

The World According to Eve, By Cullen Murphy

reviewed by [Dianne Bergant](#) in the [April 21, 1999](#) issue

### **The World According to Eve**

*By Cullen Murphy. Houghton Mifflin, 302 pp.*

Journalist Cullen Murphy introduces us to some of the leading feminist biblical scholars of our day and explores their insights into the Bible. Although the topics discussed range from literary and social history to archaeology and the Gnostic writings, the book reads like a novel. Murphy first presents the scholars, portraying them as engaging people with various interests. Only then does he discuss the passions that drive their scholarly pursuits--research that spans both testaments and carries over into the period of the early church.

The book begins by sketching the life and accomplishments of one of the forebears of the feminist movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Her *The Woman's Bible*, published in two volumes in 1895 and 1898, opened the doors for women's serious study and interpretation of the Bible. Murphy considers Stanton's work to be a remarkable piece of literature, still interesting today. To the list of extraordinary women of this time, Murphy adds Antoinette Brown, Lucy Stone and the Grimke sisters, all pioneers in the struggle for the recognition of women's dignity and rights. This brief look at the movement's beginnings not only sets the historical context for the rest of Murphy's investigation but also acknowledges the debt that succeeding feminist scholars owe these trailblazers.

An overview of various critical approaches (text, source, and tradition or redaction criticisms) leads into a clear explanation of rhetorical criticism and a sketch of the woman who brought this approach to biblical scholarship. Though impressed by the thinking of the radical feminist Mary Daly, Phyllis Trible choose to reinterpret the biblical tradition rather than to reject it. Murphy traces her development as a scholar and includes short excerpts of her work. Though he is fascinated by some of her findings, he finds some of her conclusions weak.

Approaching the Bible through a study of historical artifacts, Carol Meyers attempts to reconstruct the social history of ancient Israel's premonarchic and monarchic

periods. Murphy captures the excitement of her undertaking, showing that for Meyers, her husband, Eric, and their children, archaeology is a family affair.

Murphy next turns to the work of several scholars who explore whether some of the biblical material might have been written by women. When Tikva Frymer-Kensky, an Assyriologist and Sumerologist, read a sheaf of ancient Babylonian birth incantations while she awaited the birth of her own child, she became interested in why this kind of material had not found its way into the Bible. Harold Bloom, in *The Book of J*, speculates that one of the earliest biblical writers, the Yahwist, or simply J, was a woman, though scholars like S. D. Goiteir disagree with him. Murphy does not reveal his own position on this issue, but he gives numerous examples of biblical material that treats matters that would have been of interest to women.

Mieke Bal, a literary critic who insists that the perspective of the reader significantly influences the character of the interpretation, examines the biblical stories about women such as Eve, Ruth, Delilah, Jael and Jephthah's unnamed daughter. She shows how images from popular films, other literature and even contemporary commercials have been read into the biblical story. Her approach frees us from misogynist biases, and from the tyranny of earlier readings.

While the First Testament has traditionally--and erroneously--been characterized as violent and unyielding, the studies of this testament included here do not seem to be as contentious as do those of the Second Testament. The chapter titled "Was Jesus a Feminist?" pinpoints two significant contemporary interests: the role of women in the early church, and the quest for the historical Jesus. How one interprets Jesus' attitude toward women often determines the position one takes on the question of feminism.

According to Murphy, the most prominent Second Testament woman scholar is Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. He describes her early life, her education and her scholarly career, and discusses her influence on contemporary feminist biblical interpretation. Whether or not Jesus was a feminist, as Leonard Swidler believes, Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the early Christian community was more egalitarian than we have previously thought. The political conclusions that she draws from this conviction challenge attitudes of the contemporary church about woman's place.

Scholars like Amy-Jill Levine call for caution here, lest we ascribe misogynist attitudes to early Judaism and egalitarianism to the Christian movement. Kathleen

Corley, one of the group of scholars known as the Jesus Seminar, is skeptical about any overpositive interpretation of the Second Testament period. We should not read our own desire for mutuality into the period.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has both disturbed some scholars, like Jane Shaberg, and captivated others, like Jaroslav Pelikan. While Murphy only mentions Shaberg's position, he discusses Pelikan's work at length. Rosemary Radford Ruether supports Pelikan, insisting that the characterizations of Mary can easily be reinterpreted for contemporary believers.

Murphy squarely takes on what is perhaps today's most controversial issue: the role of women in ministry. He begins by quoting the writings of Pope John Paul II, and then presents the views of several scholars who challenge the pope's view.

Proponents of women's ordination believe that if they can show that women and men functioned similarly in the early church, they will be able to defuse some of their opponents' arguments. To this end, scholars like Karen Jo Torjesen have joined the search for prominent women in the churches established by Paul.

Mary of Magdala seems to have played an important role in the life of Jesus. Murphy traces the way this woman, Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and the repentant sinner were gradually conflated into one person. He then introduces us to the *Gospel of Mary*, an early Christian document that was not incorporated into the canon. It was unknown until 1896, when a manuscript containing it was discovered near the Egyptian village of Nag Hammadi. Elaine Pagels wrote about this material in 1979. More recently, Karen King has found in the *Gospel of Mary* a woman whose importance rivaled that of Peter. The absence of this kind of material from the canon raises the question of ecclesiastical power and authority. Might books such as this have been kept out because those in power did not want to acknowledge that women had held significant positions in the early church?

Murphy ends his study with a discussion of the sexual behavior of early Christian women, as recorded in some of the Gnostic material. Bemadette Brooten has studied the question of same-sex love among women, while Ross Kramer sees sexual asceticism as a way for women to be free of male domination.

For most of these scholars, their reinterpretation of the tradition is a way of being faithful both to it and to their identity as women. Murphy provides us with a fascinating glimpse of both their commitment and the fruits of their scholarship.