

## **Building Eve: Temple-Oriented Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Woman**

by Jacob Rennaker

Eve receives little attention in the Hebrew Bible, disappearing almost completely after Genesis chapter 4. However, this did not prevent early Jewish and Christian interpreters from drawing upon her story to understand the world around them. A number of interpreters recognized temple imagery in the creation of woman, and that sensitivity appears to have influenced their worldview. I will demonstrate this by first looking at the creation of Eve in Genesis 2, examining the narrative for connections to the temple and its conceptual predecessor, the tabernacle. Building upon this paradigm, I will then go on to illustrate how early interpreters viewed Eve and women in light of the temple, following this thread through several traditions.

[Slide- Creation] One of the most recognizable paintings from the Sistine Chapel is the “Creation of Adam.” [Slide- Creation at center] Many visitors see this as the conceptual center of the chapel’s ceiling, and assume that it is located at the architectural center as well, as in this picture. However, this is not the case [Slide- complete]. The Sistine Chapel’s ceiling consists of nine panels, and the “Creation of Adam” is actually the fourth panel from the bottom, *not* the fifth panel (which is the architectural center).

[Slide- Labels] The “Creation of Eve” is the painting that actually stands at the center of the Sistine Chapel, and in more ways than one. [Slide- Creation Eve] While the “Creation of Eve” is the fifth panel (occupying the numerical center), [Slide: Temptation] Eve is also present in the sixth panel, “The Temptation.” [Slide- center 3] And, if one creates a diagonal axis from the position of Eve in “The Temptation” (at the top) and through Eve in the “Creation of Eve,” [Slide- diagonal] one is led to encounter a woman in God’s entourage, positioned directly behind

the deity in the “Creation of Adam.” [Slide- Creation] If one posits that this woman who is present with God at the creation of Adam is actually Eve (as some have argued),<sup>1</sup> then Eve occupies each of the three central panels of the chapel’s ceiling.

An even more striking example of the centrality of Eve comes into focus when examining the architecture of the chapel itself. [Slide- Creation Eve] As mentioned earlier, the painting of the “Creation of Eve” stands at the center of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. In this painting, Adam is portrayed as an inert figure in the shadows, while the light is fully shining upon Eve as God calls her forth from the man. Eve stands in the center of this painting, which in turn stands in the center of the ceiling. [Slide- architecture] Directly below this panel, the chapel is divided into two equal halves. Gary Anderson notes:

The chapel below is...marked by a...symmetrical division. The eastern half of the building was designated for lay and clerical observers. The western half, on the other hand, was raised one step higher and was reserved for the papal elite. It was, to use biblical language about the Temple, the *sanctum sanctorum*, or the ‘holy of holies.’ The *Creation of Eve* is at the very center point of the chapel’s liturgical structure.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the “Creation of Eve” appears above the area of the chapel that served as a point of connection between the common observers and those occupying a much higher religious position. Anderson draws a parallel between such a point of connection and the Holy of Holies in the Israelite temple. When seen in this light, Eve may be seen as having a close conceptual association with the temple. This got me to thinking: if this was the case in the Sistine Chapel,

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<sup>1</sup> Leo Steinberg, “Who’s Who in Michaelangelo’s *Creation of Adam*: A Chronology of the Picture’s Reluctant Self-Revelation,” *Art Bulletin* 74:4 (1992), pp. 552-566.

<sup>2</sup> Gary A. Anderson, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 4.

were there earlier instances where Eve was described using temple imagery? In what follows, I hope to take you along many forgotten side-roads of biblical interpretation that compare Eve (and women in general) to the most sacred structure in Israelite thought: the temple.

[Slide- Medieval] In a study of the Second Temple period text *Life of Adam and Eve*, Johannes Tromp describes this account as a “founding story” for a community. He explains, “Every culture (or subculture) has its founding stories, known in their main outlines to every individual who is a member of the culture. These stories are used as points of reference: they function...to illustrate basic truths valid in the community where they are commonly accepted.”<sup>3</sup> The story of Adam and Eve served as just such a reference point for a number of communities and was useful for explaining the circumstances surrounding their lives.

