

All About Eve

By Rev. Dr. George Dole

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Bible Reading

Genesis 2:4–25

Reading from Swedenborg

“Alone” means that he was not content to be led by the Lord, but wanted to be led by himself and the world. The “helper suitable for him” means self-awareness, soon to be called the rib built into a woman. (*Arcana Coelestia* #138)

Countless things could be said about self-awareness—what it is like for people who are focused on physical and worldly values and what it is like for spiritual people and for heavenly people. For people who are focused on physical and worldly values, it is all they have. They are conscious of nothing but themselves. They think they would die, so to speak, if it were lost to them.

For spiritual people it is much the same because even though they know that the Lord is the life of everyone; that the Lord is the source of their intelligence and wisdom; that the Lord enables them to think and to act—even though they say this, they do not really believe it.

Heavenly people, though, realize that the Lord is the life of everyone, enabling them to think and to act, because they see that this is true. They have no desire whatever for self-awareness. Still, even though they have no desire for it, the Lord gives them a self-consciousness that is bound up with their every sense of what is good and true and therefore with every touch of happiness. Angels live in this kind of self-awareness; and when they do, they live in the greatest peace and serenity because in their self-awareness are the gifts of the Lord, who is governing their self-awareness, or governing them through it. This kind of self-awareness is the essence of all that is heavenly, while the physical kind is hellish. (*Arcana Coelestia* #141)

Sermon

And the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper suitable for him.” (Genesis 2:18)

Sometimes it is easier to interpret biblical passages if we lift them out of their context; but whenever we do, it gets us into trouble. The context of Paul’s dictum that we are saved by faith apart from the works of the law (*Romans 3:28*) is a letter that has already insisted that God rewards us according to our works (*Romans 2:6*). The context of the story of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib is a creation scene in which male and female have already been created in the image and likeness of God.

In the prevailing scholarly view, though, the first chapter of Genesis does not offer a context for the second; instead, we are dealing with two distinct accounts of creation, each of which essentially ignores

the other. After all, the second story has its own introduction: “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth, when they were created.” It begins before plants and animals existed, and it begins with the formation of a man from the dust of the earth. Then the garden is planted, the trees are made to grow, the animals are created as potential companions for the man, and finally woman is created out of his rib. In other words, we have now arrived at much the same complete creation we already had at the close of the first chapter, with earth, plants, animals, and male and female human beings.

From a Swedenborgian point of view, this misses the point. The basic purpose of the stories is not to explain how things came to be. That is a matter of academic interest only. These things happened a long, long time ago. What matters far more is why things came to be. This involves purposes that are still very much alive. Once we look at this dimension, the stories fit together. Let us start, then, by looking at some very general considerations, and then focus in on the specific moment of the creation of Eve.

The two stories are in complete agreement about the most important facts of our lives, namely, that there is a God who created everything that exists, and that the divine motives for creation are good. The goodness of creation is a repeated theme of the first story, and the turning point in the second is when the Lord God sets out to take care of something that is “not good.”

The two stories agree also in centering the purpose of creation in the human race, though they do this in opposite ways. The first story does it by making our creation the climax. It starts from the bottom and works up from the mineral world through the plant world through the animal world to the human world. Then we have a kind of benediction: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” The second story does it by having the man created first and then having everything else created for his sake—the garden planted, the trees grown, the animals formed, and finally Eve built from his rib. After this last step we have a second benediction, of a different kind: “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.”

On the “why” level, these stories are telling us different things, but things that in no way contradict each other. The first shows us the perfection and beauty of the fundamental order of creation. The second offers the ideal of perfect innocence—of having nothing to hide. The first is cosmic in scale; the second is intimate. They are united in their portrayal of a God who cares about us. When we put them together, we have a God who is both transcendent and immanent. The same God who creates the sun, moon, and stars walks with us in the garden in the cool of the day.

Our theology tells us, though, that by the time these stories came into being, that age of innocence was past. When we move from the age of myth into the age of history, things are very different. The world of the earliest patriarchs contained the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, the march of conquering kings, and family strife—things that sound all too familiar. One of the Mesopotamian creation myths might seem more appropriate: it tells of gods who themselves were often in conflict, and finally created the human race as servants because they were tired of doing their own housework. It is remarkable, if we stop to think about it, that in a world as brutal as the one history describes, there could be an insistence on divine goodness and on the beauty of innocence.

