

## 2. WOMAN: IN THE BEGINNING

The interpretation of the first three chapters of Genesis is absolutely critical to any biblical study of human life, and certainly of this study of the biblical teachings about women. Many incorrect or incomplete teachings on the subject can be traced to a faulty exegesis of these chapters. To begin one must understand what the text says about the original creation and what happened to it. Then the rest of Scripture on the matter can be harmonized.

This is not the place to discuss the literary nature of these passages or their reliability, even though these issues are hotly debated. For the sake of this study I shall assume that the passages are narrative prose, that they provide us with profound theological teachings, and that they account for actual persons and events. To deny the historicity of Adam and Eve not only creates questions about the reliability of Scripture, but also raises doubts about the nature of God. If people are the way that God created them, if there never was a Fall that took place in time and space, then we must draw a very different picture of God, for humans are the image of God; and if we are the way God intended us to be, why do we need to be saved? Neither do we help matters by denying the historicity of the account to deal with it as myth, stories intended to portray people in rebellion against God. We are still left with the question of how and when it all began.

### Genesis 1:26-28

The text tells us,

So God created man as His own image,

as the image of God created He him;

male and female created He them (Gen. 1:27).

Within the context of this passage we must consider the meaning of the term “image,” the duality of mankind in the two sexes, and the relationship between the male and the female as God’s image.

## *Imago Dei*

The Bible clearly presents human nature as the image of God--that is, both male and female, as the parallelism of Genesis 1:27 shows. The word “man” (*ha’adam*) is the generic term for humankind, even though in different contexts it can mean an individual man, or the name Adam. In this verse the male and the female together make up “man” --humankind. But there is in this an individuality as well as a complementarity, as Genesis 2 will detail for us.

Much has been written on the meaning of the term “image” (*tselem*) and its parallel “likeness” (*d<sup>e</sup>mut*). Because both male and female are the image, the expression is not intended to describe their bodily structure, but the spiritual and moral capacity in-breathed by God (Gen. 2:7). But to the Hebrew way of thinking, it is not possible to split the physical from the spiritual--the image of God would refer to the communicated attributes in human life, the whole person.

The word “image” can be used of any kind of statue, shape, or structure. In this context the use of the word draws upon the culture of the ancient Near East, most notably Egypt; it signifies the function of representing God’s sovereign dominion on earth. Gerhard von Rad makes the comparison with kings of ancient Egypt: just as they would erect statues of themselves to represent their dominion over a given territory, so too God created human life to be His image in the earth.

The function of humans as the image of God is immediately clarified by two commandments. The first is that they should “be fruitful and multiply and fill all the earth.” While the same command was given to other creatures, something very special was meant for human beings because they were not just breathing creatures but creatures who had the divine breath of life given to them. As God’s representatives they could share in the work of God--and in Genesis that would naturally indicate first and foremost the creation of human life. Obviously neither the male nor the female alone could do this. Only together in God’s plan could they share this wonderful work.

The second command is to “rule and have dominion” over the earth. The expressions used suggest that danger was on the horizon, that a conflict was brewing, that there would indeed be something to subdue. But as the representatives of God on earth, and with the God-given capacities to rule, humankind--male and female--had the task of protecting and controlling the **rest** of God’s creation.

It is important to note in passing that this theme will find further development later in the discussion of New Testament salvation. In Christ people become new **creations** (2 Cor. 5:17), and their task is to be conformed to the **image** of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:13) who is the express image of God the Father (Heb. 1:3). Moreover, we do not yet see the proper **dominion** over the earth (Ps. 8:4-6), but we see Jesus who will eventually fulfill the divine plan for the human race by putting everything under His feet (Heb. 2:8,9).

## The Duality of Humankind

Sexual differentiation is presented in these passages as a creation of God, and not a mere extension of male and female deities. In fact, the creation of the sexes by the direct act of God forms a polemic against the divinization of sex among the pagans. God is far above human sexuality.

Moreover, the bipolarity of the sexes exists from the very beginning. Any notions about an androgynous being split into the two sexes cannot be supported. Von Rad underscores this by noting that the plural of verse 27 (“He created them”) is intentionally contrasted with the singular (“created He him”) and prevents one from assuming the creation of an originally androgynous man. So the sexual distinction is presented in Genesis 1 as a basic component in the original creation of human life.

## The Relationship between Male and Female

From this passage one must conclude that there was no ontological or functional superiority or inferiority between male and female as God created them (remembering that this is before the Fall when there was no sin whatsoever). As Thieliicke says, both are “equally immediate to the Creator and His act.” Male and female are equally the image of God.

