

Article

# The Woman's Curse: A Redemptive Reading of Genesis 3:16

Abi Doukhan

Queens College, City University of New York, New York, NY 11367, USA; doukhana@yahoo.com

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**Abstract:** In light of the recent developments featuring women around the world reclaiming their autonomy and self-respect in the face of male domination, it is becoming increasingly urgent to rethink the ancient “curse” on woman and the way that it has not only allowed but condoned male oppression and domination over women throughout the centuries. Rather than read the text through the traditional Aristotelian lens used by Church fathers to describe woman as the seductress and man as the legitimate authority over woman’s corrupt nature, this paper proposes a radical re-reading of the “curse” of Genesis 3:16 as a redemptive rather than a punitive moment wherein the woman is given back her power as the *ezer kenegdo* of man, and man is given back his kingdom lost and his reign over the whole of Creation, or *mashal*, through the woman’s love, or *teshuqah*. This will entail that the two key concepts *mashal* and *teshuqah* be profoundly re-interpreted from a Hebrew inter-textual perspective rather than through a Greek philosophical lens.

**Keywords:** curse; woman; Aristotle; *teshuqah*; *mashal*; Greek; Hebrew; seduction; love; domination; self-mastery

## 1. Introduction

Your desire shall be for your husband  
And he shall rule over you

—Gen. 3:16

For centuries this passage has been used to keep women in their place. Both Jewish and Christian traditions have interpreted this passage as pointing to woman’s inherent moral depravation, her power to seduce man into his own downfall, and the need for man, therefore, to keep woman in check and rule over her. Thus, woman has been described for centuries in a negative light, with her feminine *eros* needing to be bent and submitted to the man’s agency and will. The woman, because of her inherent moral inferiority and because of her central role in the fall of mankind, must submit. And if she chooses not to? History has shown the dire consequences of that revolt. From the witch hunts in the Middle Ages to horrifying statistics on domestic violence, we see what happens to the woman who refuses to bend to the man’s rule.

Rather than offer redemptive comfort, however, the Biblical text seems to justify these acts of violence and coercion on woman as the consequence of her sin, or worse, as the remedy to her fallenness—by submitting to the man, she is saved, redeemed, protected from her own moral depravity. It is of no surprise that many feminists have dismissed the Bible as a patriarchal text written by men for men.<sup>1</sup> For them, the Biblical text needs to be either discarded or deconstructed if any progress is to

<sup>1</sup> Pamela J. Milne observes, “in Western culture, the Bible has provided the single most important sustaining rationale for the oppression of women. . . . Serious people, especially feminist people, are having to reassess their relationship to the

be made for women. Yet, one wonders how such a degrading interpretation of the role of woman has emerged from a scripture supposed to be redemptive. Inasmuch as the Biblical text is meant to be a teaching on love and for the uplifting of humanity, one wonders how this interpretation of woman as fallen and needing to submit to the man falls in line with the Biblical *ethos*. Perhaps what needs to be deconstructed is not so much the text itself as its historical and traditional interpretations.

The purpose of this essay will be to offer such a deconstruction. Rather than read the text through the traditional Aristotelian lens used by both the ancient rabbis and church fathers to describe woman as the seductress and man as the legitimate authority over woman's corrupt nature, this essay proposes a radical re-imagining of the curse of Genesis 3:16 as a redemptive rather than a punitive moment. My task will not be so much exegetical—such is not my primary training—as philosophical. Such a task will be two-fold: first a deconstructive task whereby I will show the Greek foundations of traditional Christian and Jewish interpretations of the text. Second, an imaginative task, that is to say, an opening up of new significations and horizons of interpretations which I believe lay yet unexplored in the text. My goal then is not to offer an exhaustive exegetical analysis of the text but to offer a possible new reading, a disclosing of other significations from my standpoint as a womanist philosopher<sup>2</sup> which I hope will inspire future exegetical work. Such a re-imagining of the text's meaning will however entail that the two key concepts “rule” (*mashal*) and “desire” (*teshuqah*) be profoundly re-interpreted through an attention to the Hebrew text itself rather than through a Greek philosophical lens. I believe the implications of such a re-reading will be stunning: Paradise lost will be restored, with both the man and the woman finding their essential and royal destiny given back to them in a masterful move on the part of the Creator. But before any re-imagining of the woman's curse can take place, we must first turn the clock back and take a look at the traditional interpretations of this text.

