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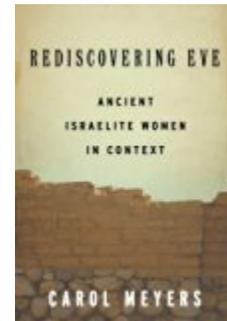


Carol L. Meyers. *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xi + 295 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-973462-7.

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Published on H-Judaic (July, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman



## Rediscovering Eve Twenty-Five Years Later

In 1988, Carol Meyers published her groundbreaking *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israel Women in Context*. Twenty-five years later, her new work, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, proves just as important and illuminating. Both books utilize a similar interdisciplinary approach and start with a similar goal: to reconsider “Eden Eve” (the character depicted in the foundational Genesis narrative) and “Everywoman Eve” (the average Israelite woman) in light of the latest research on Genesis 2-3 and the daily lives of women in ancient Israel. Yet Meyers does not present this new book as a revision of the first. She widens the scope of her investigation from the earliest period of Israelite history (Iron Age I, ca. 1200-1000 BCE) to the entire Iron Age (ca. 1200-586 BCE), and incorporates a considerable amount of new research, along with her own refined and updated thinking.

To get a sense of the degree to which *Rediscovering Eve* expands upon and advances its predecessor, one need only compare their bibliographies. The 1988 book contains 257 bibliographic entries, including seven articles by Meyers. In contrast, the 2012 work cites 574 resources, with only 125 predating 1988. Meyers’s own entry spans four pages and lists twenty-five articles and three books, plus another co-authored book and one co-authored article. The more than twofold increase in the size of the bibliography indicates the quantity of new research incorporated into this version, thus prompting extensive changes and a new title. The more than threefold increase in the size of Meyers’s entry stands as a testament to her immense contribution to the fields of biblical studies and

archaeology, particularly to our understanding of women in ancient Israel.

The first chapter of *Rediscovering Eve*, “Eve and Israelite Women: Understanding the Task,” frames the book’s aim and approach. Meyers states that the “purpose of this book is not only to examine the Eve of the Eden story but also to bring to light the lives of Everywoman Eve, the ordinary women of ancient Israel” (p. 4). This twofold objective reflects a distinction between biblical women (the female figures mentioned in the Hebrew Bible) and Israelite women (the women who lived in Iron Age Israel), as well as a conviction that understanding the former requires knowledge about the latter. Meyers’s dual expertise in the Bible and archaeology give her the requisite tools to accomplish this task.

Achieving these goals requires a “multifaceted, interdisciplinary, integrative approach,” one of the hallmarks of this book (p. 14). Meyers explains her methodology and explores the strengths and weaknesses of her sources in chapter 2, “Resources for the Task.” In addition to the Bible and other ancient writings, material remains provide “independent witnesses to the lives of the ancient Israelites” (p. 27). But since archaeological finds require interpretation, Meyers also turns to anthropological research, particularly ethnography. She explains: “By looking at the material practices and social patterns of an observable culture, we can infer that similar practices and patterns obtained in an ancient culture with a similar set of environmental conditions” (p. 32). Be-

cause she combines archaeology and ethnography with textual data, Meyers labels her approach “ethnohistorical” (p. 37).

Meyers demonstrates how these resources work together in chapter 3, “Setting the Scene: The Ancient Environment.” She paints a vivid picture of the harsh environmental conditions encountered by those who inhabited the Iron Age highland settlements. Meyers characterizes the majority of these people as “peasants”: subsistence farmers or “small-scale, independent agriculturalists who produce for their own needs and not for profit” (p. 47). Given the hilly terrain and scarcity of water, along with nutritional deficiencies and other health risks detailed in this chapter, Israelite women and men faced rather austere conditions.

With this information as background, chapter 4, “Eve in Eden: Genesis 2-3,” turns to the biblical text. Meyers attempts to reorient our reading of the Eden story so that we view it in the context of the environmental conditions of Iron Age Israel and in light of the meaning of the Hebrew text, instead of through the “interpretive eyes” of later Jewish and Christian commentators who “distort or misrepresent the meaning and function of the tale” (p. 60). She traces the negative portrayal of Eve through a range of post-biblical writings, demonstrating how ideas not found in the biblical text—like the Fall or Eve’s temptation of Adam—became associated with the first biblical woman. Meyers also criticizes “another and perhaps more insidious kind of interference”: translations that misconstrue the meaning of the Hebrew text in ways that perpetuate biased readings of Genesis 2-3 (64).