The original equality of the sexes is further indicated by the use of plural verbs in the two commandments (*p<sup>e</sup>ru u-r<sup>e</sup>bu u-mil’u . . . w<sup>e</sup>kibshuha u-r<sup>e</sup>du*). Both the male and female are to share in the blessing and responsibility of producing and caring for life. And both are given the same dominion over the earth and over the living creatures. Both, then, share the identification as and the privilege of being the image of God.

The relationship between the male and the female is heightened by the way the contemplation of creation is recorded; only in this place do we find the Creator contemplating creation with the use of the plural: “Let us make man as our image, after our likeness.” Of the many attempts to explain this plural “Let us,” the view that fits Scripture the best is that it is a plural of majesty, that God is set apart by the use of plural as majestic, sovereign, and almighty. But the language also prepares us for the full revelation of Scripture that declares that within the Godhead there is the distinction of persons; in this passage there is a hint of intra-divine deliberation among the persons within the divine being.

The juxtaposition of the “Us” of the Godhead with the “them” of mankind is significant. Barth correctly notes that an analogy is intended between the human and the divine: just as there is diversity of persons within the Godhead, so there is diversity of persons within mankind--albeit on a mundane level. We dare not push the analogy too far; however, we may say that just as there takes place in the divine nature a deliberation over creation--“the differentiation and relationship, the loving coexistence and co-operation, the I and Thou”--so the same are to be

found in the product of God's creation--humankind. The way the text is written, though, preserves the unity of God and rules out any possible notion of bisexuality within the Godhead. The point, after all, is that there is a relationship between male and female (different people) that reflects the fullness of the nature of the one true God (different persons within the Godhead).

## Genesis 2:4-25

### The Order of Creation

Much has been made in the literature about the order of creation, i.e., the man was created first and therefore must be superior to the woman. Sometimes this idea is expressed as part of a functioning hierarchy present before the Fall; but other times it is merely used to express the superiority of the male over the female. But several things need to be said concerning this issue.

First, the way Genesis 2 presents the creation of the man and the woman underscores the unity of the male and the female--and the male's appreciation of this. The male--Adam--was created first, and in the process of naming the animals was able to see that none of them corresponded to him. He was alone. Thus, when God provided the woman--Eve--he was ecstatic:

This one, at last, is bone of my bones,  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called woman,  
because she was taken from man.

The meaning of this couplet is that the woman is the same nature as man.

Second, the narrative underscores this by a literary device known as *inclusio* or "ring construction" in which things of importance are placed at the beginning and the end of the narrative to stress the important point. In this passage the creation of man is put at the beginning, and the creation of woman at the end, showing the unity of the human race as male and female.

Third, Adam did not name his wife at this point. This is a very important distinction, because naming shows sovereignty or dominion over that which is named. The little poetic couplet uses a future passive to announce how she will be described--"this one will be called woman." The naming formula will use the active: "And the man called his wife's name 'Eve'" (Gen. 3:20)--this appears after the Fall. But before sin entered the world there was no such domination by the male over the female.

Fourth, it is clear from the woman's conversation with the tempter in Genesis 3, as well as the divine judgment on her in the curse section, that the instructions given to "man" in Genesis 2:17,18 were intended for both the male and the female. This certainly corresponds to the plural imperatives of Genesis 1:26-28.23 In fact, any harmony between the passages will show that the male and the female needed each other to fulfill God's will for them.

## **"Helper"**

Certainly the most well-known word used in Genesis to describe the woman is the word "helper" (*'ezer*). In our culture this word usually refers to someone of lesser or inferior value or worth, such as a plumber's helper, or mommy's little helper--one who does smaller, more menial jobs. Although this meaning has often been transferred to Genesis 2:18, that is not the idea in the Hebrew word.

In the Old Testament the term "helper" describes the one who can provide ethical, spiritual, and physical help to someone who is in great need. In fact, the term is used in the Bible of God Himself: He is the great Helper of His people (1 Sam. 7:12; Ps. 46:1; 22:11, 19). Throughout the Scripture, the LORD comes to help the helpless, for He alone is able to meet their needs. For this He is known as the Helper, *par excellence*. So whatever ideas someone may have about the status of women as inferior cannot be supported through Eve's being called a "helper." The word is a relational term; it describes a beneficial relationship, but says nothing about rank or importance. The specific position must be drawn from the context--and it is significant that wherever "helper" is used the focus is placed on the weakness, the inability, or the incompleteness of the one in need.

