

## Book Review

**Benckhuysen, Amanda W. 2019. *The Gospel according to Eve: A History of Women's Interpretation*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic. 260 pp. ISBN: 978-0830852277. Approx. 375 ZAR (25 USD). Paperback.**

### 1. Author Profile

Amanda Benckhuysen is professor of OT at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, where she has taught since 2014. Prior to this, she taught for six years at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, USA. Before entering academia, Benckhuysen was a campus minister and is currently ordained within the Christian Reformed Church. In her research, she is especially interested in biblical hermeneutics and the history of biblical interpretation.

### 2. Background and Purpose of the Book

The importance of the creation account in Genesis 1–3 cannot be overstated in terms of our understanding of what it means to be human, specifically, what it means to be a man or a woman. Influential interpreters throughout church history have posited answers to questions that Genesis 1–3 beckons us to ask: What is the significance of men and women being made in the image of God (1:27)? Why was Eve created after Adam and what does this created order signify (2:18–25)? What are the implications of Eve being created from Adam's rib (2:21)? Why did the serpent speak to Eve and not to Adam (3:1–5)? What motivated Eve to take the fruit and give it to her husband (3:6)? What do God's declarations about men and women teach us about the relationship between the genders in a fallen world versus his original intention (3:16–19)? What implications does this text have in terms of how men and women should act in society, the home, and the church?

As they looked at the rest of Scripture, gifted interpreters have sought to answer other questions as well: How do we make sense of Paul's interpretation of the Adam and Eve narrative in 1 Timothy 2:13–15 and in his other discussions about the relationship between men and women (see 1 Cor 11 and 14 especially)? How does Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension change the way in which men and women should relate?

Benckhuysen notes that most male interpreters throughout church history have answered these questions in ways that have largely led to the “domestication and subordination of women” (p. 1). Benckhuysen, therefore, seeks to recover a host of women's interpretations of Genesis 1–3 that reflect that the Bible does indeed contain good news for women. Throughout her book, she presents the voices of more than sixty women who interacted with Genesis 1–3 from the fourth century to the present. Instead of accepting their culture's understanding of gender, these women discovered that the Scriptures offered a different vision that helped them embrace God's will for them as women in their unique contexts. Thus, Benckhuysen hopes that these unearthed interpretations of our foremothers will help the contemporary church wrestle with and converse about what “the Scriptures say and don't say about gender distinction” (p. 3).

### 3. Why is a Man Reviewing this Book? A Brief Digression

Some readers may find it strange that a man is interested (or even qualified) to review a book written by a woman about women's biblical interpretation. Before summarizing and engaging with the book, it is appropriate then to present three responses to these potential sentiments.

Firstly, the majority of academic literature in recent years regarding women's roles in the church has been produced by men. For example, in a recent work, New Testament scholar Nijay Gupta surveys the topic and recommends eleven significant books on the subject (from a variety of perspectives) written between 1990 and 2010 (2020, 133–144). Of the sixteen authors and/or editors Gupta lists, fourteen are men.<sup>1</sup> Thus, I do not think my interest in women's biblical interpretation is extraordinary or that my gender disqualifies me from helpfully contributing to the discussion.

Secondly, biblical and theological discussions around gender are often erroneously considered a “women's issue,” implying that men are not invested in the dialogue. However, regardless of what a person concludes that Scripture teaches on the issue, their conclusion will deeply impact the lives of men. For example, if women cannot pastor, the church will need more male preachers and leaders; if women are encouraged to have vocations outside of the home, men will have to embrace a more present role caring for children, and so on. Therefore, as a man, I have an investment in discussions of gender and gender-focused biblical interpretation and think it is appropriate for me to engage in this conversation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly concerning the book being reviewed, women have important insights that men can learn from. Since women have unique viewpoints shaped by experiences that men cannot share, it is important that men reflect upon women's perspectives on Scripture. Just as North American biblical scholars and theologians ought to seek out and value African and other Majority World perspectives, men ought to read works by women in order to understand viewpoints that they cannot possess. Therefore, I think that Benckhuysen's work is a helpful resource for both women and (especially) men.