Translation issues play a prominent role in chapter 5, “Eve out of Eden: Genesis 3:16,” as Meyers provides a close reading of this verse informed by her nuanced understanding of Hebrew vocabulary and syntax as well as her extensive knowledge of conditions in Iron Age Israel. Meyers rejects the many translations that present God as vowing to intensify pain in childbirth and authorizing women’s subordination to men. Instead, she more accurately translates the first line as a dual punishment: “I will make great your toil and many your pregnancies” (p. 102). She insists that the second half of the verse gives men “mastery in marital sex—but not dominance in all aspects of life” (p. 96), a response to possible resistance to sexual relations by women who knew the potential anguish caused by multiple pregnancies and high infant mortality rates. In light of the demographic and environmental realities, Genesis 3:16-19 functions etiologically as a way to explain why Israelite women and

men worked so hard and why women might have endured as many as six pregnancies to produce an optimal family size of two to four children.

In chapter 6, “Eve’s World: The Household,” attention shifts back to “Everywoman Eve.” To help reconstruct the lives of women in ancient Israel, Meyers introduces the term “household,” which includes a material component (domestic dwellings and physical objects) and a human component (nuclear and extended families and the larger clan, tribe, and people). The chapter concludes with an important discussion of the “problems of presentism.” Meyers observes that, like the overlay of later traditions, our present-day experiences and preconceptions can influence, even distort, our interpretations of the past. She spotlights three characteristics of ancient Israel that differ fundamentally from contemporary norms. First, she points out that people in ancient Israel “were so interdependent in a variety of economic, social, and religious ways” that they perceived themselves “first and foremost members of groups,” not as independent individuals (pp. 118-119). Second, Meyers explains how the industrial revolution brought about a bifurcation of the household and the workplace, and a subsequent devaluation of women’s work as mere “housekeeping chores with little economic value” (p. 121). She insists that women’s significant household contributions in traditional societies invalidate this perception. Third, she repudiates the notion perpetuated by past scholars of a dichotomy between prestigious public life associated with men and private or domestic life associated with women. Instead, she argues that “in premodern societies the ‘public’ and ‘private’ are really overlapping domains” (p. 123).

Chapters 7 and 8 explore women and “household maintenance,” focusing first on economic, reproductive, and sociopolitical activities, and then on religious activities. In order to adequately explain and appreciate women’s roles and responsibilities, Meyers introduces the term “maintenance activities,” which covers the daily tasks essential for the successful functioning of the household and its community. She describes in detail the diverse and indispensable tasks performed by Israelite women, including the provision of food and clothing, care of the young and the sick, socialization and education of children, fostering of connections with kin and neighbors, and the performance of household rituals (p. 126). This research enables Meyers to prove her central thesis: “Everywoman Eve of the agrarian settlements of ancient Israel emerges ... as a woman with considerable agency and power, a complement to her spouse in carry-

ing out the myriad tasks of an agrarian household—hardly a subservient, passive, and inferior housewife” (p. 203).

Chapter 9, an excursus on professional women, expands the discussion to include “supra-household roles.” After she describes nearly twenty positions mentioned in the Bible, such as midwives, prophets, and musicians, Meyers asks: “What did it mean for women to be professionals?” (p. 177). She contends that women performing professional roles would have experienced “the gratification of serving a constituency beyond their households and also contributing to the household economy” (p. 178), as well as the satisfaction of being accorded a degree of prestige by those they served and those they mentored.

In the concluding chapter, “Gender and Society: Reconstructing Relationships, Rethinking Systems,” Meyers questions the legitimacy of the perception in biblical scholarship and popular culture that Israelite women were inferior to or the chattel of men, simply “powerless pawns in an all-pervasive, male-dominated hierarchical structure” (p. 181). Given the information and analysis presented in the prior chapters, Meyers rejects this stereotype and advocates for a new assessment of gender relationships. She concludes that “women’s maintenance roles in traditional agrarian societies translate into certain kinds of power that overlap with or complement

male power” (p. 184). Meyers challenges those who label Israelite society as “patriarchal,” for the term “implies near total male domination at the micro level of personal relationships as well as in macro institutional forms” (p. 193). In its place, she proposes an alternative, more nuanced model called “heterarchy” that “can account for the fact that past societies had multiple sources of power that did not necessarily line up in a single set of vertical hierarchical relationships” (p. 197).

One of the most important contributions of this book in particular and Meyers’s scholarship in general is the way she pushes us to put aside our often uninformed or biased assumptions about what life was like for women in ancient Israel. She provides the data and analysis to enable us to do just what the title suggests: to rediscover the women mentioned in and hiding behind the pages of the Hebrew Bible. Because of its interdisciplinary approach and accessible style, the book serves as a valuable resource for a wide audience, including students and scholars of the Bible, particularly those who do not possess an in-depth expertise in the numerous disciplines brought together in this volume. Given both the widespread religious and cultural influence of the Eden story and current conversations about women and work, *Rediscovering Eve* holds the potential to radically reshape how we perceive gendered relationship and the contributions of women, then and now.

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**Citation:** Andrea Weiss. Review of Meyers, Carol L., *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

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