

# **Making an Educated Choice: Conflicting Interpretations of the Creation Narratives**

*Elizabeth Goodine*

Any Biblically based position regarding the relationship of men and women under God must inevitably rest on interpretation of the texts dealing with the creation of human beings, that is, on *Genesis* 1 & 2. While much of the argumentation over proper roles for women and men in the Church revolves around writings of Paul -- with those who prefer differentiation of roles focusing on texts such as *1 Corinthians* 11 & 14 and those favoring equal roles emphasizing *Galatians* 3 -- those arguments build on, and thus ultimately rest on, an assumed understanding of the creation narrative. Thus, in order to make one's own educated choice in regard to these interpretations (referred to here as the "complementary" view and the "egalitarian" view), it is critical to first understand how proponents of each position interpret the *Genesis* texts.

## **The Complementary View**

This is the view that has come to be considered traditional in Christianity. It is based largely on *Genesis* 2 wherein God creates the woman out of the side of the man. In this view, the order in which the humans are created is very significant; the woman is created second -- she comes into the picture only after the man. Based on this *order of creation* (a key term for this view), Eve, the first woman, is understood as subordinate, secondary, to Adam, the first man. This *order* is understood as signifying the proper relationship of men and women for all generations since it was God who created the first humans in this manner. Proponents of this view point out that, prior to creating Eve, God notices that Adam does not have a suitable partner, declares that it is not good for the man to be alone, and therefore decides to make a "helper" for him. This underscores that the woman is created for the man; her purpose is to help the man fulfill his purpose.

With this hierarchical relationship between the man and the woman established, supporters of this view turn their attention to *Genesis* 1. In this account, the text informs readers that "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." The key word here is *image*. Therefore, the question regarding what it means to be the *image* of God must be asked and answered. Analysis of the Hebrew word shows that it carries the same basic meaning as it does in English. An image can be thought of as a "reflection" or a "copy" of an original. Putting this information together with the proper ordering of men and women as established in *Genesis* 2, advocates of the "complementary" view assert that Adam (the man) is primarily the image of God; and that Eve (the woman) is the image of Adam. It is understood that she participates in God's image (as do women then through all generations) -- it is not that she does not bear God's image -- but that, as long as

she is in this earthly existence, she does so through Adam, that is, through the man.

This basic interpretation of the creation narratives forms the foundation for the complementary view. The woman is understood as secondary to the man, his helper, whereas the man, as the primary reflection of God, is to respect and care for the woman placed under him, and the children she bears for him. In the modern context, proponents of this view argue for separate roles based on one's sex and tend to support traditional roles for men and women i.e. men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. Since the Church is to be a model of family and community for the world, the maintenance of proper roles within that context is seen as especially critical.

### **The Egalitarian View**

This is the view that is most prominent among Jewish and Christian feminists. Proponents of this view tend to begin with the creation narrative of *Genesis 1* which states that "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Once again, *image* is the key word in this text. However, advocates of this view also emphasize the writer's use of particular nouns and pronouns. First, they note that the writer chooses to use the word "*hā-'ādām*," a broad term that encompasses all human beings -- "God created humankind [not just males] in his image. . . "They also note the parallelism of the two lines that follow ("in the image of God, he created him; male and female he created them"). This parallel structure, they point out, is quite common in Hebrew, with these parallel lines serving to unpack the meaning of the first line. In this case, the pronoun of line 2 ("in the image of God he created *him*") refers to the *hā-'ādām* (the human being) and the pronoun of line three clarifies that fact -- "male and female [within that human being] he created *them*." Advocates of this view further assert that such an interpretation is emphasized in verses 26 and 28 (which surround verse 27) wherein God grants dominion over all the earth not to male humans alone but rather to humankind, male and female. Thus, in this view, God is understood as having created the human beings, both of them, equally, in his image. It is not the sexual categories of male and female, but rather, the category of *human* (male and female) that is primary; it is humanity that is understood to be in God's image (as distinct from the animals who do not bear the image of God).

With this egalitarian relationship between the man and the woman established, proponents of this view turn their attention to *Genesis 2* wherein God is shown creating the man, Adam, out of the dust of the ground and the woman, Eve, out of the flesh of Adam. In this view, it is also critical that Eve is created from Adam; yet, she is not understood as secondary. Rather, emphasis is on the intimate relationship of the two; God's literal co-mingling of their flesh which disallows hierarchy and differentiation based on sex. This equal and intimate relationship is understood to be underscored by the statement that follows at the end of the chapter "and they [the man and the woman] become one flesh."

This basic interpretation of the creation narratives forms the foundation for the egalitarian view. The man and the woman are understood as equal partners before God, having both been created in the image of God. As human beings who are reflections of their God, they are to love and care for one another as well as for all of the earth and its creatures. In the modern context, advocates of this view argue that roles are properly determined by the God-given talents of each individual and not according to one's sex. Thus it is understood that while the gifts of some individuals may lead them to follow traditional roles; others may be led in different directions, i.e. women may hold top positions in government and corporations, and men may stay home to nurture and raise children. Since the Church is to be a model of family and community for the world, it is critical that all members be valued and treated equally in that context with any limitation of roles based only on ability and not on one's sex.

