

# “And Also Some Women” Podcast Transcript

## EPISODE 5: ALL ABOUT EVE

**June:** This is “And Also Some Women.” A podcast from Broadview magazine, and I’m your host, June Joplin.

**Anne:** And I’m Anne Thériault. Thanks for tuning in to our fifth and final episode, where we’re going to end at the beginning with a closer look at the mother of all living things.

**June:** That's Eve! Someone who obviously inspires very neutral feelings in people, right?

**Anne:** Yeah, it's not like she's been blamed for the downfall of all humanity or anything.

**June:** Well, I'm excited to dive into this, Anne, because I hear we've got some amazing guests in this episode.

**Anne:** Yes! And they’re going to take us through how most Sunday school lessons get it all wrong. Eve isn't second to Adam. And also ... the snake might not be who we think it is? I'll let our guests introduce themselves.

**Reuven:** My name is Reuven Kimelman. I'm a professor of classical Judaica at Brandeis University, and I'm also a rabbi of a congregation in Brookline in Massachusetts.

**River:** I'm River Cook Needham, my pronouns are she and her. I am a doctoral student at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and you can find my publicly accessible work at [www.RiverNeedham.org](http://www.RiverNeedham.org)

**Anne:** And then there’s the subject of our episode, who almost needs no introduction ...

**June:** But for those who could use a refresher, let's do a quick Sunday School review. God, of course, creates Adam first, and then makes Eve. A snake appears and tricks Eve into eating the fruit of the only forbidden tree in the whole Garden of Eden, and then Eve entices Adam to eat the fruit. God finds out what happens and kicks the unfortunate pair out of paradise and curses them and all their descendants to pain and misery.

**Anne:** And the Christian interpretation of Eve's role in this story has traditionally been less than flattering. She's seen as introducing sin into the world, which helped give rise to the doctrine of original sin, which is the idea that all humans everywhere are born with a tainted nature. She's also viewed through this highly sexualized lens, with the idea that offering Adam the fruit was a kind of seduction, and that her main sin was sexual in nature.

**June:** Well, when in doubt, throw some sex in, I guess. And of course, there's this idea that women are secondary to men because Eve was made from Adam's side and because she was the first one to eat the fruit.

**Anne:** Absolutely! Here's River speaking a bit about how Eve was perceived in the church that she grew up in.

**River:** I grew up in a fundamentalist tradition, and there Eve was deceived. Eve was the weaker partner. That meant that women needed to be subjugated to the will of men, and they were functioning almost as second class citizens. And that's one interpretation that I think is common in sort of more conservative Christianity, although maybe not quite to the extent that I just said.

**June:** It's certainly common in the type of Christianity that I was raised in. It's also infantilizing, but I guess that's the point, to treat women like disobedient children as a way of controlling them.

**Anne:** Yes! It's such a twisted use of the Creation story. Reuven thinks that a lot of people get Eve all wrong, starting with how we understand Adam's gender before God even created Eve.

**Reuven:** Eve is probably one of the most misunderstood characters in the Bible. Almost everybody thinks she's secondary to creation. The popular understanding is that the original entity was male, and female is a supplement to the male and therefore secondary to it. This is a misreading of the original Hebrew. The original Hebrew says the original entity was male and female. Now the problem is that Hebrew has no word for "it," and the default gender in Hebrew is male. Therefore when it says "God created it," people translated "God created him." The trouble with that is, the "it" is called male and female. So the original entity was a humanoid, he came from, or she came, or it came from the *adamah*, which is earth, therefore called Adam. So one word for earth in Latin is humus. So we should call the original entity humanoid or android.

Now this android was overwhelmingly lonely. So what did God do to solve the problem of loneliness? Split it in two. The female we merged out of the android became the sidekick of the remaining part, which was the male.

**June:** Now, I love this idea of Adam as this lonely human thing, this androgynous android adrift in the first week of creation.

**Anne:** I know it's not quite right, but I'm picturing Data from Star Trek looking lost and asking, "You mean there's no one else like me?"

**June:** Yes. I find it fascinating to think of Adam as this ungendered person, or really an all-gendered person. It's tempting to say that feels like a modern concept, except obviously it's not.

**Anne:** Actually, River has a similar take on Adam's gender pre-Eve, and then she puts her own fascinating spin on the story.

**River:** I think of Eve's story as having three parts. The first part is Adam going through all the animals that God had created, and then there wasn't a helper found. And so God does what I think of as the first gender confirmation surgery, and goes into this androgyne Adam, and pulls out a rib and makes what is called an *ishah*, or a woman.

