THE GENESIS OF GENDER

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Introduction

Then God said, “Let us make humankind (adam) in our image, according to Our likeness…So God created humankind (adam) in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”¹ The creation of humanity in God’s image is a defining feature of creation in Genesis, one that is distinct among other ancient creation accounts for its high anthropological view. The elevation of humanity in Genesis is made all the more profound by the inclusion of both male and female in reflecting God’s image.² The equal role that both genders have in imaging God has often been overshadowed by the traditional assumption that man was created prior to woman and as such retains a unique and superior place in God’s creational design.³

The following research will explore the possibility (theologically and linguistically speaking) that the initial human (adam), created and formed by God, was not male, but rather a masculine/feminine combination that God later differentiated into a male and a female.⁴ This radical proposition is underpinned by both the linguistics of the Hebrew in Genesis and commentary from various historical figures. Precedence from among other ancient creation myths will also demonstrate that the idea of an androgynous original human was not unheard of.⁵ The profound ramifications that this hypothesis could have for theology illuminate why it must be examined further.

¹ New Revised Standard Bible, Genesis 1:26-27.
³ Even if we accept the traditional order of creation, it is important to emphasize that Eve’s creation from Adam does not inherently imply inferiority on the part of women. As Phipps notes, “Man’s superiority can be no more posited on the basis of his prior creation than can woman’s superiority be attributed to her being created last [as Social Darwinism would argue].” As Phipps demonstrates, the manner in which we interpret the Genesis account is often highly contingent upon the dominant social and anthropological perspectives of any given time period. Patriarchal, evolutionary and feminist social theories/assumptions have all influenced the reading of Genesis at various points in history. However it would be a mistake to assume that history has only progressed away from patriarchal modes of thinking. As Phipps puts it, “Due to the pervasive concept of evolutionary progress in our culture, it is often assumed that history has been moving in a linear manner from repressive attitudes towards women to an egalitarian outlook. However, our Adam’s rib motif study shows that the nadir of feminism was during the Renaissance era when many were obsessed with persecuting alleged witches whose criminal behavior was rooted in the crooked rib. On the other hand, a high point for feminism was when the Genesis creation myths were composed...Moreover, contrary to patriarchal mores, the *male* leaves his parents in order to cleave to his wife.” See William E. Phipps, “Adam’s Rib: Bone of Contention,” 269-273.
⁴ This paper will not address the implications and significance of passages found in the Pauline corpus which appear to underpin the notion that the Apostle believed in both a literal Adam (who was a male) and that Adam came before Eve in the order of Creation. See Romans 5:12-14, 1 Corinthians 15:45 and 1 Timothy 2:13 for example. For a helpful discussion of issues regarding the literal Adam see, John H. Walton, The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).
⁵ My contention is not that God’s original and/or normative intent for creation and humanity was an androgynous being, but rather that God separated an androgynous individual (with masculine and feminine traits; biologically and otherwise) into separate individuals (male/female), differentiating them for the potential purpose of reuniting in one-flesh marriage (Genesis 2:24), thus reflecting the beauty and diversity of Trinitarian *Perichoresis*. As I will discuss later, this understanding of gender in the Genesis creation account reframes and challenges our assumptions about the primacy of the male sex in the the order of creation and helps underpin an egalitarian framework of sexuality and gender.
Who was Adam?

When readers initially encounter אדם (‘adam) in Genesis, many assume that it is in fact a reference to a man. This assumption makes sense given the fact that virtually all English translations render אדם as “man” in Genesis 1. Most of the occurrences of “Adam” in the Bible are in fact used in reference to the personal name of the first human. However as we will see, in the early Genesis creation narrative אדם is not used as a proper name nor is it limited to the designation of a male human.

According to Elwell, “The Hebrew word transliterated [as] “Adam” is found about 560 times in the OT.”6 The Hebrew adam comes from the word adamah, which means, “of the earth” or simply “ground.”7 In Genesis, adam can distinguish a specific person, particularly one with no determined gender. It can also refer to the entire human race or the proper name of the first human/man, Adam. It has been argued that only the context can determine which of these three categories adam is referring to and whether or not there is a specified gender entailed.8 Elwell explains that most scholars see all references to adam prior to Genesis 4:25 as describing “man or the man.”9 Elwell adds that sometimes adam is indicated to describe “the proper name of the first man.”10 However, it has also been noted that from Genesis 1 to Genesis 5, adam is “used in contexts that play upon all of the different senses of the word - collective, individual, gender nonspecific, and male.”11 Eerdmans notes that “the language of sexuality and gender distinction is not used explicitly until the woman is created”12 in Genesis 2:23-24. As pointed out in Eerdmans, prior to Genesis 2:23-24, gender and sex are not “an emphasis of the identity of Adam.”13 Therefore up until the creation of Eve, Adam, either as an individual or a collective identifier of humanity, is not explicitly defined as male. Scholar Ziony Zevit states that “the first creature was an adam, a sexually undifferentiated human.”14 Richard Hess argues that from Genesis 1:26-28, adam is used to describe “the species of humanity.”15 Additionally, he adds that the text at this point doesn’t “prejudice the reader towards man or woman.”16 Other scholars have picked up on this subtle textual point as well. Ziffer argues that, “The first [creation] account clearly states that the original creation of mankind [sic] included both sexes.”17