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<sup>1</sup> These men include such influential evangelical scholars as Wayne Grudem, Thomas Schreiner, Craig Blomberg, and Craig Keener.

## 4. Summary of the Book

Benckhuysen weaves women's interpretations of Genesis 1–3 into a web of chapters organized by various topics. To begin, Benckhuysen sets the scene by briefly identifying the ambiguities of Genesis 1–3 that have led to a panoply of diverse (and opposing) interpretations offered by both men and women. These include God creating Adam first and then Eve; the meaning of the Hebrew word, *ezer* (“helpmate”); the difficulty of harmonizing the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 and the implications of emphasizing one account over the other; discussions about bearing the image of God in a pre-fallen and post-fallen world, as well as God's response to Adam and Eve's sin.

Chapter 1 also briefly summarizes views of women based on Genesis 1–3 held by such influential biblical interpreters as Tertullian, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine, Jerome, and Thomas Aquinas. With few exceptions, Benckhuysen declares that “early interpreters concluded that Eve was an inferior ... creation who bore primary responsibility for plunging the world into sin and strife” (p. 7). It is this interpretation of Genesis 1–3 that “provided divine sanction for a system of patriarchy ... that made women subordinate ... and denied them the right to own property, to pursue formal education, to marry freely, to vote for civic leaders, to participate in public affairs, to choose a profession, and to share in ecclesiastical leadership” (p. 8).

With this background provided, Benckhuysen topically introduces women's perspectives on Genesis 1–3, motivated by the prohibitions placed on them. In presenting the writings of fifteenth- to seventeenth-century women (including Italian Christine de Pizan, and Englishwoman Rachel Speght), she shows how women used Genesis 1–3 to show that, contrary to what their culture told them the garden story meant, women are not inferior, but made in the image of God, and are no more responsible for the fall of humanity than are men.

In chapter 3, Benckhuysen highlights the manner in which women authors from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries (such as Englishwomen Bathsua Makin and Mary Chudleigh) interpreted Genesis 1–3 to advocate for women's education. Accepting (at least ironically) the idea that women are weaker and more prone to being deceived, they argued that on this basis women should be educated. Since women's divine role was to be a virtuous helpmate for their husbands, would not education help women to develop virtue in order to strengthen their marriage and society? If women are made in the image of God and capable of rational thinking, should not this be encouraged through education?

In chapter 4, Benckhuysen brings together the interpretations of Englishwomen Mary Astell (1666–1731), Lucy Hutton (d.1788), and others, who looked to Genesis 1–3 to help them understand God's intention for marriage in the face of the broken marriages that they experienced or witnessed. After interpreting these chapters, these women understood that God intended marriage to be a place of friendship, love, and sexual intimacy, free from the rampant subjugation and oppression of women that they observed around them.

Next, Benckhuysen showcases the interpretations of Genesis 1–3 by women who felt empowered by this text (and the rest of Scripture) to preach, teach, and lead in the Church. Among others, these interpreters include seventeenth-century Quaker Margaret Fell (“the Mother of Quakerism”) and nineteenth-century Salvation Army co-founder Catherine Booth. Benckhuysen emphasizes that the women she highlights were not influenced by secular feminist culture around them (since no such culture existed) but by their interpretation of Scripture and their understanding of the leading of God's Spirit in their lives.

Chapter 6 features women (such as eighteenth-century British-American novelist Susanna Rowson and nineteenth-century American Sarah Martyn) who wrote children's devotional writings, describing how their interpretation of Genesis 1–3 subtly and explicitly influenced the next generation's understanding of gender roles.

In chapter 7, Benckhuysen describes how women in the nineteenth century began to advocate for their own rights on the basis of Genesis 1–3. Living out their assumed divinely-given roles as virtuous helpmates, these women took on social causes like temperance, labor reform, and the abolitionist movement, only to find their effectiveness nullified by their own lack of civil rights. The actions of American women such as Hannah Crocker, Sarah Grimke, and Sara Spencer spawned the first wave of modern feminism and the suffragette movement around the globe.