My experience as a trans woman, I see Eve is the first trans woman, as one of my ancestors in faith. Because when I think about transgender people, I think about anyone who was assigned a gender at birth and lives according to a different gender and I - has recognized that they are a different gender. That's what happens with Eve and with Adam. There's this sort of androgyne character, that has no gender, that is just a person, just dirt, a dirt person. And then they are broken apart into *ish* and *ishah*, and we have the first two trans people, a trans man and a trans woman.

**June:** Wow. River and Reuven's interpretations are so thought-provoking, and both of them explain the same central problem: this idea that the original version of Adam is just not happy, and that unhappiness is resolved by separating out Eve.

**Anne:** And River pointed out that Adam, before Eve, exists without any kind of gender framework. She refers to that version of Adam as "a being that be's," without any sense of needing to perform gender.

**June:** Yeah! Of course! Because there's no one to perform gender for!

**Anne:** Exactly. So now we get to what River thinks of as the second part of the story.

**June:** Where the snake shows up and asks Eve if God *really* put limits on what they're allowed to eat in the garden. And then, of course, the snake famously tempts her.

**Anne:** Reuven emphasized to me how strange it is that the snake has this insider knowledge about what God said to Adam about what they're allowed to eat in the garden - and by extension, to Eve, since this is before God separated her out. Also, Reuven provided some interesting insight into how Eve communicates with the snake about the forbidden fruit.

**Reuven:** So the original command says - very interesting, it says, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat. But as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it. For as soon as you eat of it, you shall die." Now, first God underscores how much he liberally lets them eat everything. The prohibition is limited to one tree. The tree of knowledge of good and bad. And you're not to eat it, and if you eat it, you will die. And this is a commandment.

Now, what does Eve say when she responds to the snake? Eve says, "We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. It is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'You shall not eat it or touch it, lest you die.'" Now the question is, is she correctly transmitting what was heard? Or is she changing the text in light of her understanding or her self-interest?

Let's examine the differences. The original statement says, "God commanded." She says "God said."

The original statement called it a Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, a very ominous tree. She reduces this great, significant tree to its location. It's the tree what? Only in the middle of the garden.

The original commandment had her dying on the spot, imminently, and she has her dying subsequently.

Now, the question is, how do we account for these changes? Are they the normal type of changes when people talk, like they're playing telephone and they change it a little bit? Or do the changes add up to something? And if they add up to something, does it tell us something about the inner workings of Eve's mind?

Now the question is, why would anybody try to reduce the forcefulness of a commandment from God? So if it's nothing more than an expression of human nature, most people, when they contemplate transgressing a prohibition, they rationalize it and reduce its severity. "Ah, it's not that important. It's not that significant." Right? In your own mind, to reduce your guilt, you reduce the severity of the commandment.

So it's no longer the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, it's nothing but what? A tree in the middle of the garden. "What do you mean God commanded? He just said." "Oh come on, what do you mean I'm going to die on this spot? Oh of course we will die, but not what? Now."

So that means already she has reduced the significance and she's calculating her self-interests. What are her self-interests? Before, she thought the tree prevented her from dying and when she was thankful to God to say, don't eat it. It's like what? Poison!

**June:** I have to say, all this stuff about minimizing and rationalizing when it comes to transgressions, it feels very relatable.

**Anne:** Yeah, it's absolutely a human tendency. When I want to do something I know I probably shouldn't, my willingness to be talked into it is unparalleled. And when it comes to Eve, it makes a lot of sense, given how much she thinks she can gain from eating the fruit.

**Reuven:** But now she's told by the snake, if you eat of it, you become like God. So she says, "You know what? Why did God deprive the tree? Because he wants to be the only God around. But every human being desires to play God. And now the snake is giving me this opportunity to play God. And the only reason God withheld this tree from me is he doesn't want competition in divinity."

Now what does it mean to be divine in this case? In most ancient stories, to be divine means to be immortal. But this story does not talk about the mortality of the first couple. It talks about, that they do not have the authority to determine what is good and evil. And if they eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they disobey God. In disobeying God, they

set themselves up as the authorities of what is right and wrong. They determine what is good and they determine what is evil. They play God, they don't become God.

In fact, as soon as they eat of it, they start hiding from God. Now remarkable, they don't hide from each other. So if the issue was nakedness, they would hide from each other. What do they cover up? They cover up their differences. By covering up their differences, they hope to reestablish commonality.

But as soon as God asks them, "Where are you?" What does Adam do? He blames Eve. Well, Eve learns from Adam, she blames a snake. There's no member of humanity that takes responsibility. Everybody's blaming others.

