Essay on "Adam and Eve" and "Coring the Apple"

BY BOYD PETERSEN

Adam and Eve remained in the Garden for many years, undisturbed by commentator, critic, rabbi, or priest. The narrative, for some reason, never really caught on with its original tenth-century BCE audience. From the Second Temple period on (538 BCE–135 CE), however, the narrative became central to literature and art in Western culture. It became a vessel that contained and transmitted each community's hopes, fears, beliefs, and values; it supported their customs and rituals and justified their traditions and norms. Retellings appear in early pseudepigraphical and apocryphal works and in commentary by Jewish rabbis and philosophers. Many of these early works attempted to expand on the original, filling in gaps and answering questions left unanswered by the original narrative—gaps and questions about the conditions of the Garden, the nature of the sin, how Adam and Eve reacted to the world they were expelled to, their first experience with illness, and even Eve's point of view.

The Adam and Eve narrative is, of course, central to the economy of the Atonement for Christians: the first Adam brought death; Christ, the second Adam, brought life through His sacrificial death. Assuming such a central place in Christian thought, it is no wonder it became ubiquitous in Western literature. The narrative was retold as a literary work most famously by Milton but has been a common reference point in literary works from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra* and

Bernard Malamud's *God's Grace.* Adam and Eve make appearances in popular culture in films like *The Truman Show, Pleasantville,* and *Wall-E;* in the funny pages, and in advertising messages. They even show up in an episode of *The Simpsons.*

Since the formative years of Christianity, two opposing interpretations of the Adam and Eve narrative have competed for dominance in Western culture. In the early days of Christianity, two opposing groups fought to become the normative

version of the religion: the orthodox and the Gnostics. As Elaine Pagels, a prominent religious scholar, has stated, it is not much of an oversimplification to sum up the entire controversy between the two groups "as a battle over the disputed territory of the first three books of Genesis."[1] The orthodox viewed the text literally and believed Eve's choice to take the fruit was a sin that left the entire human race fallen and overcome with sin, while the Gnostics viewed the text allegorically and saw her choice as a good thing—a preference for knowledge over innocence. Despite the fact that the Gnostics lost the battle, gnostic ways of viewing the narrative resurface again and again, most famously during the Romantic period.

Today the differences between other Christians and Latter-day Saints similarly focus on the different interpretations each gives to the Adam and Eve narrative. The Mormon position, while maintaining a literal reading, is radically gnostic in its orientation. We see the Fall as fortunate, knowledge as a boon, and Adam and Eve as heroes. Furthermore, many of the major theological differences between Latter-day Saints and other Christians—our beliefs in the corporeality of God, the unique individual identities of the Trinity, the repudiation of original sin, the nature of the Fall, and the role of Christ—center on our unique reading of the Adam and Eve narrative.

Both Davey Morrison Dillard's play "Adam and Eve" and Sarah Page's poem "Coring the Apple" illustrate this unique LDS reading of the first chapters of Genesis, while simultaneously, whether consciously or unconsciously, reflecting the larger literature on Adam and Eve. Both demonstrate uniquely LDS sensitivities, but both fall into a long tradition within Western culture of reworking the original narrative. Morrison's play recalls a long tradition of "gap-filling"—of trying to imagine the original hopes, fears, words, and deeds of our primeval parents. Morrison's gift is being able to recognize the humor implicit in the situation—how would it be to date the only other person on earth? How would it be to be told, in the company of that date, to be "fruitful and multiply"? How does one show affection for another person, having never seen any example? (Holding hands? Who would have thought of that?) Morrison has a keen eye for recognizing the potential awkward moments of this first courtship. The play is strongly reminiscent of Mark Twain's *Diaries of Adam & Eve.* Like Twain, Morrison sees potential for great humor in the gaps left unfilled by the original text. But Morrison's text is uniquely Mormon. He recognizes the Fall as involving a choice between two contradictory commandments and notes that it brought new knowledge to our first parents: a sense of guilt and shame at having been disobedient, but also a new understanding of beauty. "I never really saw how beautiful you are till . . . after." Most importantly, Morrison recognizes—with restrained understatement—the fears that must have accompanied being truly alone in a dreary world and highlights the courage of that first couple: "Are you scared?" "A little." "Me too." "That's okay." Readers know what that first couple could not: it will be okay. But it won't be easy and it certainly won't be painless.

Sarah Page's "Coring the Apple" is strongly reminiscent, and she acknowledges the influence of Robert Frost's sonnet "Never Again Would Bird's Song Be the Same." Frost's poem celebrates Eve as the creator of the soft eloquence of sound, coequal in her work to Adam's task of naming (creating words), the two abilities necessary, ultimately, for poetic production. But Page is not simply imitating Frost. While Frost honors Eve's (in fact all women's) gift of beauty to the world, Page celebrates Eve as a hero, as the shaper of divine destiny.

Page also plays with scripture in ways that are much older than Frost. Her experiment with finding poetry by borrowing from two separate verses of scripture that appear to be unrelated recalls the ancient Jewish rabbinical commentary (or *midrash)* on the Bible. The rabbis approached the biblical text in much the same way Page approaches it: they assumed that every biblical verse has something to teach us, that all verses are interrelated, and that these verses have limitless potential for meaning. The *midrash* exhibited the same kind of playfulness with language and bold new readings that Page demonstrates in her poem. However, like Morrison's play, Page's poem is uniquely Mormon. She sees Eve as a courageous woman, making a conscious choice, aware of the enormous stakes of that choice—but also seeing the limitless potential of future generations. It is common among Latter-day Saints to believe that, as he was suffering in Gethsemane and on the Cross, Jesus knew each of us personally and took upon himself each of our individual sins. But it is a unique insight to think that Eve was also aware of each of our lives and all of our potential when she took that fateful bite. Page recognizes that, for Latter-day Saints, Christ is

not so much the Second Adam as he is the Second Eve. For it is Eve who we celebrate for making that glorious decision to become mortal and wise, and it is Christ who transforms us from mortal to immortal, from wise to saved.

Throughout the history of retelling the Adam and Eve narrative, Eve has been portrayed in both a positive and negative light. In one rabbinic *midrash,* it speculated that women need perfume because Eve was made from a rib and, since bones putrefy, women must cover the stench. Contrasting that notion is an early apocryphal text that portrays Adam as frightened to the point of death by his first experience with darkness. Adam dreads the darkness not so much because he cannot see, but because he cannot see Eve. "For, so long as we were in the garden, we neither saw nor even knew what darkness is. I was not hidden from Eve, neither was she hidden from me. . . ."[2] Likewise, in Twain's *Diaries of Adam & Eve,* Adam has the last word as he laments over the death of Eve: "Wheresoever she was, there was Eden." The long tradition of literary gap-filling continues. What both Morrison and Page accomplish in their works is, not only to portray the fears, hopes, humor, and tragedy of Adam and Eve, but to recognize—in a uniquely Mormon way—the first couple as bravely ushering in a new world of endless possibility. ▪

ENDNOTES

1. Elaine Pagels, "Adam and Eve and the Serpent in Genesis 1–3," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism,* ed. Karen L. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 413.

2. "The Conflict of Adam & Eve with Satan" in *The Forgotten Books of Eden,* ed. Rutherford H. Platt, Jr. (New York: Bell, 1981, reprint of the 1927 ed.), 11.