## 2. Traditional Jewish and Christian Interpretations of Genesis 3:16

The history of interpretation—both Jewish and Christian—is unanimous when it comes to this passage: The curse was given to woman by God in order not only to punish her for inciting and seducing man into sin through her “desire” of him (*teshuqah*), but also to prevent such an incitement from ever happening again. This prevention is contained in God's giving man the prerogative to “rule” (*mashal*) over the woman, thereby reining in her seductive powers and becoming lord over her sexuality and desires. History has shown the myriad of ways in which this curse has been applied: from the command given to woman that she submits to the man in all things, to the careful guard set on her sexuality and feminine body. Chastity, modesty, and submission have become the three watchdogs of woman's body and sexual desire and have been powerfully enforced throughout the ages, through constant vigilance and indoctrination, and ultimately physical coercion and violence.

In Judaism, Philo's commentary of this passage offers a damning portrait of woman's inherent moral depravity: “But the woman was more accustomed to be deceived than the man. For his counsels as well as his body are of a masculine sort, and competent to disentangle the notions of seduction; but the mind of the woman is more effeminate, so that through her softness she easily yields and is easily caught by the persuasions of falsehood, which imitate the resemblance of truth.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is not just accidentally that Eve sinned. She sinned *because* she was a woman, inasmuch as the feminine body

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authoritative status of the Bible as a guide for structuring relationships between men and women in the modern world (Pamela J. Milne, “No Promised Land: Rejecting the Authority of the Bible,” in Hershel Shanks, ed., *Feminist Approaches to the Bible* [Washington, DC: Biblical Archeology Society, 1995]) (Milne 1995, pp. 47–49).

<sup>2</sup> Womanist as opposed to Feminist, inasmuch as my primary task will not be to “deliver” the woman from male domination, but rather to show how a partnership between the man and the woman is at play in the text, one that is unabashedly founded on sexual difference and gender roles, albeit in a wholly different way than was imagined by patriarchy. For more on my definition of womanism, see my *Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), (Doukhan 2019b, pp. vii–xiv).

<sup>3</sup> Philo, *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesim*, 1.33, in *Eve & Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*, eds. Kristen Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999) (Philo of Alexandria 1999a, p. 65).

is inherently yielding and easily influenced. Women are thus inherently weak when it comes to the moral playing field. And it is precisely because women are the morally “weaker sex” that they need the rulership of man. Just as the senses need to be subjugated by the mind, women, as naturally sensuous creatures, need to be subjugated by men who are naturally more rational: “In the allegorical sense, however, woman is a symbol of sense and man, of mind.”<sup>4</sup> And so, according to Philo, “Man’s sin was that he gave up his rightful position as master to subordinate himself to the woman.”<sup>5</sup> Such reading of the text can also be found in the midrash<sup>6</sup>, medieval commentators such as Rashi and Nachmanides,<sup>7</sup> and even in some hermeneutical circles today.

The Christian tradition falls into the same line of interpretation. Quoting the writings of Paul, Ambrose observes: “She was first to be deceived and was responsible for deceiving the man. Wherefore the Apostle Paul has related that holy women have in olden times been subject to the stronger vessel and recommends them to obey their husbands as their masters. (1 Peter 3:1). And Paul says: ‘Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and was in sin.’ (1 Tim 2:14). This is a warning that no one ought to rely on himself, for she who was made for assistance needs the protection of a man (Gen 2:18). The head of the woman is man, who, while he believed that he would have the assistance of his wife, fell because of her (1 Cor 11:3).”<sup>8</sup> Ambrose concludes on the moral superiority of man over woman and as such, it becomes the man’s legitimate task to lead the woman and lord over her. And the woman, by virtue of her inherent moral depravity, must obey and submit. This perspective will permeate Christian exegetical circles throughout the history of interpretation in the commentaries of Tertullian and Aquinas,<sup>9</sup> and linger on even in some contemporary exegetical work.

### 3. Deconstructing the Tradition: The Aristotelian Key

There are a number of problems, however, with these interpretations, the first having to do with the way woman is represented and depicted. An interpretation of woman as being ontologically different from man—women are sensuous and men are rational—and therefore morally inferior to him is simply not substantiated in the Biblical text surrounding our passage. Genesis 1 describes the creation of man and woman as taking place according to the same blueprint, the image of God: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1: 27). Genesis 2 further emphasizes the common ontological substance of both man and woman: Far from one being more sensuous or carnal and the other more rational, they are *both* created with the attributes of carnality and rationality. Genesis 2 describes the human as being a complex of clay and breath, flesh and spirit, sensuality and rationality. Furthermore, when it comes to ruling or having dominion, they are *both* given this command: “And God blessed *them*. And God said to *them*: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Gen. 1: 28, my italics). They are *both* inherently created to rule and to reign, not just the man by virtue of his masculine essence.

Thus, it is abundantly clear that the aforementioned Christian and Jewish interpretations could not have found their source in the Hebrew text itself. The question is then, where did these interpretations come from? The reason is historical: most of the known Jewish and Christian interpretations emerged within the same socio-cultural context—Hellenism. As such, they are looking at the text through the same lens, that of Greek philosophy, and more precisely that of Aristotelian philosophy. Whether we

<sup>4</sup> Philo, *ibid.*, 1.37, in Kvam et al., eds., *Eve & Adam* (Philo of Alexandria 1999a, p. 65).

