

**Eve's Courage, Adam's Nobility:  
On the Possibility of a Nietzschean Interpretation of Genesis 3**

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**Introduction**

The desire for meaning and purpose in life is a universal trait. In the search for meaning, individuals must often contend with uneven splits of value. Rich/poor, master/slave, beautiful/ugly, courage/cowardice—these social divides leave the person on the undesirable side feeling unworthy of honor or dignity. A particular divide that has been constant throughout history is male/female. One side is seen as strong, superior, active, and dominant, and the other side is seen as weak, inferior, passive, and meek. Within Christian theology, the fall of humanity becomes inextricably connected to women through the actions of Eve. In agreement with traditional Christian theology, this divide between male and female remains perpetuated by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. He believes only noble individuals can display courage, and only men are capable of nobility. Throughout his writings, he claims a less traditional idea of courage, giving precedence to an internal courage through knowledge and freedom. Nietzsche's masculine idea of courage makes it impossible for women to display courage. In this paper, I will give a Nietzschean reading of Genesis 3 and show how, despite Nietzsche's own logic, it would appear that Eve, not Adam, stands as courageous and noble. First I will talk about Nietzsche's view of nobility, his harsh view of women, and his masculine but internal ideas of courage; then I will give a philosophical account of Genesis 3 and interpret the story through Nietzsche's rules of courage and nobility.

**Nietzsche's View of Nobility**

History is filled with brilliant philosophers and theorists, but few in the discipline of philosophy and theology are women. Often, women are looked down upon as being the weaker sex, and Nietzsche is one influential philosopher that views women as delicate and weak. A woman's ability to be virtuous, noble, or courageous is next to impossible.<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche connects nobility to virtue: only a noble person can be virtuous. If women cannot be noble, they cannot display the noble virtues of courage, insight, sympathy, and solitude.<sup>2</sup>

In order to be noble, a person cannot be trapped in the old-world relationships, characterized by master and slave. Master morality is the morality of the strong-willed, and masters are the measure of all things. They alone determine what is good. Slaves value what their masters value—they are servants submitting to the will and command of the master.<sup>3</sup> Nobility

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1990), 237.

<sup>2</sup> See *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

requires a person to break free from a master/slave relationship. As Nietzsche says, “The noble soul has reverence for itself.”<sup>4</sup> Nobility is born out of a respect for self; noble people form values and do not seek the approval of others. They determine what is harmful and what is honorable.<sup>5</sup>

Nobility is a trait connected with power. Nietzsche describes noble people as honoring the person of power within themselves.<sup>6</sup> They are neither weak nor dependent upon others. Significantly, a noble man is the “master of his virtues.”<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche writes, “To live with tremendous and proud self-possession...[is] to remain master of one’s four virtues, courage, insight, sympathy, and solitude.”<sup>8</sup> “Proud self-possession” is another way of saying that no other person should possess or master a person except for the person himself. This is a requirement for nobility. Therefore, swapping out the words “tremendous and proud self-possession” for “nobility” is faithful to Nietzsche’s view of nobility. This clearly shows that a noble person must master the four virtues of courage, insight, sympathy, and solitude. To be courageous, insightful, sympathetic, or in a state of solitude, a person must be noble. Courage is the ability to seek after knowledge and reform one’s worst qualities into his best qualities.

### **Nietzsche’s View of Women**

Gender division is scattered throughout Nietzsche’s writing, and he is largely negative and offensive in his view of women. His view of femininity is similar to his view of a slave, as he refers to women as birds that need to be caged up.<sup>9</sup> Women value what their fathers or husbands value. They serve men and cook for men. He talks about women’s cooking and how it devalues evolution: “If women had been a thinking creature,” they would have learned to cook better by now. Nietzsche is so bold as to say, “Through bad female cooks—through the entire lack of reason in the kitchen—the development of mankind has been longest retarded and most interfered with: even today matters are very little better.”<sup>10</sup> According to Nietzsche, a woman’s role is in the house serving men. He writes that it is women’s “first and last profession [to] bear strong children.”<sup>11</sup> Women are here to keep the male gender going—to reproduce and to cook. However, Nietzsche believes women are not even capable of the simple act of cooking nourishing food for those they serve. He blames women’s cooking for men’s ability or inability to grow intellectually.

His ideas of women and slavery are not far from one another. This eventually leads Nietzsche to describe women as the “weaker sex.”<sup>12</sup> The only way to for women to redeem their weaker position is to become masculine. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he writes about how women

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

need to “masculinize themselves.”<sup>13</sup> This solution does not appear to be a solution at all to his vulgar talk of women because, essentially, he believes there is no way for a woman to be a woman and be seen as an equal. Women must become men to be viewed with respect and dignity. However, if women want to stay feminine and be seen as equals, they must first find a man who is “man enough to redeem the woman in the woman.”<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche shows little to no faith in the ability of women to be both feminine and be viewed as an equal sex. Throughout his writing, degrading and objectifying views of women are prevalent. In order to understand how a woman could become noble and display the virtue of courage, it is important to first understand Nietzsche's definition of courage.

