

**The Eve and Mary Parallel:
Misogyny in 1 Timothy 2:11-15**

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Berthold Furtmeyr, *Tree of Life and Death Flanked by Eve and Mary-Ecclesia*, 1495

The image of Eve that has been presented is that of a seductress, a dangerous being of disobedience, while the traditional image of Mary is of the holy mother of Jesus, a being obedient to God. These opposing images have long been used in Christianity as the polarized archetypes of good and bad women. What is the background to this contrast, and for what purpose has it been used? This study will show how patriarchy in Christianity skillfully facilitated a subordinate existence for women under men using the opposing images of Eve and Mary. I will discuss first, Eve and Mary as reflected in 1 Timothy 2:11-15; second, the

development of the Eve and Mary parallel in the writings of the Church Fathers and the Roman Empire around the time of 1 Timothy; and third, the misogyny found in the Eve-Mary contrast. This discussion will reveal the complex layers of misogyny in the Christian tradition, not only in the Eve-Mary juxtaposition but also in the sociocultural background of Christianity.

1. Eve and Mary in 1 Timothy 2:11-15

First Timothy 2:11-15 is one of the most misogynistic passages in the Christian sacred text. The authorship of the letter has been constantly doubted because many scholars argue that the author is not Paul, for these verses contain non-Pauline themes and writing styles, several logical errors, misogynistic expressions, and an androcentric interpretation of the second creation story found in Genesis 2.¹ Timothy 2:11-15 reads as follows:

v.11 Γυνή ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ μανθανέτω ἐν πάσῃ ὑποταγῇ:

(NRSV) Let a woman learn in silence with full submission.

v.12 διδάσκειν δὲ γυναικὶ οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω, οὐδὲ αὐθεντεῖν ἀνδρός, ἀλλ' εἶναι ἐν ἡσυχίᾳ.

(NRSV) I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.

v.13 Ἀδὰμ γὰρ πρῶτος ἐπλάσθη, εἶτα Εὕα:

(NRSV) For Adam was formed first, then Eve;

v.14 καὶ Ἀδὰμ οὐκ ἠπατήθη, ἡ δὲ γυνὴ ἐξαπατηθεῖσα ἐν παραβάσει γέγονεν.

(NRSV) and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

v.15 σωθήσεται δὲ διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας, ἐὰν μείνωσιν ἐν πίστει καὶ ἀγάπῃ καὶ ἀγιασμῷ μετὰ σωφροσύνης.

(NRSV) Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

As each verse of the passage demonstrates, the author of 1 Timothy expresses an extremely negative view of female leadership and teaching in the church and family. Even considering the sociocultural context of this document when seen as a letter designed to address a specific problem in the church in Ephesus, these expressions are still misogynistic. However, a more serious issue is the contemporary use of these verses to oppose the ordination or leadership of women in the church, without any understanding of their context.

First Timothy 2:11-15 uses the “assertion-reason” structure, in that the author argues that women must remain silent and provides the reason for this from the second creation story in Genesis. A logical leap occurs at this point. This argument is a misogynistic generalization because it interprets Eve’s case in Genesis misogynistically and misuses it to suppress the voices of women who are treated as if homogenous with Eve. Also, awareness of the background of “διδάσκειν δὲ γυναικὶ οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω” (2:12a) is important for understanding the intention of the author. According to Richard and Catherine Clark Kroeger, διδάσκειν has the meaning of

¹ Paul M. Zehr, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2010) 22-23; Walter F. Taylor, Jr., “1-2 Timothy, Titus,” in *The Deutero-Pauline Letters: Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus*, ed. Gerhard Krodel (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 59; Joanna Dewey, “1 Timothy,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (London: SPCK, 1992), 353.

“activities of a teacher.”² Here the author uses this word with the meaning of “false teaching” because some women were engaged in false teaching in the community.³ In light of this background, the intention of the author could be simply to stop false teaching by some women, and not all teaching by all women. Paul M. Zehr describes the social and cultural context of 1 Timothy as follows:

From about 44 BC onward, women in some circles of the Roman Empire claimed a bold new freedom. Certain scholars refer to the emergence of a “new woman” at this time. Some philosophers and Roman rulers spoke against the liberation of women because they worried that it would bring about a breakdown in family morality. The women of high standing who became Christians in Thessalonica (Acts 17:4) and Beroea (17:12) may have included some of these newly liberated women in the Roman Empire.⁴

The author of 1 Timothy was concerned with the stability of the church in Ephesus, not the oppression of all women. He was an ordinary human being who lived, thought, and wrote in and for his context. When readers interpret his writing, they need to remember this.