<sup>5</sup> Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, 165, in Kvam et al., eds., *Eve & Adam* (Philo of Alexandria 1999b, p. 42).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Genesis Rabbah 17.7.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Rashi, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, Genesis 1:28 (Rashi n.d.); and Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, Gen 3:16 (Nachmanides n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> Ambrose, *Paradise*, 4:24, in Kvam et al., eds., *Eve & Adam* (Ambrose 1999, p. 136).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, 1:1 (Tertullian n.d.); and Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 92, a. 1.2. (Aquinas 1947).

are quoting Philo or Ambrose, the majority of Christian and Jewish commentators were conceived in the womb of Hellenistic culture and, as such, will come to the Hebrew text with the same Hellenistic perspective. What unites these interpretations—and why they are so similar—is their Greek frame of reference, and especially their Aristotelian roots.

A look at Aristotelian views on gender shows striking similarities with the interpretations we have cited above. Both perspectives speak of the moral weakness of woman and both perspectives speak of the man's moral superiority and his prerogative to rule over the woman. In his *On the Generation of Animals*, Aristotle observes that male animals have a hotter body temperature than female animals.<sup>10</sup> He also observes that female animals tend to be “less spirited than the male . . . softer, more vicious, less simple, more impetuous . . . while the males, on the contrary, are more spirited, wilder, simpler and less cunning”<sup>11</sup> These variations between the male and the female animals are, according to Aristotle, the effect of differences of body temperature. Because the female animals have a lower body temperature they are “less spirited,” that is to say less capable of resisting their impulses or their instincts. As such, the female, although more merciful, is also more prone to negative emotions such as jealousy, rage and violence.<sup>12</sup> Although she often knows better, and is as good as the male at knowing the difference between good and evil, her physical nature makes it difficult if not impossible for her to control her passions and develop the discipline necessary for virtuous behavior. This was exactly the argument that Philo, clearly under the influence of Aristotle, made in his differentiation between the masculine and the effeminate—the masculine being more competent than the effeminate to “disentangle the notions of seduction” for the woman “in her softness . . . yields and is easily caught by the persuasions of falsehood.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, according to Aristotle, “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.”<sup>14</sup> Because the male is more spirited and more connected to the realm of forms (due to his physical make-up) he is naturally more fitted to lead the female who, by virtue of being less spirited and, therefore, less self-controlled and disciplined, actually needs a strong lead in her life. Again, we see connections between Aristotle and traditional Jewish and Christian perspectives on gender relations. Like Aristotle, Philo believes that women, as sensuous beings, need to remain subordinate to men who are more rational in nature. Just like the senses are subordinate to the mind, women must become subordinate to their husbands. For Ambrose and following the lead of the Paulinian writings—themselves steeped in Hellenism<sup>15</sup>—woman, being morally inferior to the man, she must submit to him. Again, we can see the deep connections that the church fathers and Jewish commentators hold with Aristotelian philosophy.

Thus, to the question as to why traditional interpretations of our passage contradict so deeply the perspective on woman expounded in the early chapters of the book of Genesis, the answer is now clearer: They contradict this particular Biblical milieu because they have entered it from a foreign place—that of Greek philosophy. Traditional interpretations come to the Hebrew text through a Greek lens; they are entering and trying to make sense of a Hebrew text from a worldview deeply foreign to it. No wonder these interpretations end up clashing with the perspectives on gender and on the role of woman that surround our passage. The time has come to enter into the Hebrew text no more with Greek eyes, but with Hebrew eyes sensitive to the Hebrew text at hand. One wonders what new

<sup>10</sup> (Aristotle n.d.), *On the Generation of Animals*, 4.1.

<sup>11</sup> (Aristotle n.d.), *On the History of Animals*, 9.1.

<sup>12</sup> (Cf. Aristotle n.d.), *On the History of Animals*, 9.1.

<sup>13</sup> Philo, *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesim*, 1.33, in Kvam et al., eds., *Eve & Adam (Philo of Alexandria 1999a)*, p. 65).

<sup>14</sup> (Aristotle n.d.), *Politics*, 1.5.

<sup>15</sup> To be fair to the Paulinian writings, the Hellenistic worldview is often, in Paul, merely a set up or a starting point for its subsequent broadening and even subversion of the Christian message. For example, when Paul speaks of the woman as needing to submit to man—a deeply entrenched Hellenistic idea—he says it on the backdrop of a profoundly subversive statement that both the man and the woman submit to each other (cf. Eph 5:21), thereby setting the woman's submission in the context of a mutual submission, unheard of in the Hellenistic context.

significations one might find were we to shed our Greek lineage for a time and simply remain attentive to the Hebrew text without subjecting it to a foreign lens.