According to Tromp, the story of Adam and Eve was used as a paradigm for communities, with Eve, for example, being used as a paradigm for all women. Tromp suggests that “a culture’s founding stories are those which parents (perhaps mothers and grandmothers in particular) tell their children.”<sup>4</sup> If mothers and grandmothers were responsible for perpetuating these stories, it is not surprising that we should find Eve and women described using such sacred terminology as that used for the temple.

The concept of a person as a temple was not foreign to Second Temple Judaism. This idea is suggested in texts found at Qumran,<sup>5</sup> but is stated explicitly by the early Christian apostle Paul, who poses the following rhetorical question to the Corinthian community: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and

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<sup>3</sup> Johannes Tromp, “The Story of our Lives: The *qz*-Text of the *Life of Adam and Eve*, the Apostle Paul, and the Jewish-Christian Oral Tradition Concerning Adam and Eve,” *New Testament Studies* 50 (2004), p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> Tromp, “The Story of our Lives,” p. 219.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Wise, “4QFlorilegium and the Temple of Adam,” *Revue de Qumran* 15 (1991).

that you are not your own?”<sup>6</sup> An examination of the woman’s creation in Genesis 2 will show that the language used in Genesis 2 easily lent itself to such an association between the temple and Eve.

[Slide- Eve from side] The first such association between Eve, women, and the temple in Genesis 2 has to do with *what* God used to create the woman. Verse 21 reads, “And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept, and he took one from his *tsalot* [צַלְעוֹתָ] and he closed up flesh in her place.” According to this verse, God takes a *tsela* (צֵלָע) from the man in order to create woman. This word is traditionally translated into English as “rib,”<sup>7</sup> but early rabbis perceived significant implications here in the use of צֵלָע.

For instance, Rabbi Nahman stated, “It [צֵלָע] was one of [the man’s] sides, as you find written in Scripture, ‘And for the second side of the tabernacle’ (Ex. 26:20).”<sup>8</sup> This reasoning was repeated by Rabbi Samuel bar Nahmani.<sup>9</sup> Both noted that the object used to create woman was the same word used to describe the side of the Israelite tabernacle. In addition to the verse quoted by Rabbi Nahman, צֵלָע is used in relation to the tabernacle in Exodus 26 and 36.<sup>10</sup> It was also specifically used to describe the side of the Holy Place in Ex. 26:35, and was eventually used in 1 Kgs. 6:15 and 16 to describe the side of the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, some interpreters saw an association between the צֵלָע used by God to create woman and the צֵלָע used to describe the sides of the tabernacle and temple.

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor. 6:19

<sup>7</sup> E.g. KJV, NIV, NRSV, NASB, NLT

<sup>8</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 8:1.

<sup>9</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 17:6.

<sup>10</sup> Ex. 26:26, 27; 36:25, 31, and 32.

[Slide- Blake Eve] The second association between Eve, women, and the temple in Genesis 2 has to do with *how* God created the woman. Verse 22 reads, “And the LORD God built the side which he took from the man for a woman, and he brought her to the man.” The word used here to describe the creation of Eve (בָּנָה) differs from the word used to create Adam in Gen. 2:7—יָצַר has the sense of “form [or] fashion,”<sup>11</sup> whereas the word used in the creation of Eve (בָּנָה) has the sense of “build.”<sup>12</sup>

In the psalms, God “built (בָּנָה—the same form of the verb as Gen. 2:22) his sanctuary (מִקְדָּשׁ) like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded forever” (Ps. 78:69). The term “sanctuary” (מִקְדָּשׁ) is the preferred term for the tabernacle in Leviticus,<sup>13</sup> and provides us with another association between Eve, women and Israelite sacred space. The root בָּנָה “build” is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as a common verb for architectural construction. However, this verb was also used in relation to the building of Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 5-6), and “occurs an unusually large number of times in these chapters.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, derivatives of the root בָּנָה are used for nouns related to the temple. For example, “*binyah*, *binyan*, and *mibhneh* are found exclusively in the block of traditional material ascribed to Ezekiel that deals with the program of building the temple [in chs. 40-42].”<sup>15</sup> Thus, at the very least, in 1 Kings and Ezekiel there is a demonstrable connection between the root בָּנָה and the temple.

