

Women & Angels of the Bible: Eve and the Angel at the Gate

Forward Movement Managing Editor Richelle Thompson recently chatted with Lindsay Hardin Freeman, author of the popular book [Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter](#), and Kate Moorehead, author of the newly released [Angels of the Bible: Finding Grace, Beauty, and Meaning](#).

You can also listen to this conversation in a special episode of the [Forward Day by Day](#) podcast, released on January 17, 2020.

Richelle: Welcome today to a conversation with two of our favorite Forward Movement authors, Lindsay Hardin Freeman, author of the bestselling *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter*, and Kate Moorehead, author of *Angels of the Bible: Finding Grace, Beauty, and Meaning*. Welcome, Lindsay. Kate. Thanks for being here with us today to talk about the role of women and the role of angels in the Bible.

So last time we talked about one of the most well-known stories of a woman encountering an angel when the Angel Gabriel visits Mary. So today we'll explore the first encounter of a woman and an angel when an angel visits Eve at the gate of the Garden of Eden. So, let's start about a kind of understanding where we are in the biblical story and what's happening. Lindsay, can you set the scene for us?

Lindsay: Sure. And this is the first story in the Bible of a man and a woman. And it runs into a lot of dissension and controversy, of course, through human history, it seems like. But I'd like to encourage all of us to just live into the story.

There is an old adage that says that stories don't tell us what is true. They tell us what must be true. So if we could just live into that when we think about today's story--as is most helpful to do with all these old Bible stories. And then I believe we'll find God's truth somewhere in there and what God wants us to know on a very deep level as well as the more up top level. So I would bring the story of Adam and Eve to the table here, as God does in the first chapter of Genesis-- actually chapter three is one that we're concerned with today.

Adam and Eve have been living a pretty happy life, well, we don't know if it's been happy, but living in God's hands and in a place that is supposed to be happy and in a place that is

supposed to give joy and give them everything they need. God created Adam. And he said, you know, we've got this tree of knowledge. Don't eat anything from the tree of knowledge, the tree of good and evil. And unfortunately, forgot to tell Eve that. Well, God doesn't really forget things, but the story is the story in the Bible. Eve offers Adam a piece of the forbidden fruit. Adam eats it, and they are turned out of the garden. All has going wrong. They have gone against God. They have separated themselves from God. This is where we see the concept of original sin coming in. So that sets the stage for the story of Adam and Eve.

Richelle: So, Kate, tell us what happens at the gate.

Kate: So, Adam and Eve have taken something that wasn't freely offered to them and they are expelled. They literally in the Hebrew are cast out of paradise. They have lived in a harmonious relationship with God, as far as we can tell without suffering. And I think this notion that we human beings were designed for paradise, we were designed for Eden, is right. It's a deep truth about who we are, because when we encounter suffering in most of our lives, one of our first responses is always, "What's wrong with me?" or "Why is this happening to me?" or "This shouldn't be happening to me," which I think tells us that we were designed for harmony and peace and bliss. Really, we expect it. A child is born expecting to be loved and cared for and is doing so in the womb. But when it comes out, it has to deal with a world in which it's sometimes not held, or it cries.

So, I think we're designed to be loved perfectly, but somehow, we've been cast out of the place where we were originally intended to be, and we find ourselves outside in a broken world where we do suffer. The angel is placed at the boundary between the two existences, at the boundary between paradise and harmony with God and the reality of our lives. And the angel protects paradise from us coming back in, which is a really interesting concept, or perhaps protects us from trying to get back in. And it's a wonderful place. It's the first angel in the scripture to appear, and it stands on the boundary between these two realities. And we'll see angels consistently standing on the boundaries between heaven and earth, between God's reality and our reality, coming to us to protect, but also to interpret between the two realities.

Richelle: Kate, it's really interesting. You talked about the angels standing at the gate possibly to protect us from entering back into the Garden of Eden. Why? Why would the angel not want us to come back in? What's the importance of that?

Kate: That's a mystery. But I think as soon as we were cast out of Eden, there was another way back to God, but it wasn't back through the gate. The other way back to God is back through the suffering, which is what Jesus will teach us in the cross.

So, we can't go back. It wouldn't work anymore. Now, what would happen? I don't think we know because no one can get past that angel with the fiery sword. No one wants to try.

So, the angel stands at the boundary between these two worlds because we can no longer get back into paradise. Our natures have been changed in some fashion by the consumption of this tree of life. Our awareness has increased perhaps too, too great of an extent for us to live in the innocence in which we were thriving. So the way forward now is through the pain and through the suffering and through the cross. It's not back into Eden.

