

Aidinoff, Elsie V. *The Garden*. New York City: HarperCollins Publishing, 2004.

A Dangerous Twist on a Timeless Story

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The creation of Adam and Eve is one of the Bible's most well-known stories. Throughout history, the biblical account of the beginning of the universe and human life has been believed by some but challenged, denied, and revised by others.

One of the most recent attempts at revision and denial comes from Author Elsie Aidinoff in her novel *The Garden*. Though Aidinoff admits that her book is not a work of theology but rather "a novel that departs from one of the oldest and best-known tales on earth," she admits to having theological beliefs that impact her writing.

In her Author's Note, Aidinoff states, "I part ways with organized religion in crucial areas. I cannot believe in an exclusive god, one who, like the old tribal gods, protects only one group of people. I cannot reconcile an omnipotent god with the suffering that exists in the world. Nor can I believe that people are inherently evil...I view the world as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and humans as capable of both great evil and great good. And like Eve (Aidinoff's Eve as portrayed in her book), I do not understand why a great god should need so much adulation."

Aidinoff's departure from biblical theology is apparent from the start of her book. Rather than detailing God's glorious handiwork in the creation of the earth and its first humans, she simply has the human characters awaken to life as curious adolescents. She attributes the existence of Adam and Eve to the Creator God but takes a vastly different

view from the Bible on how Adam and Eve gain their knowledge of life and eventually death.

In Aidinoff's story, God takes on the responsibility of instructing Adam and gives the Serpent the responsibility of parenting Eve. God and the Serpent spend most of their time alone with their respective pupils. While God instructs Adam and at times both Adam and Eve in a structured classroom-style setting requiring rote memorization and recitation of what he teaches them about himself, the Serpent's teaching method is more playful and hands-on. Eve describes her experience with the Serpent as a "mixture of elation, and joy, and love."

She finds her experience with God nearly opposite as he exhibits anger and impatience with her questions. In one example, Eve asks God a question about his robe: "God stopped suddenly. 'Oh!' he cried crossly. 'More interruptions!'" When Eve states that she only asked the question because of the beauty of his garment, God replies, "It is beautiful, isn't it?" He then speaks more gently to Eve.

Aidinoff's characterization of God as emotionally volatile is no accident. She compares God to the Los Alamos scientists who created the atom bomb: "The brilliant scientists who created the bomb were passionate about their work – totally absorbed, exhilarated, drunk on intellectual excitement. But, geniuses though they were, they never considered the moral implications of the bomb, or the suffering it would bring. I began to think God could in some ways be compared to the Los Alamos scientists: a creator focused on his creations, impatient to prove his theories right (or at least make them work as he had planned) with no understanding of the human cost. I have certainly taken liberties with God, but I do not think his behavior is out of character. The God of the Old

Testament is a choleric and impetuous being. As I delved further into the Garden of Eden, it became clear to me that the Serpent is the hero of the story...the Serpent gave them (Adam and Eve) the capacity to reason.”

Sadly, Aidinoff exhibits her perspectives of God and Satan in dangerous and sinister ways. In the darkest scene of her novel, God becomes anxious to test his theory of procreation. In the Serpent’s absence, he commands Adam and Eve to have sex in front of him talking them through the process of copulation in explicit detail. God becomes angry at Adam’s hesitancy and Eve’s cries of pain telling them that he created this to be an enjoyable experience; therefore they are to enjoy it and not complain.

When Eve tells the Serpent what happened, he angrily forbids God and Adam to see Eve for an extended period of time until he gives them permission to do so. The Serpent then gives the injured Eve time to work through her feelings of anger toward God and Adam. Eventually, he intoxicates Eve and gently has sexual intercourse with her himself in a way that gives her pleasure. This is to help her understand that eventually sex with Adam would be enjoyable and something she needed to do in order to have children and further the human race.