Additionally, there is an intriguing ancient Near Eastern parallel between the Akkadian equivalent of בָּנָה and the temple. In the *Enuma Elish* (the preeminent Babylonian creation text),

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<sup>11</sup> HALOT, p. 428, s.v. יָצַר.

<sup>12</sup> HALOT, p. 139, s.v. בָּנָה.

<sup>13</sup> HALOT, p. 625, s.v. מִקְדָּשׁ.

<sup>14</sup> Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Vol. II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 177.

<sup>15</sup> Botterweck and Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Vol. II*, p. 178.

this language of “building” is used in relation to Tiamat, the first female figure that comes into existence. Here, we read, “Creator Tiamat, the one birthing their universe”<sup>16</sup> goes on to “build” (*ibbannûma*) the first generation of gods (from *banī* “to create or build”<sup>17</sup>).<sup>18</sup> The first qualifier of Tiamat, *mummu* (“Creator”), is related to the phrase *bīt mummi* “workshop of a temple”<sup>19</sup> or “workshop used to make and repair ritual objects [such as statues of goddesses].”<sup>20</sup> When viewing these concepts together, we arrive at an image of Tiamat as a type of temple that stood at the center of creation and who was responsible for the creation of the gods.

We find similar temple imagery used to describe Eve and women as mothers. In Gen. 3:20, the man names the woman “Eve” because “she was the mother of all living.” According to certain strands of early Jewish and Christian interpretation, this legacy of bearing children was interpreted using temple imagery. In *Genesis Rabbah* 17:8, an unidentified interlocutor poses the following question: “On what account does a man deposit seed in woman, and a woman does not deposit seed in man?” Here’s the response: “[Rabbi Joshua] said to them, ‘The matter may be compared to the case of someone who had in his possession an object to be left for safe keeping. He goes in search of someone truly dependable, with whom to deposit the object.’” Here, Rabbi Joshua describes women as “truly dependable” safe-keepers for preserving human life.

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<sup>16</sup> *mummu Tiamat mu'allidat gimri šun* [*Enuma Elish* I:4]

<sup>17</sup> Akkadian *banī* is the equivalent of בנה.

<sup>18</sup> *Enuma Elish* I:9

<sup>19</sup> Jeremy A. Black, A. R. George, and J. N. Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), p. 216.

<sup>20</sup> *CAD* M v. 2, p. 198, s.v. *mummu* A. It is interesting to note that secondary meaning of *mummu* is “a curved stick or beam” (an architectural term) which is conceptually connected to the rib / side used to create Eve (*CAD* M v. 2, p. 198, s.v. *mummu* B).

Shortly after this discussion, Rabbi Hisda commented on the creation of woman, stating, “[God] built in [the woman] more chambers than he did in the man, broad on the bottom and narrow on the top, so that she should be able to hold babies” (*Genesis Rabbah* 18:3). At first glance, this statement seems to be an unenlightened and even laughable etiology for the physiological differences between women and men. However, it becomes much more significant when viewed in light of the temple, and brings us back to our pivotal word עֲלָצָה (“rib” or “side”) from Genesis 2. This word is used elsewhere to describe “side-chambers” in the temple<sup>21</sup> (e.g. 1 Kgs. 6 and Ezek. 41), and it was these חֲלָצָה (“side-chambers”) that were used for holding sacred temple equipment. Similarly, according to these rabbis, Eve and her daughters were created to hold a different type of sacred object: children.