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8 Ibid., 159-60.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
Both Stolper and Ziffer agree that the reference to \textit{ha-adam} in Genesis 1:27 is to a single human being. Stolper notes the following:

Who is \textit{ha-adam}? It is neither a man (\textit{ish}) nor the first man (\textit{adam}). To identify \textit{ha-adam}, we turn to Genesis 1:27 ‘And God created \textit{ha-adam} in His image, in the image of God He created \textit{him} (\textit{oto}); male and female, He created \textit{them} (\textit{otam}).’ The first part of the verse clearly indicates that \textit{ha-adam} is a single being. The second half indicates that this single being is both male and female. Finally, this single being, at the conclusion of the creation process, becomes ‘\textit{otam} (them),’ two individuals.\textsuperscript{18}

Stolper is suggesting that Genesis 1:27 indicates two stages in the creation of humanity.\textsuperscript{19} The first stage was the creation of ‘\textit{adam},’ a single human incorporating both the masculine and feminine qualities of God, referred to as ‘\textit{him}’ in the middle of verse 27.\textsuperscript{20} The second stage then involved differentiating the humans into two separate individuals, male and female, referred to as ‘\textit{them}’ at the end of Genesis 1:27. The existence of two separate creation accounts in Genesis, the Priestly (Gen 1:1-2:3) and the Yahwistic (Gen 2:4), could also indicate that there were two stages in the development of human gender.\textsuperscript{21} Christine Hayes provides a helpful summary of what may in fact be occurring in this text:

Contrary to popular belief, the verse [Genesis 1:27] seems to tell of the creation not of a single man with the personal name of Adam, but of a species of earthlings consisting of males and females, together and all at once. Moreover, this earthing that includes both male and female is said to be created in the divine image, suggesting that ancient Israelites did not conceive of their God as gendered male or female.\textsuperscript{22}

In summary it seems entirely plausible that the first creation account can be viewed as either the simultaneous creation of males and females or the creation of an initial androgynous person. If the latter is in fact the case, then after this stage, in the second creation account, God differentiates the first androgynous human into male and female gendered individuals. The symbolic and theological significance of this differentiation is highlighted when man and woman become one flesh, unified once more, reflecting the relationality and diversity of the Trinity. This view may help explain why there are two creation narratives and why they differ. As we will see next, many other creation mythologies contain similar themes.\textsuperscript{23}

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\textsuperscript{19} As indicated by Stolper above, Genesis 1:27 does not make usage of the Hebrew word for man, which is אֱישׁ (\textit{iysh}).

\textsuperscript{20} The Biblical witness attributes both masculine and feminine qualities to God (insofar as culture and tradition have categorized these various qualities). See Isaiah 42:14, Isaiah 66:13 and Matthew 23:37, among others, for both maternal and feminine descriptions of God. We are presupposing that these are not strictly anthropomorphisms and that they reflect true characteristics (not physically speaking of course) of God.

\textsuperscript{21} This paper will not engage in questions of source criticism or questions regarding how P or J make use of אָדָם to underpin their respective theological agendas. However I am assuming that there are in fact two separate sources contributing to the creation narratives.

\textsuperscript{22} Christine Hayes, \textit{Introduction to the Bible}, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 36.

