

What Adam and Eve Can Teach Modern Couples

We often miss an essential fact about our biblical progenitors: They were in love, and their love survived great hardship

What Adam and Eve Teach Us About Love

Adam and Eve teach us that conflict resolution is essential love, according to WSJ contributor Bruce Feiler. He and WSJ's Tanya Rivero also discuss how Adam and Eve's relationship applies to modern couples. Photo Illustration: Serge Bloch

By

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In December 1867, Mark Twain was touring Jerusalem when he visited a room in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre identified as Adam's tomb. He was overcome with emotion. "The fountain of my filial affection was stirred to its profoundest depths," he wrote. Twain became obsessed with his oldest ancestor, at one point urging planners in New York to replace the Statue of Liberty with a monument to Adam. He went on to write a half-dozen pieces about the first couple, including "Extracts From Adam's Diary" and an "Autobiography of Eve."

Adam, in Twain's telling, is initially uncomfortable with Eve. "It used to be so pleasant and quiet here," he says. "I foresee trouble. Will emigrate." Eve is equally unimpressed with Adam. "He talks very little. Perhaps it is because he is not bright, and is sensitive about it."

But slowly, the two come around. "I see I should be lonesome and depressed without her," Adam says. Eve echoes his feelings: "I love him with all the strength of my passionate nature.... It is my prayer, it is my longing, that we may pass from this life together."

Adam and Eve in love? Really? Who could think such a thing?

The answer: Michelangelo, Milton, Byron, Mary Shelley, Ernest Hemingway and a string of artists and thinkers stretching as far forward as Beyoncé and Pope Francis and as far back as the compilers of the Hebrew Bible. For 30 centuries, at moments of transition in the state of the family, people have turned to the foundational family of Western civilization.

We are plainly living through such a moment today. The last generation has seen breathtaking changes in how men and women relate to each other. Marriage rates have plummeted, divorce rates have hardened, sexuality has become more fluid, women have flooded the workplace, men the parenting space. The internet has made the situation even more tumultuous, with whole new ways to hook up, break up or simply hole up by yourself. In our hyper-connected world, we have a crisis of connection.

Could Adam and Eve, of all people, offer some guidance?

The answer, I believe, is yes. I have spent the past few years traveling in the footsteps of history's first couple, from the Garden of Eden in Iraq to the Old City of Jerusalem, from Milton's London to Mae West's Hollywood. What I found is that Adam and Eve introduced the idea of love. They are the first in Western history to grapple—sometimes successfully, other times not—with the central mystery of being human: being with another person.

Yet instead of celebrating this achievement, history has blamed Adam and Eve—especially Eve—for being selfish, unfaithful and lustful, and for bringing sin, immorality, even death into the world. The first couple have been victims of a long campaign of character assassination.

One reason the negative view has endured is that we rarely read the opening chapters of Genesis with the idea that Adam and Eve might be in love. When you do, a surprising thing happens.

In Genesis, a peculiarity surrounds Adam and Eve: There isn't one story of their origins but two. The second story, beginning in Genesis 2, is more famous. God forms Adam from the earth, then Eve from part of his body. The two are besotted with each other, but Eve grows bored and ventures into the Garden. She eats the forbidden fruit, then shares it with Adam. They get kicked out of Eden and have two feuding sons, one of whom murders the other. Adam and Eve separate and then reunite and have a third son.

This story contains what for many is the key question: Who is God's chosen sex, man or woman? But when you consider this version in light of the briefer, less familiar account of their origins in Genesis 1, the answer appears different.

On the sixth day of creation, God forms humanity in his image. This first human has no identifiable gender or personality; rabbis of the Talmud considered this creature a hermaphrodite. God then divides this first human in two, male and female. What's true for the man is true for the woman. They are entirely equal.



'The Fall of Man' by Lucas Cranach the Elder Photo: Heritage Images/Getty Images

This first account of Adam and Eve contains a revolution in thought. In other origin stories in the ancient world, from Mesopotamia to Egypt, the gods do the creating. Human beings emerge from the joining of a god and a god or a god and a human.

The Bible is the first to put a man and woman at the start of the human line. God can't procreate. He needs human partners—starting with Adam and Eve—for humanity to succeed. The question is whether they can find a way.

With this clear underpinning of equality, what happened? Over time, various religious traditions took hold of the story, which meant, in practice, leaving it in the hands of an almost exclusively male commentariat. Early rabbis and church fathers showed a particular animus to Eve.

Genesis 2, for example, says that Eve is made from Adam's "tsela," a Hebrew word that elsewhere in the Bible means "side," suggesting that Adam and Eve stand side by side. Most commentators, however, claimed that it meant "rib" and said that God chose it because ribs, like women, are small and insignificant.

'Early commentators were consistent in stressing one theme: It was the woman's fault.'

Elsewhere in the story, Adam and Eve wrestle with a full complement of emotions, including desire, frustration, blame, shame, guilt, forgiveness and reconciliation. Despite the complex back-and-forth between the two, early commentators were consistent in stressing one theme: It was the woman's fault. As an old American spiritual puts it, "That's all there is, there ain't no more. / Eve got the apple, and Adam got the core."

Among those who tried to chip away at this legacy of hierarchy was Michelangelo. Beginning in 1508, the Florentine painted three panels of the first couple on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The most famous of these is the Creation of Adam, but it isn't the one that Michelangelo deemed most critical.

That's the second image, the Creation of Eve. Adam lies on the left; God stands on the right. In the middle, forming a bridge between the two, is Eve, sinewy, elegant, emerging from Adam's side (Michelangelo knew his Bible). It is Eve—not Adam and not God—who occupies the exact center of the room. The third panel shows Adam and Eve even more equalized, as the two figures reach together for the forbidden fruit. Adam and Eve are not estranged; they are partners.

