page 106, the authors demonstrate that the "'I have a Problem, Lord' joke type" is based on a reversal of the sense of Gen 2:18a, where it is actually God (not Adam) who first notices that it is not good for Adam to be alone.

There are a number of instances in the book where the authors observe that modern interpretations are at odds with the "original meaning and function" (112) of the biblical text. While the free-verse epigraphs at the beginning of some of the chapters (attributed to "L. S. & V. Z.") partially elucidate the "original" interpretation of Genesis 2–3 that is implicitly in conversation with the data throughout the book, it may be useful for readers to refer

to the 1999 *Eve and Adam* volume for the detailed historical and exegetical arguments that generally stand behind the authors' critiques of recent interpretations. In many cases, *Enticed by Eden* deals with impressionistic appropriations of the figures of Adam and Eve, rather than with verse-level readings of the biblical story.

In the interest of space, I will focus the remainder of this review on the heart of the book, the first three chapters and the authors' critique of conservative evangelical appropriations of the text. The central argument of the book is that for American evangelicals

> Eden functions as a normative culture, and the crusading evangelicals determined to recapture it have no intention of excluding nonbelievers from their new social order. Indeed, the prospect of remaking *all* American mores and institutions in the image of the Garden is precisely what appeals most to these reformers. Their visions include heady mixes of patriotism, capitalism, consumerism, and most important of all, sexism. More than anything else, the so-called complementarian understanding of the creation seeks to put women in their places as submissive servants of men. Gender hierarchy is not an afterthought in this theology; rather, it *constitutes* this theology. (152, emphasis in original)

While it is true that much of the data in the first three chapters is found in the context of the American evangelical subculture, broadly defined, it strikes me as an oversimplification to equate evangelicalism per se with complementarianism, let alone with the alarming vision referred to in the above quotation, and even less so with the aspiration for "a world in which husbands routinely inflict violence upon wives, fathers regard daughters as personal possessions created to wait upon them, and women everywhere—in the home, in the church, and in the state—are to remain silent" (152). The authors' appraisal of the evangelical subculture, which regards complementarianism as the "absolute centerpiece of evangelical theology" (3), takes little notice of the lively intramural evangelical debate on the complementarian-vs.-egalitarian issue, which exists on the level of academic theology (e.g., Craig S. Keener among many others), as an organized movement (the complementarian Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood has an egalitarian counterpart, Christians for Biblical Equality), and on the popular level.

Again, any fair account of contemporary American evangelicalism must include not only the ravings of anonymous, complementarian or patriarchalist internet commenters, but also the voices of influential pastors and academics at evangelical institutions of higher learning.

The authors cite sociologist Sally K. Gallagher on the centrality of gender in evangelical thought and the influence of the complementarian rhetoric of figures such as James Dobson and Wayne Grudem (158; notes to page 4), but I think that Gallagher's findings concerning the countervailing fact of pragmatic egalitarianism among evangelicals should carry more weight in any overall assessment of the evangelical subculture. In a few places, the authors do note evangelical objections to the more lurid manifestations of complementarianism such as wife-spanking (see 174, for example, where evangelical umbrage is nevertheless relegated from the main text to endnote 10), but elsewhere they give the impression that colorful voices speak for an evangelical consensus, when no such consensus exists. Mark Driscoll, whose book *Real Marriage* provides a vivid example of what the authors call the "Adam as Alpha Male" syndrome, was criticized stridently in 2011 by the evangelical author and blogger Rachel Held Evans, to give one example. (Since I first wrote this review, Driscoll has stepped down from leadership and his organization has been disbanded under a cloud of scandal involving, among other things, manipulation of sales of *Real Marriage* to achieve bestseller status and the resurfacing of sexist comments Driscoll made in 2000 and 2001 under the internet pseudonym "William Wallace II." These revelations vindicate the authors' assessment of Driscoll as an "alpha male," while the role of prominent evangelicals in scrutinizing and investigating Driscoll underscores my contention that the authors did not sufficiently situate Driscoll among his evangelical detractors. Rachel Held Evans has since moved away from the "evangelical" label.) It would be useful to plot such evangelical discourses as are discussed in this book within a more detailed topography of American evangelicalism. In fact, as it is used by evangelicals, the term "complementarianism" defines a position not in contrast to a secular or even mainline Protestant alternative, but to the alternative of *evangelical* egalitarianism.

With a few exceptions (for example, tracing the roots of Joshua Harris's anti-dating writings on marital romance to Elisabeth Elliot's 1984 *Passion and Purity*, 18), this book does little to set the data in the historical context of twentieth- and twenty-first-century evangelical discussions of Genesis. Again, *Eve and Adam* will provide useful background, though the selection of data (Chapter 8 of *Eve and Adam*) mostly reinforces the simple equation of evangelicalism and "hierarchical" (i.e., complementarian) approaches.