What does “the childbearing (τῆς τεκνογονίας)” mean in verse 15? There are various interpretations suggested for this word: 1) It represents Jesus’ birth through Mary.⁵ 2) It applies only to Eve, based on Genesis 3:15, “[Eve’s offspring] shall bruise your [Satan’s] head, and you shall bruise its heel,” because the suffering of childbirth was considered women’s punishment for disobedience to God’s commandment.⁶ 3) Childbearing was the domain of married women in that society, and this verse reflects a Jewish culture of marriage that emphasizes the responsibility of parenthood.⁷ 4) The term refers to the influence of the mother of the Roman goddess in Ephesus. Of these, the second, third, and last explanations do not provide a reason for linking salvation (σωθήσεται) and childbearing (τῆς τεκνογονίας). At the same time, the first interpretation is the most plausible because it does provide a link between salvation and childbearing. Also, the definite article, “τῆς (the),” denotes that this word does not mean the general childbearing of all women, but indicates a specific instance of such childbearing. Philip H. Towner notes, “With original sin and the pronouncement of the curse as the background, some have understood the definite article (“the”) which precedes childbearing in the Greek sentence to denote “the birth”—that is, the birth of Christ.”⁸ Along the same lines, John R. W. Stott states, “women ‘will be saved through the Birth of the Child’ referring to Christ.”⁹ The debate is ongoing because the text does not mention Mary directly. However, considering the background of the period discussed below, Towner and Stott’s arguments are plausible.¹⁰

² Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Women: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 80.

³ Ibid., 81.

⁴ Zehr, *1&2 Timothy, Titus*, 62.

⁵ Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1994), 80.

⁶ Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Women*, 172.

⁷ Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letter to Timothy: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 241-242.

⁸ Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus*, 79.

⁹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus: God’s Good News for the World* (Leicester, UK, Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 87.

¹⁰ Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Women*, 172.

Given the period in which 1 Timothy was written—for according to biblical scholars, the letter was written by an unknown author in the late first to mid-second century—some have suggested that the author might have already been aware of the parallel between Eve and Mary.¹¹ Because some of Paul's documents already mention the parallel between Adam and Jesus in the mid-first century, this is possible. Several verses from Paul draw a parallel between Adam and Jesus, with the first Adam bringing death and the second Adam providing life for all human beings:

For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. (1 Cor 15:21-22, NRSV)

Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. (Rom 5:14, NRSV)

These verses provide clues about the Eve-Mary juxtaposition of that time, with scholars suggesting that 1 Corinthians and Romans were written ca. AD 53-57, and hence before 1 Timothy. Also, several documents from the early Church Fathers directly mention the parallel between Eve and Mary, and it is therefore not difficult to point to these texts as sources for the Eve-Mary parallel found in 1 Timothy.¹²

2. The Development of the Eve-Mary Parallel

According to Luigi Gambero, Justin Martyr was the first author to use the Eve-Mary parallel.¹³ Gambero cites 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 as the scriptural foundation of the juxtaposition: "It was not difficult for the Fathers to perceive the profound connection between the concept of Christ as new Adam and the concept of Mary as new Eve."¹⁴ Later, Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130-200) received and developed the idea that Mary was the new Eve. According to Irenaeus, "Adam had to be recapitulated in Christ, so that death might be swallowed up in immortality, and Eve in Mary, so that the Virgin, having become another virgin's advocate, might destroy and abolish one virgin's disobedience by the obedience of another virgin."¹⁵ Irenaeus' argument passed through other Church Fathers and was fully developed by Ephrem. In Ephrem's writings, Mary shares many similarities with Eve, and this commonality creates opposing contrasts between them:

¹¹ Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 393.

¹² Bruce M. Metzger and United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament* (London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 12.

¹³ Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵ *Proof of the Apostolic Preachings*, trans. In Gambero 1999, 55; Dilia N. Angelova, *Sacred Founders: Women, Men, and Gods in the Discourse of Imperial Founding, Rome through Early Byzantium* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 242.

Mary gave birth without having relations with a man. As in the beginning, Eve was born from Adam without a carnal relationship, so it happened for Joseph and Mary, his wife. Eve brought to the world the murdering Cain; Mary brought forth the Lifegiver. One brought into the world him who spilled the blood of his brother (cf. Gen 4:1016); the other, him whose blood was poured out for the sake of his brothers. One brought into the world him who fled, trembling because of the curse of the earth; the other brought forth him who, having taken the curse upon himself, nailed it to the Cross. (cf. Col 2:14)¹⁶

The most dramatic turning point in Eve and Mary's polarization was the council of Ephesus in 431, which confirmed Mary as *Theotokos* or God-bearer.¹⁷ After that, Mary's image was rapidly elevated, and this new status was reflected in Christian documents and the arts. According to Dilianna N. Angelova, 431-32 are memorable years for an iconographic transition of Mary in art history.¹⁸ The *Theotokos* became an extension of the doctrine of the Trinity, which confirmed the divinity of Jesus at the council of Nicaea in 325. Because Jesus was admitted as being of the triune God, Mary was able to become the mother of God. And so the gap between the two women, Mary and Eve, deepened.