In spite of Aidinoff’s claim that her portrayal of God in *The Garden* is in line with the Old Testament, she is grossly inaccurate. First, the God of the Old Testament never cowers to Satan. Instead, God puts limitations on Satan rather than taking orders from him (Gen. 3:14-15; Job 1:12). God also displays great patience toward his erring children including Adam and Eve and the nation of Israel in their repeated acts of disbelief and rebellion (Gen. 3; Judges 1 – 21). Old Testament law dictated by God says that sex between humans and animals is an abomination, not something beautiful as *The Garden*

implies (Leviticus 18:23). God portrays the physical relationship between husband and wife as gentle and tender as seen in the Song of Solomon, and he punishes those who disobey his standards on sexual behavior as illustrated in the Levitical law and in his discipline upon King David when he had an illicit relationship with another man's wife (2 Samuel 12:1-23; Leviticus 20:10).

Another major departure by Aidinoff from the biblical account of creation and the fall into sin has to do with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Though the Bible places the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden from the beginning and shows Satan lying to Eve about the consequences of disobeying God, Aidinoff takes an entirely different approach to this aspect of the story too.

During her time of separation from God and Adam, Eve goes on adventures with the Serpent to lands outside of the Garden of Eden. There she sees barren lands, varying climates, danger, and even death. She inadvertently carries back to the Garden of Eden a seed which grows into a tree that bears the forbidden fruit. In spite of God's attempts to wipe out the tree, it grows and comes to full blossom. By this time Adam is increasingly respectful of Eve's self-will in standing up to God when she disagrees with him. God tells Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of this tree, but curious Eve is determined to do so anyway.

The Serpent explains to Adam and Eve the full consequences of what will happen if they eat the fruit: they will be banished from the Garden and will no longer have the provision and protection it affords them. However, he also explains that they will have more freedom and self-determination out on their own than if they remain in the Garden. Adam and Eve ponder the Serpent's words and decide to eat the forbidden fruit.

As Satan predicted, God drove them all out of the Garden. As Eve observes the torrent of animals trampling each other as they flee from the Garden, she cries out, “What have I done!” The Serpent replies, “Eve! Never say that! Never think it!... You and Adam chose freely, both of you, and it was brave. Never doubt that it was the right choice: in the Garden you would have been God’s chattels forever. This’ – it nodded at the chaos around us – ‘is not your doing. It is God’s...It is not suffering, or injustice, or evil that you have brought into the world – though they have come. It is freedom...Don’t cry. Stand proud! Because of your choice, all humans are free, now and forevermore.”

This last statement by the Serpent summarizes Aidinoff’s goals for the novel: “to explore questions of personal responsibility, justice, and freedom.” Unfortunately, she chooses to explore those questions not under the banner of truth and biblical theology but out of her opinion that it is wrong for religion to blame women for the introduction of sin into the world and her subsequent dismissal of the teachings of the Bible. She claims that her self-willed, outspoken Eve may have been the Eve of the Bible had Genesis been written in a less patriarchal culture.

In spite of her gross misrepresentation of the nature of the God in both Old and New Testaments, Aidinoff exhibits talent as a novelist. Her writing is concise, easy to read, action-packed, and filled with enticements such as cliff-hanger chapter endings to keep the reader hungry to know what happens next. The combination of her talent and her erroneous depictions of biblical characters makes this book a dangerous tool that can actually lead a reader into bondage.

Unless a reader is willing to stop reading simply because the book is blasphemous and filled with inappropriate sexual content, even the most biblically literate Christian

can be enticed to keep reading and face temptation to rethink what the Bible says about God. This would be especially true for a reader who has been emotionally traumatized by an atrocity such as rape.

Rather than examining what the Bible has to say about sin and how to find God's love and recover from trauma, Aidinoff's work only fuels the natural tendency to blame God for evil events by her portrayal of Eve as a victim the reader can identify and sympathize with. Instead of leading a reader to freedom, Aidinoff can harden a reader's heart against the Lord turning them from the only true source of freedom from devastating life events.

In spite of her efforts to depart from traditional interpretations of Genesis, Aidinoff interestingly has only succeeded at propagating the original sin that occurred in the real Garden of Eden. She has given the real Satan another tool to tell today's generation about the Bible the same thing he told the real Eve about God's words to her so long ago, "Did God really say...? Surely not!" (Gen. 3:1,4).