In chapter 8, Benckhuysen highlights interpretations of Genesis 1–3 in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that support various gender ideologies. Women like Katherine Bushnell (d. 1946) and Lee Anna Starr (d. 1937) used biblical scholarship to tackle gender bias in translation of Genesis 1–3. Their work anticipated recent and contemporary feminist Biblical scholarship led by such significant scholars as Phyllis Trible (b.1932) and Carol Meyer (b. 1942).

In chapter 9, Benckhuysen concludes her study by highlighting lessons drawn from the women's interpretations of Genesis 1–3. She says that the highlighted women teach contemporary interpreters (both male and female) that when interpreting Genesis 1–3 we must be aware of the text's ancient context as well as our own biases and the contexts that shape them. Finally, for Benckhuysen the survey of women's interpretations teaches us that we must seek to interpret Genesis 1–3 in the legacy of Augustine, with the primary goal of our interpretations being to lead us to love God and neighbor with greater effectiveness and sincerity.

## 5. Critical Engagement

### 5.1. *Strengths of the book*

Even though Benckhuysen's topic belongs to the history of biblical interpretation, she presents the material in such a way that makes it extremely relevant to the twenty-first century. By mentioning scientific studies and current issues at the beginning of most chapters, she illustrates how the topics that shape her selection of women's interpretations (marriage, women's education, women's place in the church, and so on) are pertinent and still need to be wrestled with by the contemporary church.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Benckhuysen's book is her call for believers to interpret the Scriptures afresh to discover God's will for them, regardless of what their culture tells them. She reminds us that whatever our ethical questions and cultural context, we must wrestle with the biblical texts and their interpretation by others (in the past and present) as we determine God's will in our situation.

On this note, Benckhuysen deeply values not only Scripture, but also the tradition of the church. She makes clear, however, that this tradition has been so dominantly shaped by men that the voices and traditions of women have been pushed to the margins and forgotten. Therefore, so many of our assumed ideas about the story of Adam and Eve originate from a legacy of male-dominated interpretations that throughout history have deeply oppressed women. Thus, Benckhuysen's book bears witness to one of post-modernism's important reminders: no biblical

interpreter is completely objective, and every interpreter is influenced by the cultural and historical setting(s) in which they find themselves. This influence does not exclude gender (p. 231).

Consequently, Benckhuysen does the church a deep service by introducing the reader to over sixty female biblical interpreters throughout church history—although admittedly, the majority are from the Global North. Furthermore, these women come from diverse denominations (Anglican, Methodist, Quaker, Roman Catholic, Reformed, Baptist, Shaker, Presbyterian, and others), socio-economic backgrounds, and family situations (wives and mothers, to celibate nuns). Benckhuysen’s work challenges us to acknowledge and evaluate women’s interpretations of the Bible if we want to conclude that we have truly consulted the history of biblical interpretation.

Despite this vast presentation of female interpretations, Benckhuysen is not without criticism. She acknowledges that while some of the women offer interpretations that are “profoundly insightful,” others are “far-fetched or untenable” (p. 230). However, Benckhuysen’s purpose is not to be critical, and she therefore allows her readers to weigh the veracity of the various interpretations presented.

At the same time, Benckhuysen curates the women’s interpretations as they were in their context, realizing that, although they paved the road that modern types of feminism now travel on, the majority of the early women featured in her book “were not feminists in the modern sense of the word” (pp. 10–11). She further recognizes that most of the women showcased in her work “stopped short of pressing for full social equality”—many even embraced traditional views of gender (p. 11). Thus, Benckhuysen resists the temptation of refashioning the historical women into a twenty-first-century image.

Although Benckhuysen’s work is structured thematically, it follows a broadly chronological framework, which enables the reader to understand how women’s interpretations have developed and changed since the fourth century. This chronological journey also helps the reader understand the historic foundation that has led to the relationship between contemporary feminism, biblical scholarship, and the Christian faith.