\textsuperscript{23} It is widely held by proponents of the documentary hypothesis that the Priestly source (Genesis 1:1-2:3), written during the Exilic period, appropriated aspects of the Babylonian creation story, the \textit{Enuma Elish}, subsequently using the Genesis account as a polemic in order to illustrate the unique way in which the God of Israel creates and relates to humans.
Ancient Creation Narratives

We see the idea of human gender unfolding through multiple stages in many other ancient creation narratives as well. Discoveries in archaeology have also contributed to the intrigue of our topic. For example, at ‘Ain Ghazal, in modern day Jordan, pottery busts from the Neolithic period have been discovered. These busts are quite unusual, depicting human bodies with two heads, neither of which “have any gender-specific attributes.” Many conclude that these statues were simply depictions of various gods. However, others note that these busts seem to be “representations of ancestor ghosts,” depictions of the earliest human ancestors. Additionally, Ziffer argues that “the ‘Ain Ghazal statues should be seen as the material expression of the concept of human creation by a divine craftsman,” created from the earth. If this is the case, the fact that these busts contain two heads makes these discoveries extraordinarily compelling. Why did these statues have two heads instead of one? What is the significance of the two heads? If in making these statues the people were attempting to express the original creation of humans by a deity, then this indicates the possibility that their creation narrative involved an androgynous first human.

The Hebrew creation narrative is not the only narrative that seems to indicate an original human being created by God, unidentified by a single gender. Furthermore, discoveries have been made elsewhere that parallel those made at ‘Ain Ghazal. In ancient Mesopotamian creation myths, two apparent stages are evident in the creation of humans. In the first stage, the human body, “is not defined according to gender; it was produced in a single process before the existence of sex and gender, and therefore encompasses every possible gender.” In these Mesopotamian narratives, the second stage is where the genders emerge. “Only in the second creation were male and female couples created with genital organs vital for the reproduction of the species.” Likewise, the Sumerian creation myth also includes an initial stage in which the first human was unable to reproduce, followed by a subsequent stage where humans were made that could reproduce. In fact a Greek philosopher by the name of Empedocles wrote on the origin of the sexes and his narrative includes three stages of development prior to male/female differentiation. The Greek philosopher Plato in Symposium, tells of the ancient myth regarding the androgyne. In this tale, a male-female being is formed, which is later split into two distinct halves, male and female. None of these ancient creation narratives involves humanity initially being created as separate sexes. Rather, all of them begin with androgynous beings which evolve into differentiated genders after various stages.

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25 Ibid., 132.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 140.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 142.
30 Ibid., 143.
Historical Views on the Androgyny of the First Human

Philo, the Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, also believed that the Genesis narrative involved two stages in the creation of humanity. Philo believed that Genesis 1 described a purely spiritual androgynous being, and that afterwards in Genesis 2, the spiritual being became embodied separately in the male and female sexes. In the Midrash, the same pattern is repeated where the original human incorporates both sexes, which are later separated into male and female. Similarly the Babylonian Talmud says that the first human was created “two faced,” again incorporating male and female. Ziony Zevit describes the view of an ancient Jewish teacher circa 200 CE who argued that the rib in the Genesis story referred to the “backside” of the original human. This Jewish teacher argued that the original human was both male and female and that “the two aspects of the human were attached back to back.” Then in the formation of Eve the two were separated, creating man and woman.

In her article “Adam’s Engendering,” historian Gillian Clark notes that Augustine, in Confessions 13, uses the word ‘womb’ in describing Adam as the progenitor of the human race. She also notes that Augustine was extremely careful in his choice of words and speculates that what Augustine was describing was that the original Adam, from which the human race came, embodied both sexes. The noteworthy Jewish rabbi and commentator Rashi from 11th century France wrote that, “They [Adam and Eve] were created shenai partzufim (of two faces, androgynous) in the original creation; and only later did God divide them.”

Theological Significance & Implications

So, there is support from the Genesis creation narrative, as well as from the other ancient creation narratives, and also from Jewish and Christian commentators historically for the thesis that the first human was not male but androgynous. Some theologians hold other views regarding Genesis and the division of gender. For example, James W. Stone argues that the differentiation of the genders came as a result of the fall as opposed to being an integral part or stage of creation. It is important to clarify that my premise does not imply that ‘Adam’ or the first human had both male and female genitalia, but rather that the first human contained personality traits from both genders or that male and female humans were created simultaneously. This puts masculinity and femininity on the same level of value and chronology in God’s design. As Hayes aptly puts it, “there is no implication that man and woman are in unequal relationship before the deity.” Furthermore this creates more congruity in the narrative that humanity was,

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31 Ibid., 143.
32 Ibid.
33 Zevit, What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden, 140.
37 Again, I am assuming that there are biological and evolutionary (and/or perhaps God-endowed) differences/determinants for certain components of masculinity and femininity. What the exact parameters of these characteristics are goes beyond the scope of this discussion.
38 Christine Hayes, Introduction to the Bible, 36.
from the start, truly created in the masculine and feminine image of God. In fact a number of scholars have drawn attention to the significance that in Genesis 2, Eve is taken from Adam’s rib:

Even in the second creation account, where the woman is built from a rib taken from the sleeping man, it is not clear that the woman is subordinate to the man. Medieval Jewish commentators hint at this when they playfully suggest that the woman was not made from man’s head - lest she rule over him - or from his foot - lest she be subservient to him - but from his side so that she might be a companion to him. Indeed, the creation of the woman is the climactic creative act in the second Genesis account. With the emergence of woman, creation is finally complete.

