



Genesis 1-3 and the relationship of the sexes

Description

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The most important text on the relationship of the sexes in the whole Bible, Genesis 1-3.

In discussing what the Bible teaches on men and women *no text in the whole Bible is more important than Genesis chapters 1-3*. Here God creates man and woman as the apex of his creative work and sets them in an idyllic world where everything is good. Tragically, however, the devil enters and both the man and the woman fall into sin and as a consequence are banished from the garden. All Christian theologians see this story as foundational to the whole Bible. It tells us that God made the world “good”[™], but the sin of man and woman destroyed their good relationship with God, each other and with the creation itself. It thus explains why a saviour and a “new creation”[™] are needed. The story is given in two forms. In Genesis chapter one in grand poetic language God creates everything in seven days with the apex of his creative work coming in the creation of man and woman who are said to be “made in God”[™]s image and likeness”[™]. Chapters 2-3 give a different account of the beginning, this time in picturesque narrative form with a number of scenes. In the so called “second creation story”[™], after the earth is created Adam appears first and then God provides for him water, vegetation, animals and a partner in woman.

Because the creation stories are absolutely fundamental to all of Christian theology in general and all Christian thinking about the sexes in particular there is no more important text to study. *This is where we should begin because this is where the Bible begins.*

In beginning my study on what the Bible says on the relationship of the sexes where the Bible begins, Genesis 1-3, I take a very different route to that of my debating opponents, the hierarchical-complementarians. They start with 1 Timothy 2:11-14 and then read everything in the Bible through this narrow lens. One very difficult and completely exceptional comment, given by the apostle near the end of his life, addressing a church torn apart by false teachers, is thus taken to determine what else Paul says on men and women, allowed to eclipse what Jesus says about the sexes, and to give an interpretation of Genesis 1-3 that is untenable. I say, beware of one text theology. The great Reformed New Testament theologian, Oscar Cullman once said, “the fountainhead of all false biblical interpretation and all heresy is invariably the isolation and absolutising of one single passage.”[™][\[1\]](#)

The right way to discover what the Bible teaches on anything is to read it holistically and canonically beginning with Genesis and ending with the book of Revelation. If we begin with one or two texts that we personally want to major for some reason on we are bound to fall into error.

A prioritizing of 1 Timothy 2:11-14 results, first of all and most importantly, in sharp division over the interpretation of Genesis 1-3. One side, the hierarchical-complementarians, read these chapters through the prism of a particular interpretation of the 1 Timothy text and find that the subordination of women is the God-given creation ideal. The egalitarian-complementarians in contrast, read the opening chapters of Genesis as we would any other Old Testament text, that is, in its own historical context. When they do this they conclude that Genesis 1-3 teaches the fundamental and essential equality of the sexes, making woman's subordination entirely a consequence of the fall. Two more diametrically opposed interpretations of these three foundational chapters in the Bible could not be imagined.

First of all I outline very briefly the interpretation of these chapters by those who think God has subordinated women to men in his good creation.

The subordination of women reading of Genesis 1-3

In Gen 1:27-28 man and women are created in God's image. They are thus equal before God "equal in dignity and equal in salvation" "spiritually equal".

However, Genesis 2-3 adds that woman was

- created second which means she is second in rank;
- Adam named the animals not the woman and this shows he was in charge of the Garden from the beginning;
- Eve was created as man's "helper" which means assistant
- and it was Eve who succumbed to the devil's temptation. This indicates that women in general are more prone to sin and error and thus need man's protection and guidance.

From such arguments it is concluded that while Gen. 1:27-28 teaches that men and women are *spiritual equals*, Gen. 2-3 makes it clear they are *different in authority and role* "they are not *social equals*". Before the fall God sets the man over the woman. He gives to him "headship". This is the ideal pattern that is unchanging and unchangeable. It is what is most pleasing to God. Those who read Genesis 1-3 in this way speak of woman's subordination as "a creation order". In theological text books, a "creation order" is a creation-given pattern of social ordering that structures relationships, irrespective of whether one is a Christian or not. Marriage and the state are two examples often cited. A "creation order" is a social ordering once-given and permanent.