#### 4. Re-Imagining Genesis 3:16: A Womanist Perspective

Anyone familiar with the book of Genesis will observe that, when God punishes, he often does so with a redemptive purpose. God does not seem interested in punishing just to punish. Arguably, his punishments can often be elucidated and interpreted as containing a seed of redemption.<sup>16</sup> Looking back to the so-called curse of the woman, one might apply this same redemptive framework: What if the curse was not really a curse? What if the punishment was not merely a punishment but contained also the seeds of redemption? To understand the redemptive power of a divine judgment or punishment one must, however, go back to the sin that brought it about. My methodology will then be to go back to the “original sin” of both Adam and Eve as to better understand what exactly the “curse” is trying to rectify, to heal, and to redeem. Thus, our passage is to be read in the light of the sin that it is responding to. The only way to understand what “desire” (*teshuqah*) and “rule” (*mashal*) really mean is to go back to the scenario of the fall and revisit the respective sins of the man and of the woman. Rather than interpret our passage through the lens of the Greek conception of woman as naturally morally weak and as essentially submissive, we must interpret it based on what happened before, in the Hebrew text, and how the woman is depicted there. Rather than interpret our passage in light of the Greek conception of man as the morally stronger agent and, as such, the one who ought to rule over the woman, we must return to the Hebrew text and to its rendition of the events involving the man.

Going back to the story of the fall we find a number of indicators as to what the woman lost—or never possessed. Interestingly, the descriptions of woman there are at the antipodes of the Greek perspective. Far from being morally deficient, the woman is described, on the contrary, as having redemptive power: she is the *ezer kenegdo* or life saver<sup>17</sup> of man, the one meant to lift him up, to redeem him, to save him from the throes of death. Thus, moral weakness is not the woman’s problem. On the contrary, she is the one meant to strengthen the man morally, not produce his downfall. What, then, is her problem? The first indicator of there being a problem lies in her silence towards the man. When she is drawn out of Adam, he breaks into song: “This at last is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman because she was taken out of man” (Gen. 2:23). The woman, however, does not respond to the man’s passionate declaration of love. She is silent. It is as though she does not hear or see him. This obliviousness on the part of woman to the man is exacerbated at the scene of the tree. Again, she does not speak to the man. She does not ask what he thinks of the matter. Rather, as though he were not standing by her side, she takes the executive decision alone to take the fruit and eat it.

We now have a clearer vision of the woman’s psychic makeup: she is alone. In her world, there is no interlocutor, no vis-à-vis, no other. At the tree, she acts alone. She does not ask the man for feedback or advice and, having eaten, she gives him the fruit and he eats without a word, indicating his surrender to her agency. As such, the woman moves in the garden alone. She is the center of the world, with everything else, including her husband, at the periphery. She is what Levinas has called the “innocently egoist” subject<sup>18</sup> who, in a state of innocent selfishness, sees everything around herself as food to be consumed by her all-embracing desire and will. In a way, it is not just the fruit that is consumed by the woman, but the man. He, too, finds himself ingurgitated by the woman’s all-consuming will. And so, the woman’s deeply problematic psychological makeup becomes clear; her inherent and pervasive narcissism becomes evident: she has no sense of the other, no sense of there

<sup>16</sup> Cf. my *Biblical Portraits of Exile: A Philosophical Reading* (New York: Routledge, 2019) (Doukhan 2019a).

<sup>17</sup> While the translations of the expression *ezer kenegdo* vary, the fact that the word *ezer* finds itself ascribed to God’s life-saving power in numerous passages (cf. Ps. 54:4; 121:1, etc.) sheds a new light on the nature of the woman’s help: far from being a mere subservient “help-meet” she, like God, has saving and redeeming power, hence a possible rendition of *ezer kenegdo* as the “life-saver” of man, rather than merely his “help-meet.” For more on this cf. André Lacocque, *The Trial of Innocence: Adam, Eve and the Yahwist* (New York: Cascade Books, 2006) (Lacocque 2006, p. 103).

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), (Levinas 1969, p. 134).

being anyone else but herself in the world, and therein lies her “original sin.” As such, she is incapable of feeling anything for anyone but herself. The only desire she has is for what will fulfill *her*, satisfy *her*, elevate *her*. There is, thus, when it comes to the woman, a perversion of desire. This powerful impulse, meant to draw us out of ourselves towards transcendence, finds its trajectory interrupted in the woman: it goes out but only to come back to the woman, carrying with it the objects of her satisfaction. In a way, the woman has not yet been awakened to true desire, that is to say, to the true other, the one who does not satisfy, who does not quench, but rather who opens up a deeper hunger, a deeper longing, drawing her out of herself, expelling her out of her innocent egotism, and exploding her narcissistic enclosure.