God in Genesis 2 gives the proper balance, for He stresses the importance of the "helper." The LORD concluded that man is incomplete without woman, basing the creation of her on the observation that "it is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18; literally: "man's being alone is not good"). Adam's being alone is the only thing in creation that is pronounced "not good." All through Genesis we learn repeatedly that God's creative works are "good." But Adam's aloneness was not good; he needed a complementary partner. Not until Eve was formed was God's creation complete--and then it was "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

So Adam by himself could not fulfill God's plan for the human race. He needed help desperately, and God provided that help through the woman. She was not merely a supplement to the man: to call her "helper" was to say that her nature, her disposition, and her physical and spiritual abilities supplied what he lacked. I think it is clear in view of the whole revelation that in the same way he also supplied what she lacked. Neither one alone, for example, could be fruitful and multiply. Together they would make a completed circle. In order to have this relationship, they had to be diverse--opposite, yet complementary; complementary because opposite.

## “Corresponding”

Our term “helper” in Genesis 2:18 is qualified by the expression “corresponding to him” (*k<sup>e</sup>negdo*, “according to the opposite of him”; translated “meet” [i.e., fitting, appropriate] in the King James Version--unfortunately this archaic modifier has been retained in some Christian groups as “helpmeet,” which often communicates the wrong thing--if anything at all). The point is that she will be fitting, corresponding to him. What is true of Adam’s nature and being will be true of Eve’s as well, so that they will know unity despite their diversity. God had formed Adam first as the beginning of the race, so that the race would be unified--they all came from one. Eve was not an independent creation but derived her nature from him in order to correspond perfectly to him. So we need to understand more fully Adam’s nature.

The design of God in creating Adam is evident in the clause “the LORD God formed the man” (Gen. 2:7). The word translated “formed” (*yatsar*) describes the work of an artist who skillfully molds a masterpiece by careful design. The Bible elsewhere uses this word for “potter” (*yotser*). As a master potter God formed man from the dust of the ground. He then breathed His divine, eternal breath into the creature, which made him a living soul.

The imagery of forming the man from the dust of the ground is meant to teach several things--that man is earthbound, that he is a direct creation of God, but most of all that he is a work of art. The verb implies that the forming was by a plan (note the use of the noun for “plans” in Gen. 6:5), a blueprint if you will, and that it was a masterpiece. God invested a great deal of care and thought into this creation.

The imagery of the in-breathing says much more. The expression “breath (*n<sup>e</sup>shamah*) of life” merits a thorough study. This word for breath is used only in the Bible of human breath that was given from God. Its usage shows that the “breath” brings three things--life, that is eternal and spiritual life as well as physical; spiritual understanding, so that man could fellowship with and serve God; and a functioning conscience, so that he could discern right from wrong.

With the same deliberate planning, the eternal Father constructed the woman. Wrapped in his deep sleep, Adam envisioned his Creator taking from him one of his ribs, fashioning and then presenting to him this glorious woman to be the mate for whom he had longed. When he awoke, he realized the vision was there, real, living, and in joy he declared that she was his flesh and bone.

So both the man and the woman share the joy of being God’s special handiwork: both have the same nature, that spiritual and moral capacity imparted by God. In all of this the woman corresponds to the man. She is his peer in capacities of intellect, moral worth, and sensibilities. She can think, feel, imagine, or reason; she can sell goods, plan buildings, make statues, diagnose diseases, construct philosophies, or write epics. What is open to man as a human being is open to her.

## Derived from Man

Some have argued that because the woman was taken from the man she is subordinate, inferior, or at least dependent. It is certainly true that the woman was derived from Adam. But derivation does not imply subordination. Adam, for example, was derived from the dust of the ground. No one would argue that Adam was inferior to or subordinate to the ground! The woman is not Adam's rib. It was the raw material that was taken from the man to make the woman, just as the raw material was taken from the ground to make the man. Moreover, as Terrien says, the woman was "not simply molded of clay, as man was, but she was architecturally 'built' (2:23)." That God built her into a woman certainly includes the ideas of divine superintendence, aesthetic values, reliability, permanence. Furthermore, the fact that Adam was asleep conveys that he had no part in the formation of Eve and could therefore claim no superiority.