In another association, the word עֲלָצָה was also used to describe the side of the ark of the covenant,<sup>22</sup> a central feature of both the tabernacle and temple. This item similarly held sacred objects (e.g. 1 Kgs. 8:9). [Slide- Mary as ark] Early Christian interpreters described Mary, mother of Jesus, as a type of “ark of the covenant.” Gregory Thaumaturgus (d. 270 CE) wrote, “Let us chant the melody that has been taught us by the inspired harp of David, and say, ‘Arise, O Lord, into thy rest; thou, and the ark of thy sanctuary.’ For the Holy Virgin is in truth an ark, wrought with gold both within and without, that has received the whole treasury of the sanctuary.”<sup>23</sup> Following this interpretive lead, Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) wrote:

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<sup>21</sup> 1 Kgs. 6:5-6 and Ezek. 41:5-11

<sup>22</sup> Ex. 25:12, 14; 37:3, 5

<sup>23</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgus, *First Homily on the Annunciation to the Holy Virgin Mary*.

O noble Virgin, truly you are greater than any other greatness. For who is your equal in greatness, O dwelling place of God the Word? To whom among all creatures shall I compare you, O Virgin? You are greater than them all O [Ark of the] Covenant, clothed with purity instead of gold! You are the ark in which is found the golden vessel containing the true manna, that is, the flesh in which divinity resides.<sup>24</sup>

These early Christian commentators were not shy in applying temple-related language to the mother of Jesus. [Slide- Mary and Eve] Similarly, commentators made comparisons between the ark-like Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Eve, the mother of all living (Gen. 3:20). For example, Tertullian (d. 220) wrote:

It was while Eve was still a virgin that the word of the devil crept in to erect an edifice of death. Likewise, through a Virgin, the Word of God was introduced to set up a structure of life. Thus, what had been laid waste in ruin by this sex was by the same sex re-established in salvation. Eve had believed the serpent; Mary believed Gabriel. That which the one destroyed by believing, the other, by believing, set straight.<sup>25</sup>

Mary was thus viewed as a “new Eve” who was not just a “mother of all living,” but instead became the “mother of all *salvation*.” Tertullian saw not only one, but many parallels between the stories surrounding the mothers Mary and Eve (as he understood them), and Mary became a corrective to the seemingly negative effects brought about by Eve.

As evidenced by these statements, certain currents of early Christianity associated Mary with both Eve and the temple, *especially* regarding birth and motherhood. Rabbinic texts articulated a similarly sacred nature of motherhood. [Slide- Eve with children] In *Genesis*

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<sup>24</sup> Athanasius, *Homily of the Papyrus of Turin*.

<sup>25</sup> Tertullian, *The Flesh of Christ*.



*Rabbah* 17:7, we read “There is this case, involving a certain pious man, who was married to a pious woman, but the couple did not produce children. They said, ‘What good do we do for the Holy One, blessed be he [if we do not produce children, thereby increasing the image of God]?’” Apparently, the inability to have children was a serious concern.

This concern seems to stem from a particular understanding of the relationship between the first and third verses of Genesis 5, verses that deal with the aftermath of creation. According to Gen. 5:1, God created אָדָם “humanity” in God’s דְמוּת “likeness.” Then, in Gen. 5:3, Adam becomes father to a son in *his* דְמוּת “likeness” and צִלְמֵ “image” (the same pairing of words used in the creation of humanity in Gen. 1:26). Therefore, just as God created אָדָם (humanity) after God’s image, so too Adam creates after *his* image. What was implicit to the aforementioned rabbis was that woman is a necessary participant in increasing this “image” of God in the world. If one was unable to have children, one was, in a sense, not increasing God’s “image” in the earth.

