Two Theologies of Humanity:

The Creation of Man and Woman in P and J

**I. Introduction**

One of the most basic insights of modern biblical scholarship is the distinction between the two stories of creation at the beginning of the Pentateuch, and with it the understanding that in order to trace the ideas that they express, they must not be reconciled with each other but must each be interpreted separately. One of the significant differences between the stories touches on the creation of woman: According to the first story, men and women were created together, both in the image of God; according to the second story, the man was created first and only later was the woman formed — from the body of the man, and for him. Based on this difference, it is understood that the first story expresses a more egalitarian perspective.

But the stories of creation do not stand on their own. Each of them is the beginning of a long literary thread: One belongs to the Priestly source and the other to the Yahwistic source. In order to understand them properly, one must take the continuation of the text into account. The distinction between the sources, and the identification of the narrative sequence, are the key to revealing complete, sequential stories, unified linguistically, narratively, and ideologically. In this article, I therefore intend to suggest a new answer to the old question, How is the relationship between women and men presented in each of the creation stories? Yet each of the stories will be examined in its own broader context, that is to say, in the narration of creation and the beginnings of humanity in the source to which it belongs.

I will try to show that the difference between the two stories is not exhausted in the description of the creation of woman. The time at which the woman is created, the future for which she is destined, and the way in which she is fashioned are all directly determined by the time, purpose, and procedure of creation של המין האנושי in each of the sources. All of these are determined in their turn by two different perspectives on the relations between God and humanity. The difference between the stories is first and foremost theological. Neither of the stories reflects a perspective of equality between men and women, but each of them to some extent demonstrates the essential relationship between men and women, in light of its perspective on humankind and the nature of the attachment between humanity and the God that created it.

Methodologically, the article illustrates the utility of considering the narrative flow of each of the sources as a basis for literary and theological analysis. This method runs counter to three alternatives: First, in contrast to any attempt to analyze the canonical story, forcing the different sources to match a single, harmonistic perspective, looking at each of the sources separately makes it possible to trace a continuous plot thread and a coherent theological perspective. Second, in contrast to a focus on the creation story alone, consideration of the source gives us a broader context that bases our understanding of the story on a complete, deep theological perspective and not on a single snapshot. Finally, the method exemplified here dissents from the assumption that passages that are clearly linked must be layers built on top of one another, so the earlier passage could obviously not know anything about the later. In contrast to this widespread trend, this article shows that different passages in a narrative sequence must be interpreted each from the other, just as in every work of literature the beginning of the story cannot be correctly understood until it is read with the knowledge of what happens in the continuation of the plot, and each detail in the plot must be understood against the background of all the other details.

**II. P: The Image of God and the Purpose of Humanity**

**1. The Pre-Creation Situation and the Purpose of Creation**

In order to understand the nature of the creation of the world and its purpose according to the Priestly source, one must consider the prelude to the story (Gen 1:1-2). God did not create the entire world *ex nihilo*: Before He did anything, the world already existed, but it was covered with water and everything was dark. That is the “problem” that God must cope with — the world was in chaos, gloomy, not in a fit condition for life to arise. His first action, therefore, was to light up the world (v. 3), and His efforts in the story are devoted to imposing order, separating the elemental forces, and bringing forth something new and useful from the old disorder (vv. 6-10). There follows the creation of plants; sun, moon, and stars; and the animals, most of whom come from the ground or the water (vv. 11-25). Only at the end are human beings created (vv. 26-28). According to P, then, humanity is created after the world has been set in order, and its creation is not intended to rectify the chaos that ruled on earth in the pre-Genesis situation. Why then was humankind created?

**2. The Purpose of Humanity, and Its Resemblance to God**

The creation of humanity in P is intended to serve another purpose, which is expressed quite explicitly in the text. The description of the creation of humanity (Gen 1:26-28) includes three separate components: (1) humanity is created in the image of God; (2) it is created male and female; and (3) it receives from God the blessing of fertility. What is the connection between these three components?

God needs a creature that will resemble Him: a creature that, for reasons unexplained in the text, is called *adam*. This creature will rule over all the rest of the creatures, and so, in a roundabout way, God will rule over all of creation. As scholars have noted, the word *ṣelem* (“image”) literally refers to a statue, so for humanity to be in the image of God must mean that humanity resembles God visually: Humans look the way God looks. But the image does not just resemble God: Just as images of the gods of the ancient Near East carry inside them the presence of the gods themselves, so too (according to P) all human beings carry inside themselves the presence of God, serving as a kind of embodiment of God on earth.

In order for humankind to be able to fulfill its purpose — to represent God on earth and to rule the world through His power — it must proliferate, for which purpose it must include both males and females; and in order for humans to proliferate on a scale great enough for them to rule the world, they require divine blessing. Fertility is therefore presented as a blessing to humanity (Gen 1:28) even though the purpose it serves is divine. The text does not say a word about emotional or sexual attachments between women and men; the focus is on fertility, and for this both men and women are needed. It is possible, then, to conclude that according to P the goal of the creation of woman was fertility; but this same conclusion is valid for the creation of man.