## "One Flesh"

It should come as no surprise, then, that Genesis describes the man and the woman together as a **unity**. In the foundational passage on marriage we are told that when a man leaves home and cleaves to his wife they become "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). The pattern has now come full circle. Having been taken from the man she is his flesh and bone; united as one they become one flesh.

The sequence of ideas here is critical. It is the man who is said to leave (*'azab*) his father and his mother--a revolutionary idea in the ancient world where the woman was usually the one to leave. The initiation comes from the man; the implication is that they both leave home. The second point is the cleaving (*dabaq*)--it takes place after the leaving and before the becoming one flesh. The term is powerful; it signifies strong personal attachment, essentially a covenant idea. In this context it must mean the strong inward attitudes of the covenant bond of marriage. Collins says it "implies a devotion and an unshakable faith between humans; it connotes a permanent attraction which transcends genital union to which, nonetheless, it gives meaning."

The third point is that the two of them **become** "one flesh." It is a process of growing together that the text envisions. In the Old Testament the term "flesh" (*basar*) refers not only to the physical body--much less to the sin nature (a Pauline use)--but to a person's whole existence. To become "one flesh" means becoming a spiritual, moral, intellectual, and physical unity. Certainly the differences remain, but the adjustment to each other involves weaving together these qualities. The term "flesh" describes the total relationship of the whole person of the man to the whole person of the woman.

No other expression could adequately describe the nature of marriage. Nothing less than the complete union of two lives is in view. This is still God's plan for marriage; but if either partner pursues selfish interests, the ideal is shattered. And if it is not a joining of one male and one female, the plan is shattered as well. Our "self" conscious society makes it all too easy for a husband and wife to live completely separate lives. Instead, they should be growing together as complete partners, the best of friends, distinct but complementary.



As G. W. Blaikie says, where there is unity, the necessary interlacing of all the events makes that unity greater. It invests the relationship with a greater tenderness and sanctity. This unity is seen in the sharing of the same home and worldly goods, being parents of the same children, being partners in joy and sorrow. As couples we mingle prayers and thanksgiving as none else can, and look back on all we have shared, and ahead to the fulfillment of our lives in glory. These are all experiences and hopes that are not only destined to deepen the unity of the relationship, but also to sweeten our daily existence as nothing else on earth can.

Genesis 2:25 goes on to add that the man and the woman were “naked and were not ashamed,” that is, they were openly at ease with one another. They felt no fear or mistrust, no risk of exploitation, and no sense of evil. This model of all human relationships was a perfect unity of two complementary humans fashioned by God Himself. Too many marriages fail because this sense of openness, honesty, and trust is not developed. Secretness and deception creep in because of the fear of exploitation. The partners may feel threatened. The world’s feeble attempts at openness both within and outside of marriage, whether through physical or “spiritual” nudism, miss the point completely. An open and honest marriage is the outgrowth of a vibrant spiritual union.

It is clear then that the concepts of helping, or corresponding, or of becoming one flesh, all have a highly spiritual purpose behind them. A wife or husband cannot be a good partner--as Genesis means good--unless they correspond to each other in spirit. The conclusion is inescapable: man and woman were designed to form a **functioning spiritual and physical union, serving God together on earth.**

Whatever else the Bible will go on to say about the woman, these ideas from the creation must first be understood. Here we find God’s original plan, the ideal.

Christians especially should recognize the principles in the story of creation. It tells us that the woman is a special creation of God. He invested her with the same nature and the same qualities as the man. He placed them together as partners to do His will on earth. The Church should then uplift Christian women and encourage them to develop their God-given gifts. Of course, the New Testament will provide guidelines by which (both men and) women exercise their spiritual gifts among believers, but too often the Spirit has been quenched in women in the name of the teaching of submission, and that doctrine has too often been based on the faulty, incomplete interpretation of all the texts of the Bible. When a husband and a wife are both growing and developing in their spiritual and intellectual abilities, they can discover that functioning, spiritual union which God Himself originally instituted.

## Summary

1. God created humankind to represent Him on earth, that is, to do the work of the LORD in ruling over the earth and creating human life.



2. God invested in humankind the moral and spiritual and intellectual capacity to do this.
3. The order and the means of creation, both of the male and the female, show that God deliberately was producing a couple that would complement one another in their God-given task.
4. All the descriptions in the passages, the verb forms, and the figures of speech, contribute to the idea that the man and the woman form a functioning spiritual and physical union.
5. The man and the woman were created as spiritual and intellectual equals. There is nothing in the creation accounts themselves that would lead in any way to the conclusion that the man was superior and the woman inferior.