Richelle: You talked about the sword and this kind of fiery creature. And I mean, what's going on with the sword? Why does this angel wield a sword? That seems pretty scary and violent? So what is that telling us?

Kate: Yeah, it's pretty interesting to study angels in scripture because they are fairly violent. There's a lot of fighting angels. We've got the Angel Michael, the Book of Revelation, the Book of Daniel, full of angels doing battle with the darkness and carrying swords and flying around and killing dragons. They're pretty awesome, actually. I think we should make video games out of them.

But yes, there is a sense that this is a powerful presence. And I think certainly in the time of the scripture and for many centuries, the sword has been a symbol of power, of strength, of violence.

I think we cannot go back. It would be more wrenching, hurtful, somehow it's not allowed. So this sword is a symbol of strength and of power.

Richelle: Kate, I have one more question about angels and especially this idea of the violence of angels. We often have the idea of an angel as this cherub, as this very cupid-looking, cartoon of angels. And you're calling us to a much deeper understanding that angels are across a whole spectrum of emotions and experiences and not just this ideal that Hallmark has promoted for years. Is that right?

Kate: That's absolutely right. One of the things that I really want to stress is sometimes in order to not take seriously the spiritual realm, we cast it as fairy tale. We do that with the story of Noah and the Ark. It's actually a quite a terrifying story, but we often make it into a little fairy tale or a nursery rhyme. It's funny. We'll put it on nursery walls, I think, because the thought of all the creatures going to two by two is kind of cute. But what we do is we relegate these stories of incredible violence and very, very complicated stories. We don't know what to make of them, so we cast them aside as fairy tale. And we do that often with angels. We'll look at them and we'll paint them as little babies with wings or little cherubs and almost equate them like with a Valentine's Day image, but that's not scriptural at all. There's no indication of angels being babies. In fact, most of them must have been terrifying because they often say don't be afraid when they first appear. So, this is a realm that makes us uncomfortable, that's mystical. The angelic realm involves a struggle, a spiritual battle between light and darkness, and oftentimes, we don't know what to make of that. So, it's easier to think about it being somehow like a children's nursery rhyme.

Richelle: Lindsay, it's interesting as we're talking about this discussion with angels and that we've often relegated angels to this cartoon ideal. When we talk about women in the Bible, we've also often relegated them to a very one-dimensional understanding. And you've spent a lot of time talking about women in the Bible and the really incredible range of roles that they've played. Do you want to talk about that for a minute with Eve and also with just your understanding of women in the Bible and the richness there is to really learning about these women and not just taking it on face value some of the things that we might have been taught as children or even as adults about women.

Lindsay: Yes. I think that's a really good point about women and about angels, that we've tamed them all down, haven't we? Yeah. I was thinking of the angel of death in the Hebrew Bible that goes and kills 50,000 or so enemy soldiers.

And it's like, wow, that really is staggering when you think about it. You know, it's the same thing about Noah's Ark. Jonah being swallowed by the great whale or whatever kind of fish it was, nobody really knows. Think of how we made Mary such a team figure. Just here's this girl and she's going to have a baby and isn't she lovely? And she's in every creche. Think of thousands of creches that Mary shows up in and everything's fine and everything's sweet. But it must have been a terrifying time for her. And I think you're right. We do this with many of the women in the Bible. The stories we found when we were doing the research for the women in the Bible...some are terrifying and some are brutal. But the stories themselves are very honest. They tend to come across so many kind of pablum truth, for pablum understandings that we think that we've had throughout the centuries of what's going on in the Bible.

An original title for the book on Bible women was Bible Women Unleashed. And then we thought, no, that's not going to work, but I mean, when you look at the context, the real angels and real women, it is a lot different than we've been led to believe.

Kate: And, you know, we think of Eve as someone who is, well, we call her a "helpmate." That was the translation in the King James version. But really the Hebrew verb looks more like a sustainer. He needed her to live and thrive. So she has a much more powerful role. And then she was curious. She took initiative. We always blame her for the fall. But what a powerful thing she did by taking that fruit. Whether you like it or not, it certainly was the most pivotal act, maybe in all of the scripture, because without it, we wouldn't have even had Christ. We don't know if Adam would have eaten without her. So it's I mean, she really initiates the story of salvation. This is a woman.

Lindsay: She really does. And you know what? I am not sure that if we follow this story, that humankind would be even around because only after they left the garden did they have children. The Bible says in the first creation story of Adam and Eve that they embraced each other, but nothing had come from that embrace until after they left. Cain and Abel were not born yet. So would the human race even be here? And I got to tell you that you're right. Eve does get a lot of the blame. Eve is bad and Adam is pretty bad when he followed his wife and she told him what to do. That's the old story. I've always had this thought that maybe there was a lot of bliss in the garden and it's perfection, but it might have been very boring.