Benckhuysen’s book reminds us that scholarly interpretations of the Bible are not the only perspectives that matter. The majority of the women presented in the book were not scholars (for obvious reasons). They did not engage with scholarship and did not attempt to influence academia. Rather, their interpretations of Genesis 1–3 were found in “poems, tracts, devotionals, children’s Bibles, dialogues, advice ... prayer books,” novels, and letters (p. 8). Many of these women’s interpretations of Genesis 1–3 were deeply influential and fruitful in their contexts, reminding academically-minded interpreters that the Bible’s domain is not limited to the scholarly journal, the classroom, or even the church worship service.

The book also includes hundreds of detailed footnotes, an appendix containing biographical information on the sixty-five female interpreters, and a helpful discussion guide with two to three questions on each chapter. These features are an added bonus that encourage and facilitate further discussion, research, and study.

## **5.2. Weaknesses of the book**

The Gospel According to Eve is a difficult book to critique because it does not consist of a single thesis and supporting arguments. It rather showcases a history of women’s interpretation of Genesis 1–3 structured in a thematic way.

This having been said, some chapters were structured better than others. Whereas some chapters were very strong in terms of sorting the various women’s interpretations into a

unified theme (especially the chapters on education for women, marriage, and justifying women preachers), others were more difficult to grasp as a unified whole (especially “Chapter Six: Forming the Character of Children”) and seemed rather scattered (p. 144).

Although Benckhuysen attempts to keep to a broadly chronological ordering of the chapters (beginning with the Church Fathers’ understanding of Eve and ending with twentieth and twenty-first-century female Biblical scholars), this is not maintained in every chapter. Thus, those reading the book straight through may be occasionally confused as to the chronology of the women interpreters. This critique may not be fair, as Benckhuysen herself says that “[b]ecause of the nature of the material and the thematic ordering of the book, each chapter can be considered separately” (p. 4).

I occasionally felt that the book was a tad ambitious in terms of fitting sixty-five female interpretations of Genesis 1–3 into just 232 pages! Because of the number of interpreters dealing with the same biblical text, the book felt a bit repetitive at times and by the end it was difficult to recall which woman wrote what about Genesis 1–3 in what period of time.

## 6. Concluding Thoughts

In an age where conversations around gender are almost always controversial and heated, Amanda Benckhuysen’s book *The Gospel According to Eve: A History of Women’s Interpretation* is a timely and vital resource for the church. She is among a group of scholars who, in recent years, has set the record straight in showing that women, although silenced, have interpreted Scripture for centuries.<sup>2</sup> If those who study the Bible want to be faithful to the whole of Church history they will never again be able to ignore these women’s witness. Benckhuysen’s carefully-crafted book reminds us that as we formulate our beliefs about gender and specifically the role of women in the home, society, and the church, we need to perennially return to Scripture, listen to the voices of women as well as men, and not be dominated by the cultural attitudes around us.

Although many readers may disagree with particular women’s interpretations of the Bible, they will find this book an incredible resource for men and women alike as we grapple with issues of gender. The book could be especially helpful in a South African context where in 2019 the government declared a national emergency in light of the crisis around gender-based violence towards women. Clearly, the country and the church has a lot of work to do in upholding the Bible’s affirmation that women are made in the image of God and intrinsically worthy of respect. Benckhuysen’s well-timed book, containing the voices of women who have lived through centuries of abuse and oppression, can help us pursue this Christ-like goal.

Jonathan Tysick<sup>3</sup>

Wycliffe College, University of Toronto

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Taylor and Choi (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Mr. Jonathan Tysick is pursuing a Master of Theological Studies at Wycliffe College (University of Toronto). He graduated with distinction from the South African Theological Seminary with a BTh and formerly worked with the School of Biblical Studies (University of the Nations) in Cape Town, South Africa. Jonathan is especially interested in how theological and New Testament studies impact contemporary issues in the church and society and how these fields can equip Christians to live out their faith in a pluralistic world.

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