

"An Evil to Embrace":
Eve and Pandora

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Nowadays it is considered appropriate to avoid traditional terminology that has sexist overtones, to talk about "the human race", for example, rather than "mankind". In one respect, however, it is still appropriate to retain that old-fashioned term. We can have quite a clear conscience in talking about myths that deal with "the creation of mankind". The reason is that a significant number of ancient myths that deal with the birth of the human race deliberately separate the origins of man from those of woman. And the way in which these stories are shaped says a lot about ancient attitudes towards women and perceptions of their role in the history of the human race. In this article, we'll compare Judeo-Christian and Greek ideas about the beginnings of mankind *and* of womankind.

The version of creation which we are perhaps most familiar with is that presented in *Genesis*. As the culmination of God's creation, man is formed from the dust of the earth and set to live in the Garden of Eden. But Adam is alone and unpartnered, and so God takes a rib from his side and uses it to fashion a woman. It is the woman, Eve, who is the active player in the rest of the story of Eden. Persuaded by the serpent to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge ("when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"), Eve also passes the fruit on to her husband. Knowledge *is* given to them as a result--they are no longer innocent, and become ashamed of their own nakedness--and God punishes them as he promised he would:

"To the woman he said, 'I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.' And to Adam he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and

you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.'"

Expulsion from a state of primeval paradise because of divine anger is roughly paralleled in Greek myths of early mankind as reported by the poet Hesiod. In both the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* Hesiod tells the story, not of the birth of mankind (he's vague about that), but of womankind. Although the two poems differ in their details, the general spirit of the story remains the same. Zeus, the king of the gods, is angered by his cousin, the Titan Prometheus. Prometheus was a champion of mankind (still *sans* the female half), and even went so far as to steal fire from heaven in order to give it to men. Zeus's angry response targets the passive recipients of Prometheus's benefactions:

"For the gods keep hidden the livelihood of men. Otherwise you might easily do enough work in a day to have enough for a full year with no further need to be working....But Zeus hid our livelihood when he was angered at heart because Prometheus, the clever deviser, tried to deceive him....Zeus of the Storm Cloud addressed him as follows: 'Son of Iapetos, you rejoice in your theft of my fire and in having deceived me, being the cause of great pain to yourself and men in the future. I shall give them in payment of fire an evil which all shall take to their hearts with delight, an evil to love and embrace.'"

This "evil to love and embrace" is the first woman, Pandora. She is beautiful and desirable, but she also has "a dog's shamelessness and the deceit of a thief". She is given to Prometheus's slightly more stupid brother Epimetheus (Prometheus would have known better). Although Epimetheus is also a Titan, somehow (through vague genealogical/biological connections that Hesiod doesn't intend us to question) Pandora becomes the ancestress of human womankind: "from her descend the race of women, the feminine sex; from her come the baneful race and types of women". Clearly her very presence (and that of her descendants) on this earth constitutes the punishment Zeus plotted for hapless men. But Hesiod wanted to make sure his

readers got the point, so in the *Works and Days* the evils that woman brings are portrayed through the vivid imagery of the jar. Pandora opens the great jar (out of malice? curiosity?), and all the evils in the world fly out, while only Hope remains.

It is interesting to remark on the similarities in the tales of Pandora and of Eve. As creation stories of *womankind* specifically, both make the assumption that the female half of the species is a secondary creation. Woman appears *after* man. It is worth noting that we might have expected the opposite scenario: that woman would appear first, and then give birth to the first man (as Earth in the Greek cosmogonic myth gives birth to Heaven and then takes him for her mate).

Both accounts also focus on certain preconceived characteristics of the female. Eve exhibits curiosity; the fruit she takes, after all, is from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam, by contrast, is something of a dullard; his lack of activity can scarcely be put down to superior virtue, since he chows down as soon as Eve offers him the fruit. Pandora too seems to have the stereotypical feminine curiosity, although Hesiod uncharacteristically misses the opportunity to take a slam at her when she opens the jar. We don't *really* know why she does it, but it's probably a good guess that curiosity played a part. Incidentally, there's a very good reason why men in ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean societies would have thought of women as proverbially curious. Women were kept relatively ignorant, and furthermore one of their only possible routes to knowledge lay through questioning their menfolk. Hence they would have given the appearance (to the men) of being both curious and foolish.

An account that draws on the male point of view, as these do, is also likely to portray woman as primarily sexual. Naturally, since woman is the most typical sexual object for man; hence sexuality itself would have seemed to be resident in the object rather than in the men who experienced desire. Certainly in the Greek myth, sex does not seem to have existed prior to the advent of womankind. Once Pandora and her descendants are around, they become the focus of deeply ambivalent feelings about sexuality, feelings of desire and of anxiety. Women are "an evil which all shall take to their hearts with delight", and men are drawn in by this sexuality, seemingly incapable of resisting their own

doom. Eve is less obviously sexual a figure than Pandora; still, it is her actions that bring both Eve and Adam to a consciousness of their own sexuality, an awareness that brings shame where before there had been innocence.

This dangerous sexuality that women were held to have is tangled up in the presentation of women as temptresses, and as weak beings prone to temptation themselves. Pandora and all women like her tempt men to their own destruction; she herself cannot resist the temptation to open the jar. Eve is tempted by the serpent, and in turn tempts Adam, who instantly acquiesces (at least Eve had *argued* with the serpent).

All the negative stereotyping of female characteristics evident here is typical of ancient views of womankind (and these accounts may well have influenced those views). What is a significant concern addressed by these particular stories is the need to account for how troubles entered into the world in the first place. The answer is: woman. Originally, man had lived some kind of blessed existence, without labour, dwelling close to God or the gods. With the advent of woman, things go wrong, the paradise comes to an end, and from now on, man must face toil and hardship all the days of his life. Woman comes between man and his gods, and this perhaps is the worst crime of all.