The second section of the P story opens with a brief reprise of the creation of humanity (Gen 5:1b-2). After repeating that humanity was created in “the likeness of God” (v. 1b), we are told that Adam begot his own son “in his likeness after his image” (v. 3), just as God had created the original human. According to P, humans were never placed in the Garden of Eden, never sinned or were expelled from there, nor were there ever any people named Cain and Abel, one of whom murdered the other. The first important event that happened on earth after creation was that humanity began to fulfill its purpose — to proliferate. Since the first human was created in the image and likeness of God and begot his own son in his own image, it follows that Adam’s son, and all the generations that came after — would likewise be minted in the image of God. The divine blessing has begun to materialize: Images of God have begun to proliferate.

The additional component of the blessing and of the realization of humanity’s purpose is that people spread throughout the world and thus fill it with the divine presence. This process is described in the Priestly parts of the genealogy in Genesis 10, which conclude with the sentence, “These are the groupings of Noah’s descendants, according to their origins, by their nations; and from these the nations branched out over the earth after the Flood” (10:32). There was no need for direct divine intervention in order to disperse human beings throughout the world; this was the natural result of their proliferation. Humankind was given God’s blessing and therefore proliferated, split into clans and peoples and spread throughout the world, precisely as God had planned.

**3. The Implication of the Name “Adam” and the Absence of Women’s Names in P**

In the world of P, it is impossible to imagine the original creation without women, since this kind of creation would not have served its purpose. P is not interested in the first man and woman as individuals, but in humanity as a whole; the word *adam* in P includes both sexes (Gen 5:2). This fact is sometimes explained as expressing an egalitarian approach, but the word *adam* in P has an additional implication: it is also used as the personal name of the first man (5:3). The first woman, by contrast, not only has no name; she is not mentioned at all, and it is the men who “beget” their offspring (5:3-32). The first women mentioned in P are Noah’s wife and daughters-in-law (6:18), and the first woman who gets a name of her own is Sarai (11:31). In the P stories of the Primeval History, there is not one single name of a woman.

**III. J: Is It Not Good for Man to Be Like God?**

**1. The Pre-Creation Situation and the Purpose of Creation**

The J creation story too opens with a description of the situation on earth before God begins to act (2:4b-6). But the situation that is described is different. The problem that God must cope with in J is not the primordial chaos of P. The pre-Genesis situation of J is a lack of plant life due to a lack of rain; the earth exists (and is not covered with water), but it is waiting for man to come and till it. Fittingly for such a situation, in J the man is not the last thing to be created but the first (2:7), immediately after which the addition of plant life becomes possible (2:8-9). Despite the absence of an explicit etiology, the commentators took the fact that man was intended to till the *adamah*, the soil, as J’s explanation for the name *adam*.

**2. The Description of the Creation of Woman**

Why, according to J, did God create the man alone first? As in P, the answer is connected to the purpose of humanity: humanity’s role in J is to till the soil, for which — the story assumes — there is no need for women. More precisely, there is also no need for men in the plural, just for one man. But it quickly becomes clear that “It is not good for man to be alone” (2:18). The text does not explain *why* it is “not good,” and readers are supposed to puzzle this out for themselves; admittedly, the problem is not obvious enough for God to have anticipated it. In contrast to P, in J the woman does not serve the divine interest but the man’s, and even the man does not serve the divine interest directly.[[1]](#footnote-1)

If in P women — and men — are necessary if humankind is to proliferate, and the creation of humanity is accompanied by a blessing of fertility, in the J creation story fertility plays no role; it arrives only after the Garden of Eden story (in 4:1), and even then the author appears to have no particular interest in discussing it for its own sake. While in P there is no description of the relationship between women and men, in J this is the focus of the story. The first man and woman are a kind of married couple, as is evident from the etiology at the end of the story, “Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh” (2:24). This statement does not apply to the first couple themselves, since the first man had no father or mother; the text is explaining that, based on the story told here about the first man and woman, men are accustomed to leave their parents and cling to their wives, since the woman was taken from the man, she was flesh of his flesh, and they long to reunite.

