Carol Meyers

*Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*


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Meyers’s *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* is an intriguing attempt “to rediscover in some measure the Eve of Eden along with the experience of real women” (212). Readers who expect, however, that this current work is simply an updating of her prior book *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford, 1988), are in for a welcome surprise. Citing changes in biblical studies, archaeological advances, and social sciences (her three primary sources for historical reconstruction), Meyers explains in the book’s preface (ix–xi) that *Rediscovering Eve* is significantly different from *Discovering Eve*. Although similar in structure and goals, this new work expands its temporal scope of research (most of the Iron Age rather than just its earliest period) and incorporates new information about ancient households. In addition to this, *Rediscovering Eve* also reflects the ways Meyers’s own views about ancient Israelite women and gender relations have changed or been refined over the last twenty-five years. The structure of *Rediscovering Eve*’s ten chapters is both thoughtful and methodical. Chapters 1–3 lay out the foundation on which the arguments of chapters 4–10 are based.

In first chapter (“Eve and Israelite Women: Understanding the Task,” 1–16) Meyers distinguishes between the literary character “Eve of Eden” and the real lives of “Everywoman Eve.” While the former is the product of the lived experiences of the story’s
author, the latter represents the experience of Iron Age Israelite women—an experience that is “largely invisible in the Hebrew Bible” (3). In chapter 2 (“Resources for the Task,” 17–37) Meyers identifies the three sources on which her reconstruction of ancient contexts is dependent: (1) texts (the Hebrew Bible and other ancient writings), (2) archaeological data, and (3) anthropological materials (specifically ethnography and feminist anthropology). Finally, chapter 3 (“Setting the Scene: the Ancient Environment,” 38–58) explores three important aspects of Everywoman Eve’s ancient context. Where and in what types of settlements did she live? What were the modes of her subsistence? Finally, what were the risks and problems inherent in her way of life (39)?

Having laid the foundation of her investigation in chapters 1–3, Meyers moves to the first subject of her interest: rediscovering the Eve both in and out of Eden. Meyers prefers the terminology in–out rather than in–after because the latter suggests a temporal contrast, implying historicity. For Meyers, the Eve in Gen 2–3’s Eden is imaginary, while the Eve outside of Eden represents lived reality (59).

Chapter 4 (“Eve in Eden: Genesis 2–3,” 59–80) analyzes the biblical story in an attempt to free it from the interpretive overlay of later normative religious traditions (60). The Eve who emerges from Meyers’s analysis is free of many of the negative characterizations that have plagued her interpretation. Meyers hopes this Eve comes close to the author’s original intent. Although Meyers is well aware of the problems of reconstructing authorial “intent,” she believes that biblical authors and their texts are “responsive to and reflective of their own world” (65). Thus, aside from dealing with the actual text of Gen 2–3, Meyers focuses on the text’s etiological aspects about human existence important to the agrarian context of both author and audience (gardens versus agrarian realities, gendered relations, fear of snakes, food and eating motifs, etc.).

In chapter 5 (“Eve out of Eden: Genesis 3:16,” 81–102), Meyers securitizes one of the most problematic verses of Gen 3 in terms of gender relations: 3:16. As she did in chapter 4, Meyers seeks to discern how a contextual reading might compare to the more negative readings prevalent in subsequent interpretations. The difficulties facing Eve out of the garden are many of the same ones that plague agrarian life. One key issue is the necessity of bearing children. After a close reading and discussion of Gen 3:16’s four lines, Meyers concludes that the verse does not mandate general female subordination to males. Instead, she suggests a translation that limits male dominance of females in ancient Israelite society to the arena of sexuality. According to Meyers, the context of such subordination should be understood as the necessity of fecundity in ancient agrarian societies where both maternal and child mortality was high. Providing such a “historically contingent context” to the verse serves to “highlight its positive function” (102).
While rediscovering the “Eve in Eden” is important and Meyers does it well, it is really in the rediscovery of “Everywoman Eve” found in chapters 7–8 and 10 that her reconstruction shines. Chapter 6 (“Eve’s World: The Household,” 103–24) prepares the reader for Meyers’s analysis of Everywoman Eve by reconstructing the realities of the Iron Age Israelite household. She notes that until a few decades ago very little attention was devoted to such an examination. Because of this, readers often fall into the fallacy of “presentism” (looking at the past anachronistically) (104). To counter this, Meyers draws attention to three aspects of ancient households that are not self-evident to contemporary readers: its material composition (the domicile and other features), its human component (family members as well as its larger context of people/nation, monarchy, tribe and clan), and its performative components (women’s work). By doing this, Myers sets the stage for her argument in chapters 7–10.