We are now in a better position to understand God’s words to her: “Your desire for your husband” (Gen. 3:16). But what does “desire” (*teshuqah*) ultimately mean? This word is used two more times in the Hebrew Bible: in Genesis 4 and in the Song of Songs. The parallel text of the Song of Songs is, however, particularly enlightening.<sup>19</sup> Far from signifying a corrupting seductive influence, as many commentators have observed, the word *teshuqah* in the Song of Songs, this time referring to man’s desire, signifies a strong, focused intention of love (Song of Songs 7:10). Thus, *teshuqah* in the Song of Songs has a positive connotation. In the Song of Songs, the man finds himself feeling desire for the woman only at the end of a long and painful wait on her part for him, while his desire remains painstakingly diffused, fragmented, deviated to other women.<sup>20</sup> *Teshuqah* implies then a coming into focus, a drawing, a coming together of one’s total being into a passionate intention of love towards one person. In our passage, a similar process takes place. The woman’s desire here, just like the man’s desire in the Song of Songs, is not initially pure. Rather, this desire is diffused, fragmented towards different objects of satisfaction. The woman lusts after the tree, and the wisdom, beauty, and pleasure it can procure her. *Teshuqah* implies, however, a profound shift in the desiring intention: rather than being mere self-gratification and self-satisfaction, *teshuqah* constitutes a maturing, a deep alchemical transformation of self-gratification into a movement of self-transcendence towards an other which cannot be absorbed or ingested. Such a desire is no more the selfish, self-interested movement of lust, but rather an intention of love for an other which cannot be consumed, mastered, and controlled.

And it is precisely this loving intention that God awakens in the woman by his words. The curse is then in fact really a blessing meant to remind the woman of her higher calling, a calling beyond her own interests and agendas, a calling towards an other, a calling to love. As such, God’s words give back to the woman her destiny as the *ezer kenegdo* of man. Yes, she failed to live up to that responsibility, yes, she caused the downfall of man rather than his redemption. But God, by these words, gives her back what she has lost, gives her back her gift and her power. For therein lies the true erotic power of woman: not in her ability to seduce the man and by this means to overpower him and weaken him to the point that he caves in to her desires. Her erotic power lies, on the contrary, in the loving intention which builds up rather than tears down, strengthens rather than weakens, energizes rather than paralyzes. Depending on the quality of her desire, the woman can make or break a man. If her desire is mere self-gratification and lust, she will destroy the man. But if her desire is love, then there are no limits to the redemptive power that is contained within her *teshuqah*.<sup>21</sup> It is precisely this power that God gives back to the woman. But what of the man? What has he lost? And what is he given back?

Going back to the curse, “your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16), we see that, alongside God’s gifting the woman back with her erotic power, or *teshuqah*, he also gifts the man with the ability to rule or *mashal*. Of course, the meaning and implications of this

<sup>19</sup> For more on the inter-textual connections between our passage and the Song of Songs, cf. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978), (Trible 1978, pp. 144–65).

<sup>20</sup> For more on this, cf. my *Womanist Wisdom in the Song of Songs* (Doukhan 2019b, pp. 61–73).

<sup>21</sup> The Hebrew Bible is replete with examples of women making a powerful difference with loving words or actions, or *teshuqah*. Abigail saves David from shedding blood and ruining his prospects as God’s anointed, with her loving and respectful demeanor towards him; Queen Esther saves her people from genocide by seducing the king; the Shulamite in the Song of Songs elevates her man’s diffused and fragmented desire for her into a love stronger than death.

rule need to be properly elucidated: over whom or what is the man to rule? What does it mean to rule? How is he to rule? We saw that in traditional Christian and Jewish interpretations, the rule of the man was understood as being extended over the woman. Inasmuch as the woman was perceived through the Greek lens of being morally weak and deficient—hence her destructive, seductive powers—it seemed reasonable that man should rule over her to make sure that the fall never happened again. The problem with that interpretation, again, is that it stems from a Greek reading of the text. As such, it does not line up with the Hebraic perspective of woman as a redeeming power or *ezer kenegdo* and as a being equal to man. Moreover, as I have argued, far from being deemed morally inadequate by her mistake, she is not so much condemned as redeemed, given back her destiny as the loving *ezer* of the man. In other words, rather than her desire being of the corrupting kind and stemming from the intention to weaken man and cause his downfall, *teshuqah*, on the contrary, meant a powerful loving intention. Thus, the woman is, here, approaching the man with love. But if this is the case, why does man still need to resist, control, or rule over her? The need to rule over and control the woman is only necessary if she poses a threat and if she is approaching the man with the intention or result of causing his moral disintegration and downfall. Inasmuch as the woman is approaching the man with her God-given loving power, one wonders why the man might still need to “rule over her.”

