

Anne: Can you briefly introduce yourself?

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

Anne: Can you give a brief overview of what we know about Eve from scripture?

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. And then there's the story between the woman and the snake, where the snake deceives her and she eats from the fruit, and then the fall happens. And then we have this moment where, after the fall, *ishah* becomes Chava or Eve, which, if you've read this in the Hebrew, it's a lovely little play on words with *chaya* and Chava, which, *chaya* means to live. It's a wonderful little play on words that I love.

Anne: How do we understand this story as being about gender? And also how does this story impact the way gender is viewed in Christianity?

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.

But in 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. It's really fascinating to me how that is not a common interpretation and I think that's probably because there aren't a lot of transgender people doing the interpretation, but it is one of my favourite ways to read the story.

Anne: How do you understand Adam's gender before the creation of Eve? Before there is any kind of binary?

River: What I think of when I think of Adam's gender beforehand is that when there is just one person, just one being, gender becomes much less important, because gender is something that is done for the sake of society, for the sake of people around you. And you know, Judith Butler, the performance of gender, our performativity of gender, and the ways that gender is both socially constructed and sort of innate.

So there is this innate sense of gender, but I don't think there's this constructed sense of gender, so there's just this being that bes. It just is. And so I was calling this creature an

androgynous, but, really, that's not true, because there is no androgyny to be found, because there is no maleness or femaleness that exists. So I think this being doesn't even exist within the framework of gender to even have a frame of reference to talk about this person's gender.

Anne: What do you make of the fact that Eve doesn't have a name until after the fall?

River: You know, that almost feels like a punishment, because, first of all, there's Adam, and then there's *ish* and *ishah*, and it feels like this punishment that *ish* and *ishah* then become Adam and Eve, and rather than being sort of this typecast of all men and women, and all people, there's specificity, there is a there's life span. Rather than these beings that I like to think of as eternal beings, they become limited by life. That there's going to be death in the world. There's going to be loss. And that name is sort of a symbol of that loss that's going to happen, so I think it's really a sad thing that Eve gets named and isn't just *ishah*.

Anne: What do you find is a useful feminist and trans reading of the story of Adam and Eve?

River: I think about the term helpmeet, I think that's what the RNSV uses. And the fact that there isn't an animal that seems to be sufficient. I think that raises Eve's position to a point of like, she is an honoured guest at this place. In the story, she is very important to this story, but she is the honoured guest in this relationship. Because she has to be created. God was done creating in the second creation story, and then had to pick it up again to finish what God thought was over. I think that's an important feminist reading. I think there's the transgender reading, the feminist transgender reading that I talked about in the beginning is also like a really fun reading.

There's also the reading of the Divine Androgynous, which is, I think, more common in Jewish circles. I think this is a place where Christian biblical interpretation can learn a lot from Jewish biblical interpretation, because the commitment is to the story, not to the text, and leaning into learning from the story is also a great feminist way, like reading the negative spaces.

So, what happened between the woman being created and the woman eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? You know, how long did that take? How long was there peace and harmony in the garden before it all fell apart? Because I like to think that that lasted for a long time. Because who wouldn't want that to last a long time? And then, you know, curiosity got the best of you, and maybe you made a decision that you regret. Or maybe you don't regret it. Maybe that's something that you thought was great even after facing the consequences. I think opening our eyes to these different ways of reading, and like reading in between the spaces, is also a really great feminist tool to read the story of Eve.

Anne: If you're comfortable with it, would you mind speaking a bit about how the term helpmeet was viewed in the fundamentalist circles that you grew up in?

River: Sure, so where I grew up, and then from the stories I've heard from people who grew up in even more fundamentalist places, helpmeet, was 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. Women weren't allowed to work outside the home. They had to 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 are just horror stories about having so much going on in the home that, like, even with a stay-at-home parent, there was no way to handle it all, and just the psychological damage that was done. I think that's very dangerous and that's a very dangerous reading of the Eve story.