### **Nietzsche's View of Courage**

Courage is a virtue that is internal and self-focused. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche describes courage as a person's power to say “no.”<sup>15</sup> Specifically, he is referring to the ability to say “no” when it is dangerous to say “no.” It takes an internal strength to say “no” when people may have expected a response of “yes.” The consequence of courage is the achievement of knowledge, and seeking after knowledge is courageous. Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science* that courageous people are silent, solitary, and resolute; they do not feel the need to surround themselves with the company of others. They overcome feelings of dependence, and they do not seek to gain their worth and value from external sources. Nietzsche writes that courageous people are cheerful, patient, pleasant through multiple circumstances. They have their own festivals, their own working days, and their own periods of mourning.<sup>16</sup> Here, Nietzsche shows that courage goes against the norms of society. It is courageous to be alone in silence, and it is courageous to be cheerful and patient. Having self-determined festivals and working days is also seen as courageous, as opposed to allowing another person to regulate the festivals and working days.

Nietzsche also describes courage as the ability to rebaptize one's worst qualities into one's best qualities,<sup>17</sup> for example, taking the weakness of impatience and channeling that desire to be active into the strength of productivity. This is a sign of courage. Nietzsche also believes it is courageous not to reveal your interior self.<sup>18</sup> Often Nietzsche connects courage with being hidden or veiled. All of these definitions of courage have a common thread: they are all internal. Nietzsche never describes courage as the ability to fight in a war, the ability to run into a burning building to save people, or even the ability to face one's fears. Courage, for Nietzsche, is self-

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<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, trans. Adrian Del Caro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 135.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Arnold Kaufmann, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 465.

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 283.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 116.

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 139.

focused and is more a strength of mind than a physical action. For the purposes of this paper the most important qualities of courage are knowledge and self-determination.

Nietzsche has a wide variety of definitions for courage, but in the strictest sense of his writing, only men are capable of being courageous, because only men can be noble. Women are unable to be courageous and, therefore, are unable to possess all the character traits above connected to the virtue of courage.

### **Can Women Be Courageous? A Philosophical Return to Eve**

The account of the Fall, Genesis 3, is important not only for the purposes of my thesis, but also because Nietzsche himself alludes to this story throughout his writing. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he writes, "Where the tree of knowledge stands is always paradise': thus speak the oldest and youngest serpents."<sup>19</sup> This alludes to the scene found in Genesis, as the garden of Eden has one tree of knowledge that Adam and Eve are forbidden to touch. Another place where this image appears is in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where courage is defined as the spiritual and intellectual act of a human possessing the "snake's cleverness."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, returning to this biblical narrative is not arbitrary on my part; rather, it is a story that Nietzsche pulls into his own thinking.

In order to use Nietzsche's own understanding of courage and nobility to show how women can be courageous, looking at the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 becomes crucial for a couple of reasons. First, we will look at the self-determination of the two characters. Second, we will look at the possible reason behind the characters' decisions. Specifically, we will look at Eve and her actions through Nietzsche's ideas of nobility and courage. Adam and Eve lived in paradise in the garden of Eden, in the full presence of their maker. God gave them full reign of the garden except for one tree—the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The temptation of the single tree among the many proved too much to bear. The serpent, also the craftiest creature of all (Genesis 3:1) slithered into the garden and told Eve that if she would eat the fruit of the forbidden tree, her eyes would be opened and she would be like God. Eve then took and ate of the fruit and offered some to Adam.

Taking a closer look at this story and the actions of the two characters, we see Eve most fervently going against the master's (God's) commands. God orders Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It is true that, solely from the text itself, we are not sure when or how Eve receives the knowledge that she is not supposed to eat off the forbidden tree, but through her conversation with the serpent we know that she has knowledge of the command. We also know that Adam is present while Eve is talking to the serpent. However, what we see as the story unfolds is Eve's action to grab and eat of the fruit. She is the initial breaker of the command. Traditionally, Eve's choice has been seen as selfish with negative consequences. Reading the story with Nietzsche's logic, is it possible to see Eve as courageous?

What we have discerned thus far in this paper is that in order to be courageous one must first be noble. In order to be noble one must learn to become their own self-determining being,

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<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 152.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 246.

meaning that a person cannot be noble if they are a slave to a master. We also have learned that a large part of courage for Nietzsche centers on knowledge. At the start of the Genesis 3, neither Adam nor Eve can be considered courageous, because both are slaves to the master God. As the story continues, we see that Eve deliberately disobeys God when she eats the fruit of the forbidden tree. At this moment, Eve is her own self-determining being. This in turn makes her noble. Adam also disobeys God's command, but he does so after Eve takes, eats, and hands him the fruit. He does not grab the fruit off the tree as Eve does.

Being charitable to Nietzsche's understanding of nobility, one might still consider Adam to be noble because he too defies his master's command. Despite a person's judgment on Adam's nobility, however, it is clear that there is only one courageous character in this story. Eve has disobeyed God, but why she disobeys God becomes her defining moment. The serpent tells her that she will be like God, she will gain knowledge, her vision will be transformed, and she will be wise if she eats of the fruit. Her choice to disobey God is motivated by her desire to gain knowledge. This in turn makes Eve courageous. It is more difficult to consider Adam courageous, as the story shows Adam as a passive character, blindly accepting what Eve has thoughtfully chosen.

Nietzsche clearly does not have a positive view of women. He does not believe them to be noble or courageous. However, taking his criteria for nobility and courage and applying them to Genesis 3, we see the female character, Eve, being both noble and courageous. Within Christian theology, Eve receives the blame for sin entering this world. She is viewed as a bad influence, incapable of following orders, and fully deserving of her punishments. However, if read through Nietzsche's masculine-centered writing, we get a positive and courageous picture of Eve. Widening out Nietzsche's logic to both genders allows any person to become noble by making his or her own decisions, thinking for him or herself, and being reflective about the world and his or her choices. It also allows for any person to possess Nietzschean courage if he or she seeks after knowledge and continues to learn throughout life.