Moreover, when it comes to ruling, a look at the first Creation story reveals that this prerogative was given to *both* of them: “Fill the earth and master it and rule (*radah*) the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky and all the living things that creep on earth” (Gen. 1:28). In the Hebrew cosmic worldview, human beings were never meant to rule over each other, but rather to rule together over the natural and animal kingdoms. Interestingly, the word for rule used in this passage is not *mashal* but *radah*. As such, we can already begin to decipher what *mashal* is *not*: it is not a rule over a being which is subordinate or inferior; it does not signify the rule of the master over the slave, or of the spiritual over the material, of the rational over the sensuous, all of which constitute the meaning of *radah*. Yet, this is precisely the interpretation that has been given of *mashal* by tradition: The man is to rule the woman as reason rules over the sensuous, and as spirit rules over matter. The Biblical text, however, does not condone this interpretation but rather ascribes the prerogative of ruling in this way (*radah*) to both the man and the woman. Both are to rule over the natural world, both are to exercise their rational power over the sensuous, their spiritual impulses over the material ones, and master the latter as a master does a slave. Neither is to rule in that way over the other, inasmuch as this mode of ruling is reserved for the natural world.

So what then does *mashal* mean? Answering this question will entail going back to the man’s side of the story and to his role during the event of the fall. We have already established that the words of God in Genesis 3:16 had the purpose of giving the woman back her forgotten destiny of being an *ezer* to the man. What was, then, man’s specific destiny, and did he also forget his own calling at the fall? Interestingly, the man as a gendered being is not given a specific task at the moment of his emergence. Rather, the task given to the human earthling (*adam*) to “work” and “keep” the ground (Gen. 2:15) is later on transmitted more specifically to the man (*ish*), as is evident at the moment of the curse when God ascribes to the man the task of working the ground “from which [he] was taken” (Gen. 3:17–20). Thus our text is here somewhat ambiguous: On the one hand, both the woman and the man, inasmuch as they were originally comprised in the human earthling (*adam*) have been given the task of working and keeping the ground; on the other hand, it is ultimately the man who finds himself harnessed to this task at the moment of the curse. Although both genders have a responsibility towards the ground—just as both genders have a responsibility towards each other—the man does seem to have been given a special gift and power when it comes to the working and keeping of the ground. In the same way that the woman, because of her origin in the human earthling, has a special responsibility for humanity, the man, because of his origin in the ground, has a special responsibility towards it. But what does this working and keeping of the ground mean and entail?

A closer look at the man’s calling reveals another facet: “The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying,

‘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’ ” (Gen. 2: 15). The task to protect and work the ground thus finds itself essentially bound to a command: to *not* eat. In other words, the ground will be protected and properly worked to the degree that the man remembers his limits: that there are things that he cannot possess, conquer, master, acquire. The earth is not completely his. There are regions of sacredness, of mystery, of transcendence. Not everything is under his power, grasp, and control. There are some things that he is not allowed to consume. The life of another human being, the land source of livelihood, and the principle of life cannot be consumed, possessed or transgressed. Such are the limits that must be set on man’s willpower if the ground is to be protected and properly worked. Thus, the calling of man to protect and till the earth comes with an ethical injunction. As long as he keeps this ethical stance of recognizing his limits, keeping his greed in check and recognizing that not everything is his possession, the ground under him will flourish.<sup>22</sup> But the day that he oversteps his limits and seeks to invade the sacred space that ought to remain untouched, death shall enter the world.

*Mashal* is, therefore, not primordially concerned with ruling over the woman as traditional commentators have maintained, but with the *man* showing himself capable of ruling *himself*, of keeping his urges and his will to power under control for the sake of the cosmos. True governance is only possible for a man who has shown himself strong enough to govern himself,<sup>23</sup> as though the survival of the cosmic order depended on his ability to control himself, to keep his own life-force in check.<sup>24</sup> And while the word *mashal* does find itself associated in later scriptures with oppression and cruelty,<sup>25</sup> we are here witnessing the birth of this concept and its possible original intent. In this passage, we can discern in the act of *mashal* a gesture which must first and foremost be turned inward. It is a gesture of self-control, which is incidentally precisely what the man was lacking at the moment of the fall when he lost control and succumbed to the woman and her fruit over his fidelity to the divine command. It is this weakness, this inability to control *his* passions and, in so doing, forfeiting his responsibility for the cosmos, that constitutes man’s “original sin.” Thus, what man has lost in the garden, upon eating the fruit, is both his crown and his kingdom, that is to say, his *mashal*.