### **Making a Choice**

From this brief overview, it should be clear that proponents of each of these views draw on and use the creation narratives to validate their interpretations (regarding the relationship of man and woman) and then to claim Biblical authority for theologies and practices that stem from those interpretations. It is therefore incumbent on any person who takes the Bible seriously to think critically about these narratives and to decide for herself or himself which has greater potential for creating a world most in-line with that intended by God. Ordain Women Now (OWN) supports and advocates the "egalitarian" view and offers the following brief summary as to why.

#### *Reasons based in grammatical issues:*

First, we believe, for reasons already noted and explained above, that *Genesis 1: 27* refers to *human* as the category of creature which is made in God's image; not to the man, with the woman in later succession. Second, we believe that equality between the man and the woman is preserved in *Genesis 2* but that the common interpretation of *Genesis 2: 18* obscures that relationship. In this verse, God is recorded as saying "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a *helper as his partner*." The Hebrew term used for "helper as his partner" is *ezer kenegdwo*. Admittedly, it is difficult to find an adequate English word(s) to render this phrase and yet, "helper" ("help-meet" in some translations) distorts the sense of the text. Perhaps "companion" or "associate" would make a better choice since *ezer* does not carry the connotation of an assistant or one with inferior status, as seen in the fact that God is frequently referred to as Israel's helper in the Biblical text (i.e. *Exodus 18: 4; Deuteronomy 33: 29; Psalms 33: 20*). Furthermore, the adjective *kenegdwo* means "corresponding to," "adequate to," "equal to." Thus, while awkward in the English, the sense of the text is that the woman is created as an equal partner with the man; and that the formation of her out of the man's flesh is not intended to underscore secondary status but rather, to emphasize the intimate bond that the two humans share.

*Reasons based on comparisons of the two narratives:*

As noted above, the "complementary" view places a great deal of importance on the *order* of creation. We do not believe that a careful reading of *Genesis* 1 & 2 supports an emphasis on sequential order. Certainly, *Genesis* 1 portrays God speaking his creation into existence in an orderly fashion: light/dark, water/land, vegetation, sun/moon, sea creatures, birds, animals, humans. Yet, if sequence is so critical to the proper interpretation of these texts, it is curious that the writer of *Genesis* 2 appears to be so entirely confused; for in that account, God forms the man "when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up" and before he had created any of the animals (see 2: 5 & 2: 15-19). We do not believe that the writers of either account were confused. The point was not sequence. Rather, *Genesis* 1 seeks to make known the great power of God as he brings each thing into existence by his very word, culminating with the creature that would bear his own image. *Genesis* 2 reveals a network of relationships (between God and the humans, God and the earth, the humans and the animals, the humans to one another) that illustrate the intimacy between God and his creation and the created beings to one another.

*Reasons based on the wider Biblical text:*

Both the *Old and New Testaments* reveal a pattern whereby God lifts up the lowly (those deemed as the lesser ones in society) and brings down the mighty (those deemed by the world to be greater in terms of status and power). From the *Old Testament*: God favors Jacob, the younger, over Esau, the elder; Joseph, the younger, over his brothers; Moses over Pharaoh; David, the shepherd boy over Saul, the first anointed king; and Jael, the weak woman, over the powerful general, Sisera. The *New Testament* follows suit with Jesus calling his followers from the ranks of the poor -- fishermen and demon possessed women -- and statements like "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (*Mark 10: 14*) and to the Pharisees, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (*Matthew 21: 31*).

Based on this prominent pattern running throughout the Biblical text, an interpretation that privileges the mighty -- in this case, all men over all women -- seems to make little sense. Is the woman less because she is created second? Such an interpretation runs counter to the wider paradigm of the Bible. If anything, the pattern would lead us to think that the woman, not the man, would be the privileged one in God's eyes. Even so, that inverted hierarchy must also be rejected if one accepts the egalitarian view which insists that the creation narratives emphasize intimate, loving and equal relationships between men and women. Likewise, the equality embedded in the relational network revealed in *Genesis* 2 disallows the possibility that the woman, rather than the man, should be interpreted as the pinnacle of creation (since she is created last in *Genesis* 2) and since (following the "complementary" argument) the sequence of *Genesis* 1 moves from the creation of the least to the greatest. This too must be rejected

since it also is simply an inversion of the hierarchy posited by proponents of the "complementary" view.

Finally, the "egalitarian" view in regard to the creation narratives is in line with the broader Biblical message of God's love for all people and with the call given to each one of us, as members of the Church, to do justice in this world. Theology is never neutral; nor should it be; and any theology that privileges one person over another on the basis of sex, cannot lead to justice for all. From Moses, to the prophets, to Jesus, to Paul, the directive that has been given to the people of God has been consistent. It is simply that in regard to all people we are to *do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6: 8)* -- because the greatest of the commandments is this: *love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind; and the second is like it -- love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22: 37-40)*.

---

Dr. Elizabeth Goodine is Instructor of Religious Studies at Loyola University in New Orleans, Louisiana. She is a member of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and is on the Board of Directors of Ordain Women Now.