Along similar lines, childbirth was associated with salvation in certain circles of early Christian thought. One such instance appears in the author of 1 Timothy’s interpretation of the Adam and Eve story in Genesis 1-5. He states, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. *Yet* she will be saved through childbearing” (1 Tim. 2:13-15, emphasis added). This foreshadows the fairly negative view of Eve’s actions in Eden that appeared in the writings of Tertullian quoted earlier.<sup>26</sup> However, it is important to note in this interpretation that childbirth was not strictly viewed as a punishment for a perceived transgression; rather, it became a means for salvation.

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<sup>26</sup> See above.

In the gospel of Luke, one can see this concept of childbirth as a means for salvation coming to fruition in the birth of Jesus. [Slide- Jesus at temple] In Luke 2:22-28, Joseph and Mary present their child Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem. As Jesus is presented there, the temple priest Simeon declares to God, “My eyes have seen your salvation” (v. 30). In this sequence, “salvation” is found in the temple through the birth of a child.

The reason for Jesus’ presentation at the temple is given in Luke 2:23, where mention is made of the Mosaic requirement that every male who “opens the womb” will be called “holy to the Lord.” This is a reference to Ex. 13:2, where the first child (בְּכוֹר “firstborn”) to open the womb is קָדָשׁ “holy” or “set apart” to the LORD. The phrase קָדָשׁ לַיהוָה “holy / set apart to the LORD” was sometimes used to describe the act of dedicating something to the temple and its service (e.g. Zech. 14:20-21). For some, this statement in Exodus meant that a woman’s first birth was seen as especially sacred, and as such, that child was dedicated to work within the sacred precincts of the temple. Once again, we return to an association between Eve, women and the temple.

A slightly different association is presented in *Genesis Rabbah* 17:1, which states, “It has been taught on Tannaite authority: Whoever has no wife lives without good, without help, without joy, without blessing, without atonement.” Thus, without a wife, one cannot make or receive atonement for transgressing the law. This point is explained shortly thereafter: Whoever has no wife lives “without atonement: [because, as it is written,] ‘...he shall make atonement for himself and for his house.’” [Slide- High Priest] This statement comes from Lev. 16:11, which refers to the high priest officiating in the tabernacle. The verse reads, “And Aaron will present the bullock of the sin-offering, which is for himself, and shall make atonement for himself, and for his house...” Jacob Neusner explains this rabbinic connection between living without a wife

and living without atonement: In the phrase “And he shall make atonement...for his house,” “his house” had an equivalent meaning to “his wife,” “so if he cannot [make] atonement for his wife, he also cannot make atonement for himself.”<sup>27</sup> Why would this be the case in the minds of the early rabbis?

An answer is alluded to in *Genesis Rabbah* 17:2, where “[Rabbi] Hiyya bar Gomdi said: ‘[He who is without a wife is] not a complete person [or *adam*], [for it is written], ‘And He blessed them, and called their name “*adam*” (Gen. 5:2).’” Here, Rabbi bar Gomdi focuses on the statement that God “called *their* name ‘*adam*.’” He appears to have understood that the name “*adam*” in this statement refers to *both Adam and Eve*. Thus, according to Bar Gomdi, God’s full blessing can only be given to a “complete” person, which consists of *both* a husband *and* a wife. Returning to the issue above regarding the marital status of a high priest, only an individual who was “complete” (or, had a wife) was capable of approaching God to atone for the sins of Israel.

This concept was so significant that some traditions claimed special provisions were made for the high priest to ensure that he would be a “complete person.” *Mishnah Yoma* 1:1 begins by explaining the precautions taken to preserve the high priest’s purity: “Seven days before the Day of Atonement, we sequester the High Priest from his house to the Palhedrin Chamber, and we prepare for him another priest in his place, [for] perhaps there will occur in him a disqualification.” It continues, “Rabbi Yehuda says: We even prepare another wife for him, [for] perhaps his wife will die; as it is said, ‘and he shall atone for himself and for his household’ - his ‘household’ is his wife.” Thus, for an occasion as sacred as Yom Kippur, the high priest’s wife was seen by some as being a crucial component of the high priest’s identity.