We are now in a position to understand what God is doing in our passage: Just as God awakened woman to her true power—that of true desire—he gives man back *his* true power—that of self-mastery. The man’s *mashal* was thus never meant to be authoritatively extended over the woman, but over himself. The problem, then, was never that the man lost his grip on the woman; it was that he lost his grip over *himself* and with it, his sense of responsibility over the cosmos. It is this self-mastery and responsibility which is bestowed anew upon him by God. It is man’s crown and kingdom which God inaugurates in the words “he will rule.” Him who was not able to rule, him who forfeited his authority and power, him who succumbed to weakness and to his passions, precisely *him*, let him rule again, let him be crowned again, let the kingdom be once again entrusted into his hands. Thus, the *mashal* that is bestowed on the man in this passage does not coincide with an essential ability to rule, or with a so-called natural authority, as was implied by the Greek perspective. Far from it. Rather, it is an act of

<sup>22</sup> The connection is explicitly made in the Deuteronomic law between keeping God’s commands—i.e., respecting the limits placed on man’s greed and will to power—and the land’s abundance, “flowing with milk and honey” (Deut. 11:8). From an agricultural point of view the curbing of greed and overexploitation is fundamental if the land’s fertility is not to become depleted. Thus, the whole Deuteronomic/Levitical law, with the oft repeated emphasis on “holiness” or separation, and its constant emphasis on boundaries and the curbing of man’s power in the face of those boundaries, can be understood as a pedagogy of governance, or *mashal*, serving to teach Israel how to properly steward the land it was about to inherit.

<sup>23</sup> “Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than him who takes a city” (Prov. 16:32).

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, this connection between man’s ability to master his own will to power and the maintenance of the cosmic order is described in the origins of the world-wide flood occurring in Genesis 7. Men killed (Gen. 4:23) and raped at will (Gen. 6:2) without any notion of the sacredness of human dignity, agency, and life, without any sense of a boundary set upon their power. As a result, the cosmos itself lost its balance and uncontrollable forces—mirroring the un-checked will to power of man—were unleashed.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Prov. 22:7 and Isaiah 19:4.



profound, undeserved grace. It is a redemptive measure whereby God inaugurates in man a power which was found tragically lacking at the crucial moment.

But there is more. In the way our text was composed, there emerges a reciprocal relationship between *mashal* and *teshuqah*, as though they are responding to each other, as though there existed a connection between the two callings. The woman turns to face the man with her newly awakened loving intention (*teshuqah*) and, in response, the man turns to her with his renewed sense of responsibility (*mashal*). Thus, although *mashal*'s scope extends to the whole cosmos, there is a special sense in which it is a response to the woman's love. This is in many ways true. A woman can not only awaken a man's *mashal*, or responsibility towards the cosmos, but she can fine-tune and refine the way he engages with the world. Many are the examples of women who, simply by believing in their man, have awakened them to their specific calling and responsibility in the world.<sup>26</sup> It is in this sense that a woman's love can be truly powerful for it can ignite in many a man the courage and perseverance he needs to accomplish his task in the world. The woman can also fine-tune a man's *mashal*. Through her loving influence, she can protect a man from the reckless and violent unleashing of his power; as such, she can curb his will to power so as to make it more humane, and less brutal.<sup>27</sup> Many are the examples of women's protests putting an end to the wars, environmental exploitation, and brutality of men.

Yet, just like the man needs the woman's *teshuqah* in order to come into his full power, the woman, too, needs the man's *mashal* for her own power to be released. Interestingly, although the man's *mashal* has, arguably, cosmic proportions, in our passage, it is extended specifically over the woman. The man is commanded by God to rule "over her" (*bakh*). Yet, far from being a command to dominate and repress the woman, *mashal*, in the way that we have explained it, must signify rather a curbing or a restraining of man's will to power and greed when standing before the woman. The extension of *mashal* "over" the woman thus means the exact opposite of controlling or mastering the woman. It signifies, far to the contrary, the constricting of man's will in order to protect and safe-guard the sacred space inhabited by the woman, by her existence, her agency and her voice, in the face of violence, oppression, and dismissal. Far from signifying the mastery of man over the woman and her desires, *mashal bakh* means the safe-guarding of the woman as precisely a being which cannot be and must not be mastered, controlled, and repressed. Rather, *mashal bakh* will ensure that the woman, too, be given her portion, that her boundaries, too, be protected, and that her agency be respected in the face of raw greed and will to power.