And when it comes to the snake, God doesn't even talk to the snake. He's almost a non-entity.

**June:** Typically, Christians see Adam and Eve covering up their nakedness as having this sexual element - that before eating the fruit, they were quote-unquote innocent, but afterwards, their bodies become sexualized. But in Reuven's understanding, they cover up because they're suddenly aware of their physical differences. It's like they're abruptly *really* conscious that they're no longer "one flesh", as Genesis chapter two says.

**Anne:** Yes! And also, I want you to remember that detail about God not talking to the snake until it's time to mete out punishments, because it's going to be important later.

**June:** Ok, noted! So, Anne, I'm curious - in Reuven's interpretation, Eve is a much more sympathetic character than she's traditionally portrayed to be. But she knows she's breaking a commandment. Wouldn't she still be the villain in this Creation story?

**Anne:** Actually, to Reuven, Eve is the hero.

**Reuven:** First, if you read all the stories, we have quite a few, of them of ancient origins of humanity - all of them are stories of the male. It's remarkable. The Bible, as far as I know, is the only story which not only talks about the creation of the female, but makes the female the central character. In other words, what does Adam, the male, do in the story? She gives him food and he eats. And when things go wrong, he blames his wife. So now we have an eater and a blamer, and that is the male portrait here.

What does the woman do? She discusses, she calculates, she reasons, she makes a decision. So what's remarkable is, not only is the woman in the story, but, beyond all doubt, she is the central character. She is the engineer, or the hero, of the story. She makes things move. Adam is pretty passive, and therefore she is central.

**June:** It's true. Somehow Christianity made Adam into the superior being when he doesn't actually do much in the story.

**Anne:** And Reuven explained how a mistranslation further contributed to Adam being turned into the hero.

**Reuven:** So, what is amazing is the centrality of the woman in the story, when other stories just mentioned women were created. And why were women primarily created in antiquity? For sexuality - you need it for reproduction. For the biblical story it doesn't mention that, it says, well, woman wasn't created, she was the second half of Adam. She's the sidekick, as it were. So you got two halves - now, this is remarkable, because the word for sidekick in Hebrew is frequently translated in modern English translation as rib. Now if the woman is the rib, then the man is the whole. Then the woman is subsidiary to the whole.

But if she's a sidekick, all that means is there was an entity which has two sides. Now the word for rib in Hebrew is *tse/a*. *Tse/a*, every place elsewhere in the Bible means side, so the sanctuary had a side. Get it? The side of the sanctuary is called a *tse/a*. Nobody would call the side of the sanctuary a rib. Otherwise every sacrifice probably would have been a barbecue.

So this mistranslation - and it functioned because initially almost all the translators were male, and therefore the male-dominated understanding was thought to be the human understanding, not just the male understanding. The woman is equally part of the initial entity. Now when one side emerges, the leftovers become what? Male.

**June:** Wow, so the idea of thinking of male as a leftover gender rather than being the norm or the default gender? Well that's a pretty delightful lens through which to see this story. And I definitely prefer seeing female as a sidekick instead of a helpmeet.

**Anne:** Yeah, and here's River again with a bit more on that term, particularly in certain versions of Christianity like the Quiverfull movement, which encourages married couples to forego any kind of birth control and have as many children as possible.

**River:** Where I grew up, and then from the stories I've heard from people who grew up in even more fundamentalist places, helpmeet, was a - almost a derogatory term that meant wasn't as good as, wasn't as equipped as, wasn't as worthy. And because of that, that translated to all women everywhere all the time. And so women stayed at home. My mother couldn't work, but like often they weren't allowed to work outside the home. They had to - they had to have children, like in the Quiverfull movement, have children and keep the house running. And that was your job. And I think about some of the horror stories I've heard from homeschool alumni that like - just horror stories about having so much going on in the home that even with a stay-at-home parent, there was no way to handle it all, and just the psychological damage that has done. And so - it keeps going, and the trauma that that causes even to this day. I think that's very dangerous and that's a very dangerous reading of the Eve story.

**June:** Ugh, so dangerous. I much, much prefer the translation of Sidekick, with Eve as equal to Adam, and the real mover and shaker of this story. But, when do we get back to the snake, Anne? You mentioned it might not be who we think it is.

**Anne:** Soon, I promise. First, we have to take a journey through a whole lot of dad jokes.

**Reuven:** The whole story is full of puns. Even the word Adam comes from the word *adamah*, which means earth. So if you wanted to translate it literally, you would call Adam an earthling. Adam, Adam, *adamah*.