The egalitarian reading of Genesis 1-3

The majority of scholarly commentaries on Genesis written in the last thirty years^[2] and Pope John Paul II^[3] categorically reject the interpretation given above. The Pope's interpretation, grounded on the best of Catholic biblical study, it should be noted, is binding on the almost one billion Catholics. This means that what follows is not an idiosyncratic egalitarian reading of Genesis 1-3 but in broad terms what the vast majority of contemporary scholarly commentators conclude and what all Roman Catholic theologians teach.

First, Gen.1:26-28 is taken as the primary and foundational comment on the sexes in the whole Bible. Here we are told four highly significant things:

1. Man and woman are alike made in the image and likeness of God. They are equal in dignity and status. This means that any denial, subtle or otherwise, of the fundamental equality of all human beings on the basis of sexual identity, race, age, social status, caste or anything else, is a denial of the what the Bible says first of all about the sexes.
2. To both man and woman alike is given the command to rule over God's world. In other words, to man *and* woman God gives authority over all creation. They are *joint rulers*, one does not rule over the other.
3. They are told to be fruitful and multiply. The family mandate is given alike to the man and the woman.
4. Nevertheless one is man and one is woman. Sexual differentiation is one of God's good gifts. The creating of humanity in two sexes implies that the two sexes *complement* each other. In other words, men and women together are more than the sum of the parts, especially so in marriage the most intimate of male-female togetherness and complementarity.

The two key words. In the above use of the word "equal" it envisages the spiritual *and* social equality of the two sexes: the belief that the two sexes have the same God-given dignity, the same leadership potential and are thus to be given the same opportunity to use God-given gifts. This meaning of the term in relation to the sexes has been clarified in recent years by the now well established distinction made between the terms "sex" and "gender". "Sex" refers to the unchanging biological markers that differentiate men and women and "gender" to the socially constructed differences between the sexes that are not biologically determined and can change. Absolutely no one is arguing for biological sameness, the issue in contention is *gender equality*. Social equality of any kind is of course always an ideal in a fallen world. All human beings are not born or find themselves equal to others; some have far more opportunities and resources, and this is all too often the case with men in relation to women.

The word "difference" in this context means "not the same", "other than". Sexual differentiation is God-given and is evidenced in differing chromosomes, genes and body forms among other things. Supposed differing leadership potential or differing gender based "roles" are not biblical or scientific indicators of indelible sexual differentiation. Difference of course does not imply or necessitate subordination. A cat and a dog are two species, different, but one species does not necessarily rule over the other.

From this we should unambiguously affirm:

- The substantive, fundamental, essential equality of the sexes, not just their spiritual equality;
- the leadership potential of men *and* women;
- parenting is a joint responsibility;
- indelible sexual differentiation. God has made us man or woman.
- The complementarity of the sexes. Man alone or woman alone, in marriage or otherwise, are less than humanity in its fullness.

What absolutely distinguishes man *and* woman from all the animals is that they alone are said to be made in "the image and likeness of God". Whatever dignity this expression bestows it is the same for the man and the woman. In the past the words, "the image and likeness of God", were

usually understood in terms of Paul's teaching. The content of the image was assumed to be Christ himself (2 Cor. 4:4, Col.1:15). From this it followed that transformation in Christ involved the restoration of the image in terms of knowledge, righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24, Col. 3:10). As far as the sexes are concerned, the apostle's assertion that man "is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man" (1 Cor. 11:7) was taken to mean that man alone fully bore the image of God – an interpretation we now see contradicts what Genesis 1:27 actually says,^[4] and therefore cannot be a correct interpretation of Paul's words to the Corinthians. Today, the almost universal agreement is that what "the image and likeness of God" means in Genesis 1:27 must be understood in terms what these words would have meant to the writer and his audience. Rather than a possible interpretation of Paul's understanding of the image and likeness of God determining the meaning of this expression in Genesis what the words mean in Genesis is taken to be the beginning of right understanding of Paul's usage.

