

by Stu Root on Sunday, July 7, 2013

Prequel -- I must warn you that if you are resistant to challenges to Biblical interpretation of some 5,000 years standing, you may not enjoy my message this morning. Also I think it only fair to say that the message you are about to hear is not endorsed by the Board of Directors of this new establishment, its officers or its laity leadership ..

Good Morning --

THE BLAME GAME --

A CONTRARIAN'S VIEW OF  
THE GARDEN OF EDEN, ADAM AND EVE,  
THE SERPENT AND GOD

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Perhaps it was in Sunday School, or just ambient information, but I always thought I knew the chain of blame for Man's [that is, the inclusive Man] condition and plight: it was that Adam had eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree, and that Adam pointed the finger at Eve [how like the uninclusive man], and that Eve fingered the serpent who "beguiled" her.

But not long ago I revisited my politically correct intelligence. Was there, I wondered, more to the blame game in Eden than we commonly accept as self-evident? Having been sensitized by

the facile blame-laying in the Washington Post, and other shallow commentators, I decided to go back to the source, to reexamine the chain of blame and its consequent shame avoidance maneuvers of which the fig leaf is emblematic.

I should add, that in my family I was tolerated as a bit of a contrarian. In fact, during one dinner with my brother present he finally erupted with a challenge: Damn it Stuart, why are you always so contrary? My defense was swift: I responded: I am NOT contrary!

But enough about me; now back to Adam.

Any man who has been only part way around the block knows that it is treacherous to blame a serious infraction on a woman, let alone the significant other with whom you hope to live peaceably for the rest of your life. After all, “hell hath no fury...”as the saying goes. And even if it took until the 16<sup>th</sup> century to frame that aphorism, it must have been well know for millennia before that. So Adam would not blithely blame his woman, however intimidating the Lord God might be.

Usually we try to dodge blame so as to not wear out our fig leaves, like work corduroys – which only leads to more shame. But Adam simply told it as it was, even if my take on Adam is different from the over 5,000 year generally accepted talmudic interpretation.

You see, Adam and Eve both knew they had done God wrong, but not because of any epiphany they got from ingesting the fruit, but rather because of his command not to eat it, or so it appears to me.

By saying this I mean to question the notion that Adam and Eve became aware of their sin once they had partaken of the Fruit – often referred to as an apple, even if it is highly doubtful that the fruit was in fact an apple. After all when God gave His command to sentient beings, His act subsumed that the newly minted couple could tell right from wrong, at least as it relates to

the tree. He was not addressing a rock or doorknob. And Eve's dialogue with the serpent reveals her ability to distinguish right from wrong – before she took a bite.

So let us reconsider the pertinent God and Adam dialogue as reported in the King James [Stuart] version:

“And He [that is, the Lord God] said: ‘Who told thee thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?’

“And the man said, ‘The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.’ “

As we know, then Eve dodged blame by pointing to the serpent who did “beguile” her. There is no record of the serpent's plea of avoidance.

But inflections can make a world of difference in this story, or any story.

For instance, many of us – if not all – are familiar with the saying: Woman without her man is lost. And then how clever rhetoricians change the meaning entirely with a change in punctuation and inflection by have the same words, in the same sequence read: Woman – without her man is lost.

Hence I have concluded that Talmudic scholars for the last 5,000 years have led us astray. After all, if Adam had any sense, as I believe he did, he must have said – not pusillanimously “the woman thou gavest to be with me, etc.” but rather “The woman THOU gavest to be with me...” So yes, Adam was asking God to look to his own act of creation for the provenance of the original sin. Indeed, it seems counterintuitive that Adam would merely point his finger at Eve, and recite monotonously the chain of events WITHOUT inflection.

In fact, to believe that Adam meekly fingered Eve as blameworthy does not compute for me. If Adam had any hope for marital bliss and harmony, he certainly could not expect to achieve it by blaming Eve, in her presence at least. Now if he had suggested that he and God have a private conversation, it would be more believable. But no, the scholars – probably celibate – found it expedient for Adam to pin the blame on Eve. Whereas I aver that Adam must have seen that there was a more marriage-preserving and congenial way to state what had happened: “The woman that THOU gavest to me...etc.”