Secondly, the snake is called *arum*, which in Hebrew, it sounds just like the word for naked. So now the question is - is the snake naked, which is, of course, absurd, or is the snake shrewd? Or is there connection between the two, because the previous verse also says the original human beings were naked. So the choice of the language in Hebrew underscores the commonality between the snake and Adam and Eve. They both share the same word *arum* but if you translate *arum* in one case shrewd and in the other case nude, you miss the point! So the English misses much of it.

**June:** Ok, so the Hebrew words for naked and shrewd sound almost the same?

**Anne:** Yeah, exactly. Yeah, exactly. So the last verses of Genesis chapter two specify that Adam and Eve are naked, and then in the first verse of Genesis chapter three, the snake is called shrewd. So if you're hearing it in Hebrew, the play on words is very clear.

And there's a third pun to do with the words for tree and pain, because eating from the forbidden tree ends up causing Adam and Eve pain. But my favourite pun is the one that Reuven sees in Eve's name.

**Reuven:** Her name in Eve - in Hebrew it's called Chava - it is only told at the end of the story, when one would suppose it should've been told where? At the beginning of the story when she first shows up! You don't talk to somebody for a long time and at the end of the meal say, "Oh, what's your name?" Kinda peculiar! Or, "I'll give you a name," even worse! Now the word Chava - it says she's called Chava because she was the mother of all life. But the word in Hebrew for mother of all life is *chaya*. Right? *Chaya*, not Chava. It sounds very similar. The beginning and the end are the same, but the middle consonant, *chaya*, Chava, right? A little bit different.

What's remarkable is that one of the ancient words for snake in Aramaic, and sometimes in Hebrew, is *chivya*. So now I have three words. She is called Chava, but she should have been called *chaya*. And her name now sounds halfway like *chivya*. So if I go *chaya*, what she should have been called, Chava, what she is called, *chivya*, the sound of snake. So phonologically, she's halfway between the mother of all life and halfway between what? The snake.

**June:** Okay, I am desperate to know what comes next. So Anne, what does Reuven make of all this wordplay?

**Anne:** Well, first he uses it to give Eve an amazing nickname, Princess Snake. The snake part has been explained, and Princess, that's just his own addition. And then things go in an even wilder direction.

**Reuven:** So then I ask myself the question, why is she called Princess Snake? Very peculiar. So I ask myself, who was she talking back there? Was she talking to a real snake? Or was she talking to her name-sake? Maybe she was talking to herself, and she's reflecting

the human desire to play God, to replace God, to be among those who what? Know good and evil. Now to know is not just intellectual. It means, I know the source of, I determine what is good and I determine what is evil.

Now according to Genesis, God endows humanity with extraordinary power - to conquer the world, to master the universe - but he does not give humanity the authority to determine what is good and what is evil. That is a divine prerogative and if you try to grab that, you're encroaching upon a divine prerogative, and that, of course, is prohibited. So the play on words and reason you play on words is because you play on words because you realize that things have multiple meanings. And when you only take it as a single meaning you misunderstand the import of the full word. So her name is Eve which is really Chava which sounds like Chivya. That's why she could be called, in English, Princess Snake.

Meaning, her name reflects that ancient debate she had with this entity, which we thought was a snake, and at the beginning of the story is a snake. But if it really was a snake, when God asked Adam the question, where are you? And then he asked Eve the question, what have you done? He should have asked the question to what? The snake.

She is, or the snake is, the third partner in the crime. But God does not deign to talk to the snake, because He knows, although we don't know, that the snake ain't real. So how do you talk to that which you know is unreal? So He doesn't talk to the snake.

So the snake reduces its reality as the story goes on. And by the end, it turns out the snake is Eve's alter ego. And that alter ego we all have. We all have the temptation to play God and believe that if we disobey divine authority, we would set up our own authority as the ultimate authority.

**June:** Okay, this theory that the snake was actually Eve's alter ego, it's blowing my mind.

**Anne:** Right?

**June:** And it answers the age-old question of how, if God created everything in the world, the snake managed to get into the Garden of Eden in the first place.

**Anne:** Yeah, I guess the call was coming from inside the house all along.

**June:** Such a twist. But then God punishes the snake separately from Eve. So how does Reuven make sense of all that?

**Anne:** Well, his theory is that the snake actually represents what we were talking about earlier, with regards to humanity's great ability to rationalize our way into doing stuff that we shouldn't.

**Reuven:** So there are three punishments. One to the snake, one to Eve, and one to Adam. Now the punishment to the snake - people think that there's a conflict between women and snakes, but if you look at the verse closely, it says there'll be conflict between the descendants of the snake and the descendants are the offspring of women.