In chapters 7 (“Women and Household Maintenance, Part I: Economic, Reproductive, and Sociopolitical Activities,” 125–46) and 8 (“Women and Household Maintenance, Part II: Religious Activities,” 147–70) Meyers employs the concept of “maintenance activities” to explore the activities of Everywoman Eve. As Meyers explains, this concept “encompasses a set of practices and experiences concerning the sustenance, welfare and long-term reproduction of the members of a social group” (126). She finds this concept useful in that it “draws attention to and valorizes women’s contributions” instead of simply marginalizing them (126). In chapter 7 these contributions involve food and textile production (economic activities), children (reproductive activities), and women’s interactions (sociopolitical activities). In chapter 8 Meyers explores women’s religious contributions, some of which are involve health care, reproduction, feasts and festivals (both life-cycle events and regular celebrations), and foodways (“people’s food practices—what they eat, how they prepare it” [165]).

It is interesting that, while chapters 7–8 focus on the daily lives of Everywoman Eve (lives that are often invisible to readers), chapter 9 (“Excurses: Professional Women,” 171–79) focuses on the more visible of the Bible’s women. These women occupy the roles of prophet, sage, judge, singer, land owner, skilled women, general, and so on. Understanding why the shortest of the book’s ten chapters focuses on the most visible women in the Hebrew Bible can be understood vis-à-vis Meyers’s comments in chapter 1. Meyers warns her readers against what she calls the “Everest fallacy.” This type of logic assumes that the visible extreme and the invisible normal are the same (3–4). Since Meyers is interested in rediscovering Everywoman Eve (ordinary women), it makes sense that her treatment of those she deems “exceptional” occupies the smallest treatment in the book.

Chapter 10 (“Gender and Society: Reconstructing Relationships, rethinking systems,” 180–202) is the last of the book’s regular chapters and addresses Meyer’s current thinking...
on gendered relationships. It is clear from her comments in this chapter that she rejects not only traditional negative assessments of Israelite women’s lived realities but also the idea that patriarchy characterized Israelite society. Both she considers dangerous stereotypes and less accurate than “heterarchy in depicting the complexities of household life and general sociopolitical organization” of Israel’s past (201).

Meyers’s final reflections are articulated in the book’s Epilogue (“Beyond the Hebrew Bible,” 203–12). In it Meyers insists that neither Eve in Eden nor Everywoman Eve is presented in the Bible as inferior. Thus, labeling the Bible as misogynist is unwarranted (203). Having stated this position, Meyers then proceeds to credit the later negative imaging that both received to various cultural developments in their interpreters’ contexts (the rise of urban centers, the intrusion of government powers into household life, increased priestly importance, increased importance of sacred writing, technological change, etc.) (205–11).

In Rediscovering Eve, Meyers essentially engages in a “rescue” attempt. In chapters 4–5 she “rescues” Eve in Eden by providing a more positive interpretation of Gen 2–3 and explaining why later negative interpretations arose and flourished. In chapters 6–10 Meyers “rescues” Everywoman Eve from general misconceptions concerning her economic, reproductive, sociopolitical, and religious activities. Are her rescue attempts on both levels successful? By in large, yes. Her treatment of Eve in Eden is excellent, as is her in-depth explication and analysis of Everywoman Eve. Especially significant is her modeling of an interdisciplinary process from which her reconstruction of both Eves is based.