That did not stop God from visiting hardships on mankind and womankind, and progeny of serpents. He was dismissive of the Adamite push-back, that is if my inflection bias has any merit.

Now one might argue that Adam’s wearing a fig leaf was a matter of self-impeachment. [By the way, this no doubt was the first instance of when “size matters” – in this case the size of the fig leaf.] After all, he knew he had broken God’s commandment not to eat; that would not bar him from pushing back in the manner I am suggesting. Put another way, Adam’s knowledge of his infraction is not the same as saying he was, in a more profound sense, to “blame!” But it would be sufficient for him to attempt a “cover-up” with his attire, or to bow to the inevitable fig leaf adornment while still harboring resentment for the predicament in which he was placed by forces beyond his control.

Throughout history we have struggled with the sources of blame, and of avoidance mechanisms. Consider the Warren Commission hearings examining the blame of Lee Harvey Oswald for the horrific assassination of President Kennedy, and also the testimony of Oswald’s mother. They interrogated her to lead her to acknowledge her son’s guilt for the assassination. They gave her a list of incriminating facts and data. Then, they implored her to respond by confess her son’s guilt: She said, as I recall: “Well, no one is perfect.”

And how about the Tsarneave brothers marathon bombing in Boston? Some apologists have said they were not properly “assimilated” into society, as if that should distribute the

blame into a cloud of amorphous responsibility. The surviving brother apparently left a note blaming the society in which he was not properly assimilated for waging war on Moslems, stating that if we kill one Moslem we are attacking all Moslems. But what of terrorist bombs or commandeered aircraft which themselves take the lives of many Moslems? He does not address that inconvenient fact.

We live in a world where such beliefs are rampant, I fear. A few weeks ago I drove down lower Broadway for the first time in several years. I was astonished at what I found. I could not turn left from Broadway onto Wall Street. The street was protected with metal pylons in the middle of the street barring access. Broad Street similarly barred traffic that might pass in front of the New York Stock Exchange, as was New Street behind the Exchange. I don't know how emergency vehicles can navigate those streets.

The point is that our country's leaders apparently are aware of the profound hatred and accusations of our guilt or blame, and the threats of counterattacks they engender for the private parts of our financial system.

In another context we have seen or read of the horrendous events in Cleveland [Ohio, that is] involving a sadist who blames his 3 young female victims for their bondage. Why? Because they got into his car without knowing who he was! So it was all their fault, or so he told the Cleveland police. More blame avoidance by one who is undeniably to blame.

Fortunately there is a flip side to this quest for avoidance.

As we conclude celebrations for our Nation's founding, we may consider two national heroes of the last Century and as they assumed responsibility for their planning during WW II.. The first is exemplified by Colonel James Doolittle and the second by General Eisenhower.

As you may recall, Doolittle led the remarkable air attack on Japan, early in the war, as a quick payback for Pearl Harbor. I have read where, before the squadron took off, Doolittle penned a note to those who remained behind saying, in effect, that if the assault was a failure he assumed full responsibility – no one else.. He was to blame.

Similarly, as the Allied Forces marshalled for the D-Day invasion, Eisenhower left a comparable memorandum assuming full responsibility for any failure in the attacks.

What are we to make of this in the world of moral philosophy? I suggest that we conclude that blame leads to shame, either self inflicted or assumed, and that avoidance of shame is a powerful motive for dodging blame. Further, that on rare occasions people of great moral courage look blame in the face, and that confidence in their being “in the right” trumps concern for blame.

And, finally, that allocation of blame can be a far more subtle or nuanced pursuit than those who seek to treat it superficially would have you, and us all, believe.

Let us pray:

God grant us the courage to change the things that can be changed; the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed; and the wisdom to know the difference.  
Amen.