Now the offspring of women are not women. The offspring of women are male and female. Almost everybody born comes from a woman. So you can't call the offspring of women, women. Therefore there's a conflict between snakes and humanity.

If the snake is a real snake, there is no ongoing conflict in antiquity, nor in modernity, between the serpentine and the human. But if the serpentine becomes metaphorical for a mode of thinking, right, like snake-sneak, and it is a temptation to displace divine authority by human authority, and that's symbolized by the snake, then it's clear there's an ongoing conflict between what the snake symbolizes, and its role in the story, and the human desire to play God. That's a given conflict.

**June:** And there are so many instances of humans trying to play God that end so badly, like eugenics, for example.

**Anne:** Yep, and Reuven's theories on Adam and Eve's punishments further prove his point.

**Reuven:** Now. What is woman, what's her punishment? Her punishment is the experience of pain in birth. Not just some pain, it says more than normal, extreme pain. Why would that be an appropriate punishment? It fits in perfectly. Woman, that is, Eve, in this case, is trying to play God. Now when does a woman most think that she's close to divine? When she's giving birth - she's bringing life into the world. There is no more divine-like activity in the whole wide world than giving birth to another human being. So precisely when she thinks she verges on the divine, the Bible underscores her human vulnerability. Therefore she experiences pain and she realizes she ain't God, even though she's involved in a God-like activity. So it's a kind of a tit for tat. You want to play God? You have a divine-like role? Precisely when you're fulfilling your divine-like role, I'm going to underscore your humanity.

Now, this explanation accounts also for the punishment of Adam. When does an ancient man feel most divine? When he reaps the produce of his labour. When he brings in the crops. I made this tree. I made this vegetable. I made this crop. I am bringing life to nature. Another divine-like activity. So what's the punishment? By the sweat of your brow you will eke out a living, it will not be easy - in fact, you are reminded of your vulnerability and your humanity and your inability to totally control nature.

**June:** Well, I think climate change has demonstrated pretty well what happens when humans try to intervene with nature.

**Anne:** Exactly. And Reuven says there's still more to the curse, and I think his next take is really important.

**Reuven:** But woman is cursed, and there's another element of her curse. It says, your desire will be towards your husband and he will rule over you. That is a curse. According to chapter 2, a husband leaves his parents, joins his wife and becomes one flesh. So the original model was a model of equity. But in a cursed world, men will exploit sexuality to dominate the woman, assuming that the woman is more needy, because she wants to become pregnant, than the man. So therefore, it's a curse, meaning male domination of the female, or female domination of the male by virtue of sexuality, is a reflection that we live in a cursed world.

**June:** Gender inequality is a product of the cursed world. Wow, Anne, that really feels like a great note to end this podcast on.

**Anne:** Yeah, and I think it really sums up our general philosophy. In a perfect world, we're all equal, and we're all loving each other in an effort to become whole.

**June:** 100%

**Anne:** Before we go, I want to mention the main source for this episode was Reuven Kimelman's essay, *The Seduction of Eve and Feminist Readings of the Garden of Eden*. He also has a new book coming out soon called *The Rhetoric of the Jewish Liturgy: A Historical and Literary Commentary to the Daily Prayer Book*.

**June:** Well Anne, thank you so much for taking on this project with me. I really feel like we've covered a lot of ground in just five episodes, from Mary Magdalene to a trio of biblical villainesses, from Mary the Mother of God to some certified Old Testament heroines, and now, of course, Eve.

**Anne:** It's been so much fun!

**June:** And a big thanks to all of our listeners for coming along for the ride. This has been the final episode of *And Also Some Women*. It was hosted by me, Junia Joplin.

**Anne:** And written and researched by me, Anne Thériault. With script editing by Kristy Woudstra and sound production by Michael Brown and Messenger Bag Media. Jocelyn Bell is our executive producer. It's been a project of Broadview, North America's oldest, continuously published magazine.

**June:** *And Also Some Women* was made possible by a generous gift from Rev. John Perigoe and Rev. Dr. Lillian Perigoe. Lillian Perigoe devoted much of her vocation to advancing feminist theology, and this podcast is inspired by her life's work. Well dear listeners, this has been Broadview's first ever podcast. But if enough of you out there enjoyed it, it doesn't have to be the last. So I want you to leave a review, tell your friends about it, and be sure, if you haven't already, to subscribe. That way, if we come back for another season, you'll be the first to know.

**Anne:** Thanks for listening!