This brings us to the other side of the context of our story—to what has come to be known as “The Fall.” Looking back from our story, we see the beauty of creation. Looking ahead, we see the grief of a world

at war. And it seems that the precise turning point is not when the serpent enters the scene, nor when Eve decides to eat the forbidden fruit. It is before that, in the verse that begins, “It is not good.” Before we ourselves have done or said anything, it seems, something is not right. What could it be?

There is a route toward an answer to this question through a fairly obvious fact: it really is not good for us to be alone. On the human level, we do of course need some solo time in our lives. But we are sustained in those times by an awareness that the rest of the world is there for us to return to. Real “aloneness” is total loneliness. It is a sense of having been deserted. From the Latin word for aloneness comes the word “desolation.” And when we look beyond the human level, separation from the Lord is the definition of evil—the very essence of “not good.”

If we follow this thought just a little way, we come to the realization that no matter how “good” we may be, no matter how innocent, we are not as good as the Lord. Anything created is less than its creator. Not only that, any lesser good becomes “not good” when it is chosen in preference to a greater good. Washing the dishes may be good, but not at the cost of ignoring a flaming frying pan on the stove or a child with a skinned knee.

Just one more short step is necessary to arrive at the explanation of this story that we find in *Arcana Coelestia*: the recognition that for us, the good and evil that matter eternally have to do with conscious choice—with our will. Nowhere is the heart of the matter more compellingly expressed than in the Lord’s prayer in Gethsemane, “Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done” (*Luke 22:42*). Our will is not the Lord’s will. We become free moral agents when we realize this—when we experience our own will as our own. Until then, we are no more responsible than a plant that grows toward the sunlight or a bird that builds its nest.

So in the *Arcana*, we find the surprising statement that “alone” means not being content to be led by the Lord, but wanting to be led by ourselves and the world; and the paradox is that to all appearances, we must lead ourselves to the willingness to be led by the Lord. We must become self-conscious agents if our lives are to have human meaning.

It has at times seemed perplexing, even a little far-fetched, that our theology identifies the woman created from Adam’s rib with something called “proprium”—variously translated as “own,” “self-image,” and “ego.” In the light of the story itself, perhaps we could translate it simply as “self-awareness” or “self-consciousness,” because that is so clearly where the narrative is headed. Just after the creation of Eve, we find the couple naked and not ashamed. The immediate result of eating the forbidden fruit is the most telling image of self-consciousness: shame at that nakedness.

Correspondentially, the details all fit. Adam’s sleep is indeed a loss of consciousness of a deeper realm of meaning. He has lost sight of that blessed state in which male and female are together, each and both in the image and likeness of God. The woman therefore cannot be created out of his flesh, but only out of his rib. This is not a consciousness of his deepest nature, but only of some relatively lifeless external part of it. There is particular poignancy in his recognition of the woman as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh: “This is the real me, and I must at all costs hang onto it.” It presents a vivid picture of everything that is necessary—and everything that is dangerous—about a positive self-image.

It is hard to underestimate how much harm has been done by literalist interpretations of this story—by the demonization of women as the agents through whom evil entered the world. This is such a blatant

distortion that it has spawned the counter distortion of women as incarnations of purity: the bride wears white and the groom wears black. True masculinity and true femininity are blessings; self-conscious masculinity and self-conscious femininity rapidly become grotesque. We cannot afford to lose sight of the first creation story; of the profound truth that male and female are not separate creations. They are at most variations on a theme, and the theme is the image and likeness of God. It is all too easy to become so obsessed with the differences between the sexes that we blind ourselves to the similarities. In the overwhelming majority of passages, our theology speaks of people without distinction as to gender.

Perhaps the message is that male and female are not what we must strive to make ourselves, but simply what the Lord has created us—simply what we are. The moment we try to pattern ourselves after some stereotype, however nobly conceived, we cross the border into the external self-consciousness that distracts us from the particular image and likeness of God that is at the center of our being. The road may lie through self-consciousness; but if faithfully followed, it leads beyond it, to an acceptance of others and of ourselves that is the heaven for which we have all been created. Amen.

Prayer

Creator God, when you finished creating the heavens and the earth in all their vast array, you pronounced them “very good.” Give us, we pray, a new appreciation of the wonderful textures of male and female that you embedded in your creation. Open our eyes to see both their oneness and their complementarity. Move us beyond our self-conscious efforts to be male or female, giving us the assurance that we are male and female, just as you have created us—and that you have created each of us to be very good. Amen.

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