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The 'first couple' in story and film

Raymond Schroth | Jun. 17, 2011

APPROACHING EDEN: ADAM AND EVE IN POPULAR CULTURE
By Theresa Sanders
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When I taught Intro to Theology, I always started with the Book of Genesis. This was highest among the things everybody should know -- a collection of myths in which our ancestors tried to answer the basic questions: Where did we come from? What went wrong? What do we do now?

Mark Twain tells us in *Innocents Abroad* that in Jerusalem?s Church of the Holy Sepulcher, he visited the site said to be Adam?s grave. Twain, not usually considered a religious man, was overcome with emotion. He admitted that he didn?t know Adam well, but they were ?family.? I also assigned Genesis in an English course. That?s because there are so many references in religion and literature to Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, Joseph and his brothers that no one can be an educated person without their stories. One college freshman told me, ?I think I?ve heard of Adam and Eve before, but not those other people.?

Theresa Sanders, an associate professor of theology at Georgetown University in Washington, has blessed us with a commentary that is scholarly, contemporary, perceptive and often very funny. *Approaching Eden* traces the ?first sin? through centuries of theological speculation and 80 years of fiction, film and television from ?Star Trek? to Homer Simpson, in witty analysis of civilization?s struggle to face the mysteries of sex, violence and bearing the pain of being responsible stewards.

If we think we know Genesis, any commentary delivers some surprises. Being made in the ?image and likeness of God? does not refer to the infusion of the human soul, but to kings who planted their image in stone in territories they controlled. The serpent is not ?Satan,? he?s a symbol of fertility and wisdom. The story is loaded with contradictions because it is written by three different groups, each with its own agenda. And in what we are taught to consider the ?original sin,? the word ?sin? is never used.

In Walt Disney?s ?Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,? the wicked queen tempts our heroine with an apple, but the Bible makes no mention of an apple. In Mel Gibson?s ?The Passion of the Christ,? Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane is tempted by a hooded figure in black, then a snake slithers away. We associate Adam and Eve?s awareness of their nakedness with sexual guilt, but sex has nothing to do with it. In *City of God* St. Augustine says that part of Adam and Eve?s punishment was the ?bodily movement? of sexual arousal.

In the original ?Star Trek? series, the Enterprise lands on an idyllic planet with a lush ?Garden of Eden,? but the inhabitants are controlled by a godlike computer called Vaal. There is neither birth nor death, nor suffering nor love. The Enterprise crew destroys Vaal, and the people are ?free? but now experience violence and sex. Spock observes that they have given the people a ?knowledge of good and evil and driven them out of paradise.? Captain Kirk asks if that makes him the ?devil.? The joke is that Spock looks more like Satan than anyone on the ship.

To St. John Chrysostom, Adam and Eve, before being expelled, lived ?like angels,? without sexual intercourse, and their mistakes -- their first son, Cain, murdered his brother -- are an argument for celibacy. Others suggest that the first creature was not the male Adam but a ?sexually undifferentiated earth creature? who was divided into man and woman; so Adam is in no way superior to Eve. And Eve is unjustly accused of seducing Adam into taking that first bite; so, what the Douay-Rheims Bible (Catholic) translates as ?She gave to her husband who did eat,? the Revised Standard Version translates as ?gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.? In short, Adam was an accomplice, not a dupe. The curse of Adam, interpreters say, is death, but in films and books we pine for immortality. The curse of Eve, allegedly, is menstruation -- see ?Carrie? -- and the pain of childbirth. Yet the ?model? woman is the Virgin Mary, who did not menstruate and had a painless childbirth that left her hymen intact.

Sanders has fun with the plots of forgotten films and also classics like ?Adam?s Rib? (1949). Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn are happily married lawyers until they end up on separate sides in the trial of a woman who shot her husband when she found him in the arms of his mistress. If the man had shot his adulterous wife, says Hepburn, no one would care. They quarrel and she cries, and Tracy accuses her of using a typical woman?s trick to get sympathy. Tracy blows up and says, ?I want a wife, not a competitor.? The marriage breaks up, and on the brink of divorce, Tracy breaks into tears pleading for another chance. She melts. He confesses that his tears were a trick. She says it proves men and women are the same.

Sanders interprets another film, ?Pleasantville? (1998), about a young couple breaking out of a false utopia, to say that God was secretly pleased with Adam and Eve?s transgression: ?God willed for the couple to leave Eden.?

That makes sense. The eating of the forbidden fruit was both an act of autonomy and a search for wisdom. What?s so bad about that? The real original sin was Cain killing Abel, the introduction of envy and violence into human behavior, culminating in the murder of Jesus and the wars of today in which we are complicit. *Leaving Eden* forces us to take on the responsibilities of brotherhood. Some try to build a new Eden here on earth, some on Mars. Others listen to the man who taught us that God is our Father who gave us freedom at the moment of creation. What we do with it is up to us.

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