The fact that God does not stop at androgyny but completes the design of humanity by differentiating the sexes, presupposes the notion that there is creative purpose in the positive differences in the genders. For example, women tend to be more nurturing and sensitive, while men tend to be more assertive and determined. Since men can exhibit feminine qualities and women can also exhibit masculinity, the notion of strict gender roles has been rightly challenged. However, the point that I am trying to make is that these traits should be seen as something that both men and women can embrace since we were created out of one original human being who was both masculine and feminine.

At the same time, we don’t have to reject innate, creational qualities associated with our gender. The possibility that the first human was androgynous also helps dispense with the myth that men are superior because they were created first or that men are or should be God’s designated leaders over and against the female gender. The idea that man was created first has motivated male dominance over women. What has then resulted has been a backlash against masculinity and then more recently, an emerging rejection of gender differentiation altogether. A continuation of this trend could play out as a negation of the physical expression of the feminine-masculine reality which God has purposed humans to reflect to each other and to

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39 Obviously I am assuming that there are anthropological, social and physical characteristics that compose the various distinctions between femininity and masculinity. That is not to say that society’s conception of masculinity must be normative for males or that society’s conception of femininity must be normative for females. Rather in line with Galatians 3:28, there is a clear sense in which Christians should transcend socially constructed traditional gender roles. However this does not entail a total rejection of God’s male-female design for creation or a rejection of biological sex. For the sake of this particular subject we will bracket out any discussion of the theological significance of intersex individuals and debates surrounding transgender and sexuality. For a helpful theological and social commentary on the issue of transgenderism as it relates to society and the Church see, David Cloutier and Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Church & Transgender Identity: Some Cautions, Some Possibilities.” Commonweal Magazine, (February 27, 2017).

40 It is worth noting that Eve or חַוָּה (chavvah) in Hebrew means “life-giver.”

41 Hayes, Introduction to the Bible, 36. On the other hand, Phipps notes that Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib was most often interpreted in a derogatory (or decidedly complementarian) fashion as found in the works of numerous other medieval commentators; Christian, Jewish and even Islamic. See William E. Phipps “Adam’s Rib: Bone of Contention,” 263-273, for a historic overview of how Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib has been interpreted.

42 We should see these qualities not as constraints. Instead of framing femininity and masculinity as something to find freedom from, we should see it as something to have freedom for. In other words, we are free to live into God’s design and purpose for us.
Creation. As Ziffer powerfully states “...when joined together, man and woman are the personification of God on earth.”

Bibliography


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The creation of Adam in Genesis is made all the more profound by the inclusion of both male and female in reflecting God’s image. The equal role that both genders have in imaging God has often been overshadowed by the traditional assumption that man was created prior to woman and as such retains a unique and superior place in God’s. Don’t miss the point here: gender is front and center in creation, the fall, and the curse. Men take the leadership positions in the Israelite theocracy, with precious few exceptions. Consider the patriarchs of Genesis, the prophets of Israel, and the Levitical priesthood (Lev. 6 ff.). Men fight the wars of Israel; women in most cases do not. But Genesis 2 gives a different perspective of the creative acts of God as compared to Genesis 1. Among other things it gives the order of human creation. Man was made first and so his unique gender characteristics are noted first (see Genesis 2:4-7). Men. The location of man’s creation is important. Man was made in the wilderness, in the bush before there was a garden. Man is wild at heart. The great outdoors are to be explored, are a challenge and provide a place of significance for most males. Men’s sports tend to be aggressive and outdoors. When traditional Aboriginal boys come of age, the This effort will examine Fredrick Engels’ The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, and, Margaret Mead’s Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies for the genesis of gender roles (patterns of behavior found in males and females in society). Both social scientists view gender roles based in a different social process, and not a biological function. Discover the world’s research. Gender is the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, femininity and masculinity. Depending on the context, these characteristics may include biological sex, sex-based social structures (i.e., gender roles), or gender identity. Most cultures use a gender binary, having two genders (boys/men and girls/women); those who exist outside these groups fall under the umbrella term non-binary or genderqueer. Some societies have specific genders besides “man” and “woman”, such as