Another breakthrough in depicting Adam and Eve as a loving couple came a century later, from the English poet and pamphleteer John Milton. In his 30s, Milton married 17-year-old Mary Powell, who returned from their honeymoon and promptly abandoned him. Milton channeled his frustration into a diatribe for the ages: five tracts, over 60,000 words, in which he argued that divorce, then largely illegal, should be socially acceptable. Many see Milton as having invented the idea of love marriage.

Its basis, he argued, was what God declared about Adam and Eve: "It is not good that man be alone." A successful bond is built not on "loveless sex" but "conjugal love and mutual assistance."

Decades later, now blind and disgraced politically, Milton returned to this theme in his greatest work. Among other things, "Paradise Lost" is a step-by-step argument that Adam and Eve were in a relationship of equals.

At first, the couple is "reaping immortal fruits" of "uninterrupted joy, unrivaled love." But then Milton conjures a tart back-and-forth about equality. Eve says that she would like to divide the labor in the Garden equally. Don't be absurd, Adam says. Eve threatens to wander off, but Adam says that she will "disturb [our] conjugal love." "Frail is our happiness if this be so," she retorts dryly.

Adam, not wanting to threaten her independence, backs down. Eve then eats the fruit and considers keeping the spoils as a win for "the female sex." But she concludes that she needs Adam, "so dear I love him." He, too, chooses love over duty. "How can I live without thee," he says. And the two leave paradise "hand in hand" for a "far happier place."

This counternarrative of love between the first couple developed for hundreds of years but didn't blossom until the 19th century, when women had more freedom to speak publicly about the story.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the founder of the American women's movement, decided after decades of fighting inequality in wages, law and voting, that she had to attack it at its core, the pulpit. The reason: Whenever she brought up women's rights, someone would say, "The Bible says..."

"With women, it always comes back to the Bible," the historian Melinda Grube told me, "to Eve being created from Adam's rib, to Eve being Adam's help-meet, to Eve bringing sin into the world." If Stanton wanted to restore equal standing between the sexes, she had to go back to Adam and Eve.

So she did. In the 1890s, a 75-year-old Stanton published an extraordinary document called "The Woman's Bible" that emphasized women's equality. She started with Genesis 1 and the idea of God creating man and woman at the same time. "Here is the sacred historian's first account of the advent of woman," Stanton writes, "a simultaneous creation of both sexes, in the image of God."

The real turn in Eve's reputation would not take place until decades later. Beginning in the 1960s, as women began to take leadership roles in religion, Eve went from being a scapegoat to a hero. Adam and Eve, in turn, started to be seen in a more balanced relationship.

Today, few would argue that men and women don't stand equally before God. So with this balance restored, what can we learn from the first couple? What can Adam and Eve teach us about love?

Constancy. The most underappreciated aspect of Adam and Eve is how they continually return to each other after periods of separation. They start life united, then Eve goes off alone. She could remain apart but instead returns to Adam. Once out of Eden, they could split, but instead they stay together. After losing a child, they separate and then reunite and have Seth. This togetherness in the face of repeated separateness is their first lesson for us: Learning to mend breaches is central to love.

"People have misunderstood the role of love in life," the poet Rilke said. "They have made love into play and pleasure because they thought that play and pleasure were more blissful than work," he said. But

“nothing is happier than work,” he went on, “and love, just because it is the extreme happiness, can be nothing else but work.”

Love is not about avoiding conflict; it is about overcoming it. Love “bears it out even to the edge of doom,” Shakespeare wrote. And who knows the edge of doom better than Adam and Eve?

Counterbalance. Perhaps the most modern aspect of the first couple is that their relationship involves a seesawing of power, in which first one, then the other, takes the lead. Eve is created from Adam’s body, but Adam clings to her. Adam initiates the lovemaking that produces their children; Eve is credited with producing them and, in several cases, naming them. Anyone in a relationship can recognize this back-and-forth.

There is a modern fantasy that love is all about equality. But that’s misleading. “Everyone wants to believe in equality,” the anthropologist Helen Fisher told me. “But somebody’s going to make more money, somebody’s going to be better with the kids.” She added, “You don’t need equality for a successful relationship. You need equilibrium.”

A Joint Narrative. The great Swiss child psychologist Jean Piaget coined the phrase “collective monologue” to describe the way that preschoolers play, meaning that they gather together but talk only to themselves. Love is the opposite of this. It’s “collective dialogue.” Two voices construct a shared story.

Creating this shared story is the last great quality of romantic love, and the one that Adam and Eve are most responsible for introducing. From the moment that God divides them in two, they alone are responsible for writing their own narrative. Theirs is the first joint byline.

Like any good story, a love story involves ups and downs. “Love is not an initial drama followed by happily ever after,” the philosopher Robert Solomon said. “Love is the continuing story of self-definition,” in which plots, themes, beginnings, middles and ends are very much up to the selves involved. This need to be the author of your own shared experience is the final lesson I took from Adam and Eve: Love is a story we tell with another person.

Today, at a time of “work-life balance” and “Can we have it all?,” in a world where we all let our lovers and ourselves down, we need to be reminded that the first couple struggled, too, yet they found a way to heal their wounds and forgive their wrongs.

We need our earliest story to be one of success, not failure. We need Adam and Eve—the first love story.

This essay is adapted from Mr. Feiler’s new book, “The First Love Story: Adam, Eve and Us,” which will be published by Penguin Press on March 21.

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