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<sup>27</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis, A New American Translation, Vol. 1 (Parashiyot One through Thrity-Three on Genesis 1:1 to 8:14)* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 180.

In a related interpretive context, the high priest of the temple was seen as having a unique relationship to the Eden narrative in Genesis 2-3. The Eden imagery present in the temple provided fertile ground for interpreting the high priest as a representative of Adam. Marvin Sweeney explains this in the following:

Later texts of the Second Temple period...note that the priest in the Temple represents Adam in the Garden of Eden, which may explain the appellation *ben-'adam*, 'son of Adam' or 'mortal,' that is consistently applied by YHWH to Ezekiel throughout the book. The fact that only the high priest may enter the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant is guarded by cherubim much like the Garden of Eden, reinforces this image.<sup>28</sup>

According to this Second Temple view, the high priest represented Adam in Eden. For example, this conceptualization appeared in *Jubilees*, and held special significance for those who used this text. From this perspective, "The high priest's entry in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur might, then, in some manner typologically correspond to the first man's return to Eden, for a season, to be reconciled with his Maker face to face."<sup>29</sup> Such a view was important not only for interpreting the significance of the high priest, but may have contributed significantly to the rabbinic view that a wife was necessary for a man to function as high priest on Yom Kippur.

As explained earlier, certain traditions held that a high priest must have a wife in order to make an efficacious atonement on behalf of Israel (*Genesis Rabbah* 17:1, *Mishnah Yoma* 1:1). This high priest, together with his wife, constituted a "complete" person, which was seen as necessary for satisfying the demands of the deity (*Genesis Rabbah* 17:2). In some of the texts

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<sup>28</sup> Marvin Sweeney, "Ezekiel: Zadokite Priest and Visionary Prophet of the Exile" in *Form and Intertextuality in Prophetic and Apocalyptic Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp.141-142.

<sup>29</sup> C.T.R. Hayward, *The Jewish Temple: A Non-Biblical Sourcebook*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 89.

circulating during the formative period of Rabbinics, the high priest appeared to be representing Adam returning to the presence of God. In light of these traditions, it would have been possible for interpreters to view the high priest as representing not only the male figure “Adam,” but a composite, complete “*adam*” or human. In other words, according to this constellation of interpretation, the high priest may have represented both Adam *and* Eve returning to the presence of God in order to make atonement for Israel.

[Slide: Creation of Eve] In conclusion, there is a complex relationship between Eve, women, and temple in the history of interpretation. One final interpretative connection should serve to summarize the significance of Eve and the temple. We have seen that according to certain traditions, Eve (or the woman) is needed to complete Adam (or the man) and regain the presence of God (a sentiment echoed by Paul in 1 Cor. 11:11, where he writes “Neither is the man without the woman, nor the woman without the man, in the Lord”). In Genesis 2:18, God states that “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a help (עֲזָרָה) sufficient for him.” Because the verb עֲזָרָה “help” is primarily used of the deity in the Hebrew Bible,<sup>30</sup> this verse gives Eve’s role a special significance—she offers Adam divine assistance. In light of this interpretation, the necessity of Eve and her relationship to the concept of “temple” may be recapitulated well in Psalm 20:

The LORD answer you in the day of trouble!  
The name of the God of Jacob protect you!  
May he send you help (עֲזָרָה) from the sanctuary,  
and give you support from Zion (Ps. 20:1-2).

Here, a connection is made between divine help (עֲזָרָה) and the temple. Many interpreters also saw the significance and sanctity of Eve and women in light of the significance and sanctity of the

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<sup>30</sup> HALOT, p. 810, s.v. עֲזָרָה.

temple. Thus, from the perspective of many ancient interpreters, real, necessary, and divine “help” (עֲזָרָה) ultimately came from the sanctuary of Eve and her daughters.