Here was a woman who thirsted after knowledge. She wanted the fruit of the tree of knowledge, of good and evil. She wanted to be like God. And that's not a great thing to think that a human can be like God. But the women in the Bible are always pushing out toward boundaries, breaking boundaries. And they're always pushing out and growing and transforming. Oftentimes they die because of it. There are stories in the Old Testament where they've spoken up and as you know, they've lost their lives. But to me, this is truer to the way that God made us. Look at how God made the universe and in terms of the boundaries of the universe pushing out and out and out. Einstein's theory is that the red line will come back; it'll start turning around and start coming back one of these days. It hasn't happened yet, but you know, some people say, did God set that tree in the garden on purpose? I think there could be a lot of truth to that also.

I think of this story of Eve and then I think of the story of Mary Magdalene going into that darkness. As you say, Kate, we've got another way to go now back toward God. It's not what some may have wanted to go back in through those gates--that's no longer an option. But Mary Magdalene went into the heart of darkness, into that dark cave. And there's the angel and the other women, and there's the angel saying, you know, Jesus isn't here. In Mark at least, the angel is saying he's gone onto Galilee, you'll see him there. So we're always searching for God and going into that darkness. And as you say, the women in the Bible are transformative in the way that they lead us through another way back to God, back to Jesus.

Kate: We wouldn't have seen an angel if Eve hadn't eaten the fruit.

Lindsay: That's right. And think how scary that angel must have been to Adam and Eve. And then think about the angel that came to Mary, young Mary.

Kate: You know, first they see that they're naked, which is terrifying enough, and then they see an angel with a fiery sword. They must have had PTSD after that. That's quite a lot of trauma.

Lindsay: Well, Kate, I didn't get enough of what you think the angel looked like. What did it look like? In your book, I see some artwork that people have done over the centuries. What's your sense of that? I'd love to know.

Kate: Well, there's always this image of light and then there's also secondarily fire. The cherubim have Canaanite roots. So they were part creature, evidently, and part winged human. We don't really know.

Lindsay: Wait, the cherubim have Canaanite roots?

Kate: Yes. Yes. There is some relationship between them in the old Canaanite myths and some of the poetries of the Psalms, riding through the area in chariots, fiery swords. They were hybrid creatures--cherubim--and they're considered one of the highest realms of angels, winged beasts, fearsome aspect in some way. But we do know that there was fire involved, which is Pentecostal as well. There's so much of God's presence manifest as light or fire or heat.

The cherubim also were in constant motion; they were difficult to look at. I love this new theory we have in quantum mechanics about different dimensions, but it sounds as if they exist in another dimension because they're sort of moving in a way that that we find difficult to look at, almost as if it's, you know, how you can't look directly at the sun. It's just too bright. It will damage your eyes. I find that probably there was something of that nature going on, just really hard to look at, sort of too much to take in.

Lindsay: Well, I've always found it interesting that the cherubim are on the highest kind of level. But then you have that the messenger angels like Gabriel and Raphael and Michael and the big warrior angels. And they're not kind of as worthy.

Kate: No, they're not as celestial. They're lower down.

Lindsay: That's a pretty important job they're doing. So why do you think the cherubim are on top of the ladder?

Kate: I think the cherubim are designed to be almost unapproachable by humans, which is another reason why cherubim would have been placed at the gate. Because the point was to keep the humans out, whereas the archangels are the messengers appearing to humans and need to be seen and understood. So they're not quite as daunting. I think the cherubim

would have been very difficult to see and made you want to hide or run away from them because their brightness was too much for us to conceive of, really, almost like if we tried to take in a planet or a star. You know, we're just too small. So the cherub's largeness or brightness would have kept us at bay, which was its purpose. It's a boundary holder.

Richelle: I think it's so interesting that we're having this conversation, and we've just celebrated Epiphany and we're in this season of light and dark and a time of new beginnings. Is there a way that you can connect this season we're in, this time between Epiphany and the beginning of Lent, most of us are in winter and in a lot of darkness. But there's also this kind of idea of new beginnings and lightness.

Richelle: How does this encounter with Eve and the angel inform that and help us understand this time better?

Kate: There's this notion that the human being can only take in so much light, and I think we grow in our capacity to take in the light. The season of Epiphany is a season of showing so appearances of light basically are of Christ. And the more that we can look at that, the greater our capacity becomes to drink it in. Just like when we pray, the more we pray, the more capable we are of prayer. It's really a discipline. It's a practice. I think we have to practice opening our eyes to the acts of God in the world, to beauty. We have to practice looking for beauty, practice looking for the works of the Holy Spirit in the world. And in that way, the more we look, the more we see and our eyes are open. So Epiphany is a wonderful season as the light is coming back into the world, especially in the north, it's still quite dark. We're searching for the light, but the more we look for it, the more we find it.