The most widely supported view today is that in speaking of humankind as made in the image and likeness of God the author of Genesis was speaking of humankind's dominion or lordship over the world. He was indicating that God had appointed men and women to exercise his rule over creation as his vice-regents. This is suggested not only by ancient Middle eastern parallels where the image of the king represents his dominion but also because immediately after stating that man and woman are made in the image and likeness of God, the author of Genesis speaks of *their* "dominion" over all living creatures (1:26) and *their* "rule" over all the earth (1:28). What is to be noted carefully is that what this means is that in creation neither sex is set over the other but standing side by side they together are to exercise God-given authority over the world.

Genesis 2-3

Nothing in the Bible should be taken to undermine, correct or contradict what God places on the first page of our Bibles. This means that Genesis 2-3, should be read in harmony with Genesis 1:27-28, presupposing that what follows teaches the same things as what precedes it, only in a different literary style.

In the so called "second creation story", a completely different picture of God's creative work is given in more symbolic and picturesque style. In this the solitary Adam finds himself in an idyllic garden where there are no plants or animals and step by step God supplies what he needs. I use the pronoun "he" but Adam at this point is not fully man in distinction to woman because man can only be man/the male in distinction to woman/the female when man and woman both exist. God sees that Adam alone is *help-less*, incomplete, and brings the animals before him. He names them but none of them are suitable partners. God then creates the woman as his perfect "partner", one other than him but his counterpart. Only at this point is man, man in distinction to woman, and woman woman, in distinction to man.

It is hard to find anything in this chapter that might suggest that in contrast to Genesis chapter 1 that here woman is set under man, the man has "headship", but men living in a patriarchal context managed to do this. Some of their ingenious arguments nowadays make most of us smile and all of them have been refuted by biblical scholars but the more imaginative ones still get a good hearing in hierarchical-complementarian literature. I evaluate the four most often heard today, Philip Payne (*Man and Woman in Christ*, 2009) lists and dismisses eleven such arguments.

1. *The naming of the animals*. First we are told that Adam's naming of the animals, apart from the

woman, indicates that the man is uniquely “head over” creation. This is unconvincing. In Genesis chapter 1, the man and the woman standing side by side are given dominion and rule over the animals. What is more, naming in the OT does not usually indicate authority over. A name is most commonly given to signify something about the person. Thus Jacob is given his name because he grabbed his twin brother’s heel and his name testifies to this fact. If name giving does indicate “authority over”, it is anomalous that women most commonly name children in the OT.

2. *Woman is created second.* Next it is claimed that the fact that woman was created second clearly shows she is second in rank, or as some say today using modern jargon, she has a subordinate, gender determined *role*. However “created second” does not indicate subordination. Man and woman are created last in Genesis chapter 1 and yet they stand at the apex of God’s creative work. Man is created after the earth in Genesis chapter 2 yet he is set over it. Often what is created second is superior, such as in the case of a second model of something. So the old joke, “God created Adam. Took one look at him and said, ‘I can do better than this’, and created Eve”. Nothing in the text of Genesis indicates created second means subordinate. What is more, nothing in the NT dictates that created second means subordinate. Paul once mentions the fact that woman was created second (1 Tim 2:13) but what he meant by this comment is to be found in the literary context in which he made this comment i.e. in First Epistle to Timothy, which we will consider later.