According to legend, Ephesus is a significant city, for Mary lived there after the death of Jesus. It is also the context for 1 Timothy and the city where the council of 431 confirmed Mary's title of *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. Also, this was one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire, the city of Aphrodite, Artemis, and many other female goddesses. The images and concepts of Mary were influenced by this cultural background. According to Angelova, based on her virginity, nature, and motherhood, Mary has a lot in common with the Greco-Roman goddesses.¹⁹ Mark Munn states along similar lines, "Artemis and the Mother of the Gods became indistinguishable from one another."²⁰ As the mother of Jesus, Mary satisfied the requirements for a holy female figure in Christianity, one who might replace the female deities of Roman culture.

Furthermore, Angelova asserts that Mary's imperial image was developed not only through the Council of Ephesus and the history of Christianity but also by the Roman Empire, especially as a result of the relationship between Constantine the Great and his mother Helena, around the second century. Angelova links the three mothers of the Christian tradition and Roman history: "Eve, the mother of humanity; Mary, the mother of God; and Helena, the mother of Constantine,"²¹ and provides an explanation for the way Mary was presented as a mother of God and queen of heaven under Constantine. The influence of the Roman Empire, especially the parallel between Helena and Constantine, and Mary and Jesus, turned Mary into the mother of God and the queen of heaven.

3. Misogyny in the Eve-Mary Parallel

¹⁶ *Diatessaron* 2, 2; SC 121, 66; Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 117.

¹⁷ Melissa R. Katz, "Regarding Mary: Women's Lives Reflected in the Virgin's Image," in *Divine Mirrors: The Virgin Mary in the Visual Arts*, ed. Melissa R. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 26.

¹⁸ Angelova, *Sacred Founders*, 235.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁰ Mark Munn, *The Mother of the Gods, Athens, and the Tyranny of Asia: A Study of Sovereignty in Ancient Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 169.

²¹ Angelova, *Sacred Founders*, 236.

The main purpose of this section is to show how the contrast between Mary and Eve has impacted the history of Christianity. Based on patriarchy, male members of the Church have appeared to need ways of expressing their image of the female figure as either wholly good or wholly bad for them, and Mary and Eve have served as typical examples of these polar opposites. Liz Curtis Higgs writes, “What labels a woman as ‘bad’ hasn’t changed since Eve. All the usual suspects are there: disobedience, lust, denial, greed, anger, lying, adultery, laziness, cruelty, selfishness, idolatry.”²² Men appear to need women who are obedient, pure, accepting, tolerant, honest, virginal, diligent, submissive, and unselfish in order to maintain their vested authority without any resistance or rebellion. It is not difficult to recognize how this list relates to the image of Mary in Christianity. Even Mary, who holds the highest position among women in Christianity, has been objectified as a symbol of the ideal woman in patriarchy. Also, the portrayal of Mary as a virgin and of her immaculate conception were developed to prove Jesus’ divinity, not for her own sake.

The objectification and functionalization of women through Mary and Eve and their contrast present serious issues in patriarchy’s invisible subordination of women. Eve and Mary mostly appear as subordinate to their gender counterparts, Adam and Jesus. The many titles of Mary represent this phenomenon: Virgin Mary, *Theotokos*—mother of God—God-bearer, and queen of heaven. Also, she was meaningful as the mother of Jesus, not in her own right. In the case of Eve in the second creation story of Genesis, God only communicates with Adam, not with Eve. She remains in a subordinate position in this story. This is the dark side of the parallel between Eve and Mary: they remain in subordinate positions under men as part of the phenomenon of theological objectification.

CONCLUSION

The contrast between Eve and Mary and the objectification of women in Christianity based on this comparison are still operative. In terms of patriarchy, every Christian woman is trapped in a negative image of Eve rather than belonging to the ranks of perfect femininity as Mary does. Many denominations still do not offer ordination to women and use 1 Timothy 2:11-15 as a justification. Also, this is the reason why secondary victimization often occurs in the church to the victims of sexual violence, which considers the female body as a dangerous and seductive being who lead the perpetrator to commit a sin like Eve.

One of the most problematic issues is that these misogynistic verses in the sacred text and their patriarchal interpretations are still applied without any recognition of the gap between the biblical world and postmodern society. These texts exist in Christianity under the name of the word of God, and this misunderstanding of the role of women in the second creation story is still repeated in various theological theories and sermons today. Furthermore, because the authors of the Bible, the traditional interpreters, and preachers in most churches were mostly men, these negative words about women were emphasized. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott writes, “We must make careful distinctions between what is ‘for an age’ and what is ‘for all time.’”²³ Therefore, the readers of the Christian Scripture and of the documents of the Church Fathers need to consider this point when they confront misogynistic verses about women in the text.

²² Liz Curtis Higgs, *Bad Girls of the Bible: And What We Can Learn From Them* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2007), 4.

²³ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Women, Men, and the Bible* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 74.