Interestingly, this interpretation of *mashal bakh* as a protective covering of man over the woman has been offered by a number of traditional commentators. These interpret the *mashal* of the man as a form of authority over the woman which safeguards her from abuse, poverty, and violence which she would endure without this covering. Such is the *mashal* offered by patriarchy.<sup>28</sup> But this is not, arguably, the meaning of our passage. If *mashal* means the curbing of man's power, it cannot signify any form of domination, even a benevolent or protective one. Although patriarchy's *mashal* has constituted a protective covering from sexual violence and exploitation, it has failed to truly protect the woman's agency, her voice, and her erotic power. Our text's *mashal*, however, points us beyond the protective structures of patriarchy to a truly emancipative gesture. Thus, far from signifying man's authority or domination, *mashal bakh* must be understood precisely as an act of abdication of that authority,

<sup>26</sup> For fascinating examples of women using their erotic power to change the political landscape see: <https://qz.com/958346/history-shows-that-sex-strikes-are-a-surprisingly-effective-strategy-for-political-change/>.

<sup>27</sup> I am reminded here of the advice given to the wise ruler in the *Tao Te Ching*, to "know the male yet keep to the female" Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version* [New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, reprint, 2006], (Tzu 2006, chapter 28). The wise ruler is one who is able to bring the masculine in balance with the feminine, and to rule from the place of balance. To neglect one or the other is to fall into imbalance, either tyranny or passivity.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Davidson outlines this view in *Flame of Yahweh*: "'You will be eager for your husband and he will rule over you' (in the sense of a servant leadership to care for and help and not in the sense of domination and oppression)" *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* [Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2007] (Davidson 2007, pp. 61–62). Here, we see clearly how this view maintains the hierarchy of the man over the woman but in a benign way: the man is to rule over the woman in order to better support and protect her.

as a stance on the part of man that protects the woman from any illegitimate form of domination or authority, thereby liberating her from those who would seek to keep her under lock and key. Rather than silencing the woman, *mashal bakh* is a gesture on the part of man that opens up a space for the woman's voice to be heard and heeded. Instead of signifying the curbing of the woman's power and desires, *mashal bakh* inaugurates them.

Far from constituting a gesture of domination over the woman's dangerous seductive powers, the man's *mashal* in fact constitutes a loving response to the woman's own loving intention, to her *teshuqah*, which has the structure of welcoming, of hospitality, of a space offered to her loving presence, to her desires, and to her voice, in a moment of unprecedented and unparalleled grace and generosity. And it is precisely such a profound act of generosity that Adam performs next. For our story has not yet reached its final culmination. The first thing Adam does with his newly recovered *mashal* is to rename the woman "the mother of all living" (Gen. 3:20). Now the implications of this are shocking! God had just finished speaking, ending with a description of the terrifying consequence of sin: the return of all humans to the dust from which they were made. Our passage thus was meant to finish on the morbid note of death and hopelessness. But it is precisely then that the man chooses to deploy his newly found power. Refusing the divine verdict on the world over which he now reigns, he overturns it, changing the divine conclusion of death into a blessing over the woman, exploding with the audacity of hope in new life. This should have been enough to silence, anachronistically, centuries of misguided interpretation of the fate of woman. Shaking violently the very foundations of the eventual diagnostic of woman as the one having ushered death into the world, this prophetic word of the man to the woman completely redeems her of that fault, sanctifying her, washing her with water and presenting her to himself without stain or wrinkle or any such blemish.<sup>29</sup>

We are now in a position to realize the powerful redemptive orientation of Gen. 3:16. Just as the woman is called to be the redemptive help or *ezer* of man (Gen. 2:18), man, too, can exercise his redemptive power towards the woman by powerfully reversing her destiny, protecting her from the scorn of her accusers, and inaugurating as well as safeguarding the space of her own unique calling. Just as a woman can awaken a man to his true calling, a man can baptize a woman, give her a new beginning and open up a way for her own destiny through his *mashal*. Such is the power of the woman, able to swap her egotism for the exigencies of love. Such is the power of the man, capable of listening to, and being influenced by the loving intentions of the woman by his side. When both the man and the woman work together in this way, the de-creation process inaugurated by the fall can be reversed, and redemption can begin to find its way into the world.<sup>30</sup> The lost balance of the universe and the ensuing chaos can be interrupted, paving the way to the renewal of the cosmos. And so our passage can also be read as a messianic prophecy, albeit not merely through the saving work of the woman's seed, but as a prophetic vision of renewed balance in gender relations, between the man and the woman, between the woman and the man, ushering us into a time of lost and forgotten harmony between the two cosmic royals, thereby bringing light, gladness, joy, and honor back into the world.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Eph. 5:26–27.

<sup>30</sup> Irigaray said this poignantly: "As long as the other is not recognized and respected as a bridge between nature and culture, a bridge that gender at first is, every attempt to establish a democratic globalization will remain a moral imperative without concrete fulfilment" (Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* [New York: Continuum, 2008]) (Irigaray 2008, p. 134).

<sup>31</sup> I am alluding here to Esther 8:16, the book of Esther being one of the clearest signifiers of this new balance between the man and the woman, and the powerfully life-giving effect of their joint rule. It is only when the King allies himself with the Queen that the people are delivered from death.

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