3. *Woman was created as man’s helper.* Next we are told that in calling the woman man’s helper (Gen. 2:18) the Bible clearly shows God made woman as man’s assistant, his subordinate helper. However, the Hebrew word *ezer*, often translated into English as “helper”, does not imply a subordinate helper, any more than the English translation does. Parents frequently “help” their children. The Hebrew word *ezer* in fact actually suggests a superior helper. In the OT it speaks 17 times of God the helper of his people and three times of armies coming to help those under siege. The text itself, however, tells us that the helper or partner God provides for man is not a superior or a subordinate helper. She is his “equal” helper, or better, his “equal partner”. The Hebrew word *kenego* that qualifies *ezer* defines the helper as one corresponding to him, a “companion”.

4. *Women are more easily led into sin and this need male leadership.* Lastly we mention the oft heard argument that the devil came first to the woman because he recognized that women are more easily deceived and more prone to sin, and thus needing man’s supervision. Given the premise that women are a subordinate class this seems a reasonable deduction for men to make hundreds of years ago but nothing in the text suggests this interpretation. Indeed, Gen. 1:26-28 that speaks of man and woman alike made in the image of God and alike given dominion over the earth makes it most unlikely. An equally plausible deduction would be that the devil reasoned, “If I can deceive the woman, the man will be a pushover”. This interpretation demeans men and so it too cannot be reconciled with Gen. 1:27-28. What seems to explain this mute detail in the story is that in this narrative with several scenes, the writer keeps changing the sequence in which God, Adam, Eve and the devil come to speak or act. This suggests that nothing at all is to be deduced from who is mentioned first or last in any scene.

Yes, in 1 Timothy 2:14 Paul speaks of Eve being “deceived” but in this context he is alluding to the *disorder* in the church at Ephesus, not the good creation order. In Ephesus some women had been *deceived* by false teaching and thus Paul forbids them from teaching error in that particular church at that particular time.

The consequences of the fall for man and woman.

So far we have found no evidence at all to indicate that man was set over woman in the Garden before the fall *and much to the contrary*. The text itself, in contrast to androcentric interpretations, would seem to teach the equality of the sexes, their sexual differentiation as man and woman, and their complementarity. What follows after the man and the woman disobey God confirms this conclusion.

In scene five (Gen. 3:8-13) of this two chapter second creation narrative, after the man and the woman have sinned, God is depicted as “walking in the garden” in the evening (3:8). On hearing his coming the man and the woman hide. Both know they have disobeyed the owner of the Garden. When God asks “*adam*” why he has eaten of the tree (3:11) he blames “the woman whom you gave to be with me”. When God addresses Eve she says, “the serpent tricked me”. I am sure you have heard the joke, Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent and the serpent did not have a leg to stand on. Confronted with their sin both the man and the woman try to pass the blame but God does not accept this. He holds them both personally responsible. No excuse can minimize their solemn, personal and direct answerability to God which is the burden of *both* man and woman.

In Genesis. 3:14-21 God’s response to the three principle actors, now in the order, serpent, woman, man is given. The judgment on the serpent opens with a “curse formula” (3:14) but this is not the case with the words addressed to the man and the woman (3:16-19). God does not curse them but announces the dire consequences of their disobedience. The man will “labour” and work in the fields and not feel he has achieved much (v 17), the woman will “labour” in childbirth which will cause her pain and yet she will desire intimacy with her husband who for his part will want to rule over her (v16).

The pronouncement that, “your husband. . . shall rule over you,” has been taken traditionally to mean that man’s loving and gentle rule over the woman before the fall becomes after the fall harsh and oppressive. All contemporary hierarchicalists adopt this position. The Hebrew word *marshal*, translated “rule” does not support this view. There are five Hebrew words which can be translated “rule” or “have dominion over”: *malak*, *mashal*, *radah*, *sarar* and *shalat*. In Genesis 3:16 probably the mildest and most positive term, *mashal*, is used. This word is often used of God’s rule over his people (Jud. 8:23; Ps. 66:7, 89:9, 103:19; Is. 40:10 etc.). This is not a despotic form of what was already a reality but an assumption of power by man over woman *for the first time*, which one consequence of the distortion in human relationships caused by sin. If you want to hear aright the Bible, it is absolutely essential that you recognize that Genesis creation stories make the distortion of the God-humankind relationship and the distortion of the co-equal relationship of the sexes entirely a consequence of the fall. It is not pleasing to God and not the ideal.