After a deeply unsettling account of an online discussion of domestic abuse that culminated in three respondents blaming the female victim, the authors argue that

> This reaction was *a predictable result* of a theology that required utter submission from women and absolute domination from men. Those attributes, moreover, were constitutive of the gender roles routinely celebrated in *evangelical Christianity*. CDD merely revealed the dimension of coercion inherent in biblical manhood and womanhood. If, *as evangelicals argued*, God created men to dominate women and promised to hold men accountable if they failed at that task, it was hardly surprising that physical violence proved to be a useful or even celebrated tool. (85, emphasis added)

Whether or not it is true that CDD is a "logical extension of the valorization of romance and wifely submission typical of evangelical discussions of biblical manhood and womanhood" (67), I would speculate that a fair number of complementarians would object to being placed at the top of the slippery slope uphill of a subgroup that is controversial and objectionable within the broader evangelical movement, to the extent it is even known. The authors themselves acknowledge that CDD would likely be shocking to many evangelicals, but that in fact it should not be, given evangelicals' interpretation of Adam and Eve. In a strategically similar move, the authors speculate that "it would not be surprising if [evangelical author Joshua] Harris concludes in the future that men and women should not sit together (or perhaps not even in sight of one another) during worship" (162). Apart from this jab (which ridicules not only Harris but also various religious communities, Christian and non-Christian, who have traditionally and for a variety of reasons maintained a separation of the genders in their houses of worship), the analysis of Harris on pages 20–23 is quite penetrating, and I think that it detracts from the authors' argument to implicate him speciously in a position that he does not actually hold.

The liability of such "slippery slope" or "guilt by association" arguments is not simply that they are potentially unfair (to people who might well deserve to have their cages rattled by an exposé of the way they unwittingly pave the way for more extreme positions than their own), but that such generalizations close the door on a set of more interesting and important questions. Why are some evangelicals complementarian and some egalitarian,

when all claim to proceed from a common understanding of biblical authority? Why are many evangelicals (even complementarians) shocked or repulsed by CDD, and others are not? Why does Joshua Harris regard women fundamentally as "threats to male power and purity" but stop short of separating men and women in worship? Or to return to the question raised by Gallagher's research, why do complementarian discourses thrive in a functionally egalitarian subculture? From the perspective of the academic study of religion, the salient fact to be explained is why for some subjects the slope is not in fact as slippery as it seems to an outside observer.

My criticism here is both that the authors have adopted a narrow definition that does not include all those who self-identify as "evangelical," and more importantly that even the specific groups and individuals who are mentioned in the book and lumped together under the label "evangelical" would not necessarily recognize their distinctive and sometimes conflicting opinions on gender and interpretations of Genesis 2–3 as manifestations of a common theology, or, as the authors allege, as the central tenet of evangelicalism per se (3).

Schearing and Ziegler generally downplay the way in which evangelicals and especially complementarians approach Genesis 2–3 primarily through the interpretive lens of a handful of New Testament references to Adam and Eve. On page 71, they quote one CDD website as referring to Eve's "sin nature," using language (Greek *sarx*, rendered as "sinful nature" in the widely-used evangelical New International Version) that is typical not of Genesis but of Paul's letters. The authors may have missed the opportunity to point out not only the interference of a New Testament text in the interpretation of Genesis 3, but also that in the New Testament texts that stand behind the language of "sin nature," it is Adam rather than Eve who is to blame. At another point in the discussion of Christian dating websites (50–51), the authors document the perplexity of message board participants in interpreting seemingly contradictory passages on gender in the New Testament: 1 Cor 11:2–16; Eph 5:21–33; 1 Tim 2:11–15; and Gal 3:27–28 (see also *Eve and Adam*, 108–10, 116–19). This passage suggests to me that rather than merely providing "additional support" (4) for a complementarian reading, the New Testament texts fundamentally control and constrain possibilities for the meaning of Adam and Eve.

Of course, in many of the instances cited in the book, evangelical subjects would claim to be engaging in a plain sense reading of Genesis, that is, a reading the result of which is not predetermined by any New Testament

passage. But this needs to be recognized and discounted as the theological strategy it is. To take complementarian arguments at face value as unmediated encounters with Genesis is to give them too much credit, as Schearing and Ziegler are elsewhere eager to avoid doing. The recent argument of New Testament scholar J. R. Daniel Kirk (*Jesus Have I Loved, but Paul?* [Baker, 2011], 117–39) complicates not only the portrayal of evangelicalism as a complementarian monolith, but also the presumed priority of Genesis in the construction of both complementarian or patriarchalist thought and evangelical egalitarianism.

The accounts of internet discussion boards were often engrossing, and more needs to be done to explore the relationship between subjects' self-representations and their real-life practices, as well as the role of the biblical texts under consideration in shaping those self-representations (as opposed to the real-life practices that may or may not stand behind them). The authors tend to approach the discussion board posts as texts, but I think it would be worthwhile more thoroughly to theorize (in conversation with new literature on internet ethnographic methodology) the online forum as a social space that shapes the discussion.

Finally, to return to the major divisions of the book, I am not persuaded that the language of "recreating Eden" is an adequate description of the precise sense in which the Garden of Eden story is normative for evangelicals, though the book forcefully makes the case for its normativity in some sense. In my judgment, the most exegetically detailed data in (and outside of) the book suggest that for most complementarians, following New Testament exegesis of Genesis 2–3, the story is etiological rather than teleological. The complementarian argument is not that Eden provides a "blueprint" (151) for the eschatological (or even pre-eschatological) restoration of the post-Edenic world. Instead, Genesis provides an account of gender that transcends the loss of Eden, describing not the world as it once was and will again become, but instead how the world came to be what it is and always has been. If complementarians do not themselves speak of "recreating Eden" (and I have not seen that they do) it is because they do not believe that the world of Eden was ever uncreated.

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