Lindsay: I think that makes a lot of sense. God knew that Jesus would be in a world of suffering and would take that suffering upon himself. Was God trying to protect us from darkness and from suffering in the Garden of Eden? Or was this Plan B in terms of getting us out there? Or was this Plan A in terms of getting us out there? What strikes me is that we have the lovely incarnational words that we just heard from the first chapter of John about Jesus being the light in the darkness that the world can never put out. So either way, if we were meant to be back in the garden or if we were meant to get out there and suffer—and I can't imagine God wanted us to suffer—but we know our own children will suffer in order to learn and grow and finally work their way back to God. And maybe those were God's

thoughts as well. But the story of God's people in the Bible with the angels and with the women is all about initial light and then darkness going out into that cruel world and not being able to find the way back, the original way back. But then we have Jesus providing us a way back with the resurrection and light. And it's interesting that we see Jesus portrayed so much in light and being the light the world could not put out. I don't think it's just a safety net. I think it's just a wonderful, wonderful pathway that God's given us. And maybe that angel knew all that when he/ she was flashing that sword around. I'm not sure how much angels know. God knows things and maybe just sends angels out to get things done.

Angels seem to be doing great work, or they seem to be doing difficult works like killing people. As you said, Kate, they're kind of like just the facts, God, we're gonna go out and do what you sent us to do.

Kate: Yeah, it's a true mystery about their comprehension. Because they're not mortal and we don't really understand what it is that they perceive. Again, to me, I like thinking of them existing in other dimensions. They probably perceive a great deal more than we do, but they tend to have the capacity to allow us to respond in whatever way we're called to respond. So yeah, so that angel stands on the boundary and tells Adam and Eve, basically, you can't come back. You've got to move forward, move forward into a shadow lands. It's not a pleasant message to be told: You can't go back. But it was the truth. They do tell the truth.

Richelle: And yet there is a lot of good news in that still. Eventually Jesus will be here to to bring us back in relationship to God and to offer salvation, so there is good news. I think sometimes we feel when we're in the darkness or when we feel like a gate has closed, that there is an end of sorts. And it feels like this story's a reminder to us that there is more to the story. The story is not over, sometimes when we feel like it is.

Kate: Yeah, that's a really good point, Rochelle. I think that when we struggle and a door closes in our life, it's very easy to try to push that same door back open again and to say, what if I had done this or what if I had done that or if only I could go back to this or that. I think angels do stand at the closed door and tell you to move forward into something else, not to look back anymore, and not to try to figure out whether it was good or bad or better or worse, but simply to move forward into whatever God is calling you to do now. You

know, we only have the present moment. I like to think of the angels standing, especially at the gates of my memories of things that I've messed up and telling me, OK, stop ruminating and move on now. Enough.

Lindsay: I was thinking that this message could be very helpful, especially for women who've been trapped in domestic violence, who are getting away from abusive partners. And it just seems to me that you're right, angels can say, no, not that way. It's not healthy. It's not good for you. Come with me. We will show you this way. It's a pretty positive message.

The last woman to speak in the Bible was a fortune-telling girl in Acts 9. She is seeking her freedom, and she is inhabited by demons. Paul throws those demons out of her and she gets to be who she is, whole and healthy and seeking her freedom. And we never heard from her again. But the good news is that she found it. Acts implies that she found her freedom. And it was because of God and the Holy Spirit that she was able to do that. So, you're right. This is a really positive message.

Kate: Yeah, yeah, it is.

Richelle: So I wonder, as we move forward and conclude our time together, that we offer prayers for all of us, that when it feels like a door has closed or a gate, that we look for those angels to help us along in our encounters and give us hope for the next stage or the next opportunity.

Kate: Yeah, I know the cherubim didn't hold a sign; he held a sword. But if he held a sign, it might have said "No more what ifs." No more what if I had done this or what I had done that? No more what ifs. Go forward.

Lindsay: Yeah, yeah, that's wonderful.

Richelle: Well, Kate, Lindsey, thank you so much for your time today. I really look forward to our next conversation as we explore the encounter of Hagar and her time with an angel of the desert. If you have questions for Lindsay or Kate or a topic to suggest, email us an editorial@forwardmovement.org and we'll pass them along.

Richelle: Thanks, Kate. Lindsey, it's been wonderful. Thank you so much.