To conclude this section let me stress that what God announces as the consequences of the sin of man and woman does not *prescribe* what has to be “an inevitable law of cause and effect that binds humans into an oppressive pattern of living. Men may strive to eradicate the weeds and to find ways of making work more rewarding and woman may seek ways to alleviate the pain involved in childbirth. Given that we humans can seek to make work lighter and childbirth easier it follows that we can also work to make the fallen male-female relationship more equal. Man is not bound to rule over the woman. He can choose to behave in another way.

Indeed, the New Testament indicates great possibilities for the Christian to realize the ideal co-equal relationships of the sexes given in creation by the transforming work of Christ on the cross that broke

the power of the fall and the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. St Paul speaks of Christ as the second Adam who defeated sin and death and on the cross and resurrection inaugurating a “new creation”™ where “everything old has passed away and everything has become new”™ (2 Cor. 5:17). The new creation ethic has at its heart *agape*-love which involves self-giving, humble service, and mutual submission. It is these virtues, Paul insists, that should characterize Christian marriage (Eph. 5:21-33).

Excursus.

In recent years for the first time the argument has been put that Genesis chapters 2 and 3 are basically about the dire consequences of “role reversal”™. First the presupposition is stated as a fact: God gave to Adam before the fall the *role* of “headship”™ or leadership in the garden. When the woman took upon herself to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil she usurped Adam’s™ leadership *role*. She whom God gave the subordinate *role* acted on an important matter without consulting her “head.”™ On this view the sin that brings condemnation on all, what is called the fall, is the sin of *role reversal*. In debating the status and ministry of women one thing must be avoided at all cost by both sides: reading into the text our own theology. The sin of Adam and Eve that resulted in “condemnation for all”™ was disobedience to God’s™ command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17) “not *role reversal*. St Paul is emphatic on this point. It is his case that the sin of Adam, representative man and woman, is that of disobedience to God which led to death for all. The incarnate Christ as the second Adam in contrast was perfectly obedient and thus won our salvation on the cross (Rom. 5:12-25). To suggest that the fall is due to anything other than direct disobedience of God’s™ command not to eat of tree of the knowledge of good and evil is theological reasoning at its worst. In the cause of truth all appeals to so called “roles”™, a sociological concept alien to the Bible, should be excluded.

Conclusion.

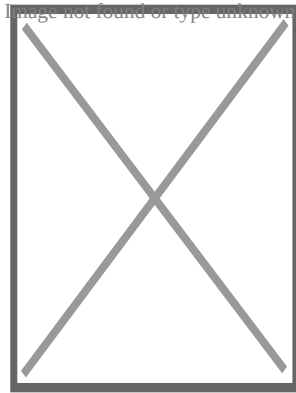
Yes, women do suffer the consequences of the fall and are thus often discriminated against, devalued and sometimes abused. However, Genesis 1-3 never depicts the subordination of women as the creation ideal. The rule of the man over the woman is an aberration that detracts and mars the male-female relationship and is never God’s™ perfect will. This means that the ideal for which we Christians should strive is gender equality which shows itself in marriage in loving, mutual subordination, in the church by affirming that God bestows gifts of leadership on men and women, and in the world by a concern to see women treated justly and with the dignity that God has bestowed on them

[1] The State in the New Testament, 47

[2] For scholarly support of what follows see, W. Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teachers and Preachers* (Atlanta, John Knox, 1982) and R. S. Hess, “Equality with Innocence: Genesis 1-3”™, in R. W. Pierce and R. M. Groothuis, eds, *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005).

[3] *Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity of Women* (Homebush, St Pauls. 1988)

[4] In my, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids, Ill.: Intervarsity, 2002) 150-1, I document this argument.



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