

IN THE BEGINNING...

Transgender Study

Session 1

Genesis 1:26-28a

Then God said, "Let us make an earth-being in our own image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humanity in God's own image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them. And God blessed them.

The question of gender occurs here, at the very beginning of the story of creation. If we are to examine the understanding of gender in the Bible, we need go no further than the first chapter before we encounter it. This passage has been used both to support a broadened understanding of a range of gender of humanity and God as well as a way to support the concept of the division of humanity in two distinct and separate genders.

Some people have used this text from the beginning of Genesis to argue that God created the binary divisions of humanity that humans should then observe. Because God created man and woman, they argue, these are the only two categories of humankind.

However, other people argue that the creation story in Genesis supports the understanding of a broad view of gender. A closer look at the text reveals nuances in its presentation of gender. We need to look closely at the ways in which gender is treated within the text, both the gender of God and the gender of humanity.

While most of us in the Jewish and Christian tradition have been taught that God is exclusively male, Genesis 1 clearly states that God encompasses both the female and the male since both women and men are made in the image of God. The New Interpreter's Bible states, "That both male and female are so created (see also 5:2) means that the female images the divine as much as the male; both are addressed in the command of v. 28." The New Interpreter's Bible goes on to state that a theological argument for God as both female and male could be made from this passage.¹

The earth-being (adam) created originally is both male and female, created in the image of God. This view is strongly supported by the Hebrew text, which uses the term adam, not as a name as is currently familiar in English, but in description of this being created from the earth. The word adam is a play upon the Hebrew word for earth, 'adamah. Rather than translating this word as a proper name, a more accurate rendering of the word would be "earthling" or "earth-being." Originally, this earthling was one, without gender differentiation, encompassing both female and male.²

The account of the creation, described in Genesis 1, tells a story that strongly supports a broader view of gender. Not only does God's own being incorporate both the male and the female, but so too does the human creation. The act of creation, even while differentiating between elements of creation, still leaves space for "in between" things: dusk, dawn, intersexed persons. God blesses all of those parts of creation, calling them good.³

¹ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 55-56.

² *Ibid.*, 58.

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

Genesis 2:4b-9, 18-24

At the time when God made earth and heaven - no shrub of the field being yet in the earth and no grains of the field having sprouted, for God had not sent rain upon the earth no human being was there to till the soil; instead a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the soil - God formed an earth creature from clods in the soil and blew into that one's nostrils the breath of life. Thus the earth creature became a living being.

God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the person whom God had formed. And out of the ground God caused to grow various trees that were a delight to the eye and good for eating, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of knowledge of good and bad...

God said, "It is not right that the earth creature should be alone. I will make an aid fit for the earth creature." So God formed out of the soil various wild beasts and birds of the sky and brought them to the person to see what that one called them; whatever the person would call a living creature, that was to be its name. The person gave names to all cattle, all birds of the sky, and all wild beasts; yet none proved to be the aid that would be fit for the earth creature.

Then God cast a deep sleep upon the earth creature and, when that one was asleep, God took one of the ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And God fashioned into a woman the rib that was removed from the man, and then brought her to the man. Said the man, "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called Woman, for she was taken from Man." Thus it is that man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh.

While this text is traditionally used to support the concept of heterosexual marriage, with the argument that we find our full completion only in a partner of the opposite sex, a sense is also here that from a single, androgynous being came two types of beings. More than one created being can come from the earth creature. The earth creature became a woman and a man when God removed a part of it and fashioned it into a whole. We could read this passage as opening up the possibilities of gender. If completeness comes from having both male and female, then a person who possessed both is a return to the original completion in the earth creature.

However, the problem that God sees with the earth creature was not that it lacked gender but that it was lonely. Traditionally, the loneliness was linked to gender, but nothing in the passage indicates that interpretation. Our reading of this passage can conclude, then, that gender is not the problem, but our isolation from love, connection, and relationship. Many trans people experience the breakup of primary relationships and isolation from their families of origin. This passage reveals to us that God is more concerned with our loneliness than with our gender and longs for us to have an appropriate companion and helper. Love brings completion, not gender, because a man and a woman who are together without love surely do not correct the problem that God identifies in this section. Rather, people who are appropriate companions and helpers for one another bring the creation back to a sense of goodness and completion.⁴

Questions for Discussion:

1. Read Genesis 1:26-28a and Genesis 2:4b-9, 18-24 in various translations (For example, KJV, NIV, and NRSV). Discuss the differences. How do the differences change the reader's perspective?
2. Do you read the Genesis creation stories as literal or metaphorical truth? What do you see as the overall themes of the Genesis creation stories? What are the stories trying to tell us?
3. When you think of God, do you have an image of God? Describe that image. What gender is God?
4. Is it difficult for you to image God as intersexed (possessing both gender characteristics)? When the Bible says that God created humankind in God's image, do you think it was talking in terms of physical traits or spiritual traits or both?

⁴ Ibid., 61-21.