**3. The Implication of the Name “Adam” and Women’s Names in J**

We have seen that in P the word *adam* indicates humanity as a whole, men and women alike (5:2), but it is also the personal name of the first man (5:3). As noted, some see in this fact additional evidence that P has an egalitarian perspective, while J (as it were) sees *adam* as meaning “man” and not woman. But a closer look at the text leads us to almost the opposite conclusion. First, the collective noun *ha-adam* indicates the entire human species not just in P but also, when we read on, in J (6:5-7). Second, unlike P, in J the first man is not called “Adam” but *hāʾāḏom*, “the man" (2:7-4:1, *passim*). Admittedly, there do seem to be occurrences in which he is called *adam* without the definite article: *lᵉʾāḏom,* "for Adam" (2:20, 3:17 and 21). But the difference is restricted to the vowel under the preposition ל, "for"of in לאדם : *lᵉʾāḏom*, with a *shewa* under the preposition, means “for Adam,” while *lāʾāḏom* with a *qamatz* would mean “for the man.” However, this vowel reflects the canonical text and not the Yahwistic story at its source. The punctuators, knowing that *adam* would go on to be used in the text — that is, in P — as the personal name of the first man, gave the preposition the appropriate vowel. But wherever in the J story the letters and not the vowels are determinative we find *hāʾāḏom* and not Adam. It is therefore apparent that if we are reading the J story on its own, the correct reading is *lāʾāḏom*.

In J, therefore, the first man does not have a name — he is simply “the human.” The reason for this is apparently that at this moment he is the only individual in the world who belongs to the human race, and so has no need of a name. The woman, by contrast, does have a name. At first she is called Woman(*ʾiššâ*), “for from man [*ʾiš*] was she taken” (2:23), but *ʾiššâ*is the common noun indicating the individual human female, and the name of the first human’s *ʾiššâ* (his “woman” or “wife”) is Eve (3:20).

In P, then, “Adam” is the name of the first man, whose woman has no name. By contrast, in J it is the first man who has no name and is simply called *hāʾāḏom*, "the human", while the first woman does have a name. Procreation is attributed in P to men but in J to Eve, noting the participation of the man and of Yhwh (4:1). In the J genealogy that follows, the role of women in giving birth is similarly noted, and a number of their names are mentioned:

Cain knew his *wife*, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he then founded a city, and named the city after his son Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad begot Mehujael, and Mehujael begot Methusael, and Methusael begot Lamech. Lamech took to himself two wives: *the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other was Zillah.* Adah bore Jabal; he was the ancestor of those who dwell in tents and amidst herds. And the name of his brother was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all who play the lyre and the pipe. As for Zillah, she bore Tubal-cain, who forged all implements of copper and iron. *And the sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.* (4:17-22)

Admittedly the role of woman in this passage is confined to bearing children, yet that is also the only role of several of the men. In any case, women are given more respect in this description than in the P genealogy, where they are not mentioned at all.

**4. Does J Contend that the Woman Was Not Created in the Image of God?**

According to P, all of humanity, women and men alike, were created in the image of God. Since in J the woman is created after the man, are we to understand that in J only the man was created in the image of God? Not at all! In J, no one — not the woman and not the man — is created in the image of God, so there is nothing to compare between the two stories.

True, even in J — just as in P — the woman’s relationship to divinity is identical to the man’s. But the connection between God and humanity in J is framed differently, both in terms of the time and the way the connection is formed and in terms of the kind of resemblance between humans and God. In P, that resemblance is at the heart of the divine plan and is intended to serve a distinct divine interest. In J, not only is humanity not created in the image of God; that is precisely Yhwh’s great concern throughout these stories: the suspicion that the humans may become like Him.

This concern is expressed first in the words of the serpent, explaining the reason for the prohibition of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and bad: “God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God [or: gods], knowing good and bad” (Gen 3:5). As Israel Knohl has explained, knowledge of good and bad is connected with the possession of moral judgment and is considered a divine trait. We read of Solomon that he asked God for precisely this kind of judgment: “Grant, then, Your servant an understanding mind to judge Your people, to distinguish between good and bad; for who can judge this vast people of Yours?” (1 Kgs 3:9). His request receives a positive response, and the story that appears immediately afterward, the “judgment of Solomon” in the case of the two women, illustrates his moral wisdom. The people discern Solomon’s impressive judicial ability and see in it a divine quality: “When all Israel heard the decision that the king had rendered, they stood in awe of the king; for they saw that he possessed divine wisdom to execute justice” (1 Kgs 3:28).

According to the book of Kings, Yhwh looked with favor on Solomon’s request to resemble Him in the power of judgment. But according to J, God tried to prevent the first human couple from acquiring this power, as the serpent understood. Indeed, after they eat God says, “Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!” (Gen 3:22). Apparently — according to the original plan — the first human was intended to live forever. But if the human were to become both as wise as God and as immortal, the resemblance between them would be too great. Now that the human has acquired one divine quality, Yhwh prevents him from acquiring an additional divine quality: He expels him from the Garden of Eden and blocks the way to the tree of life.

Humanity’s surprising attempts to become like Yhwh, and Yhwh’s attempts to prevent it, continue throughout the J version of the Primeval History. To God’s dismay, an attempt to cross the border between human and divine occurs from the divine side as well, when the “sons of *elohim*” take themselves wives from among the “daughters of *ha-adam*” (6:1-4). An additional attempt is made from the human side in the story of the Tower of Babel (11:1-9), where humanity tries to attain another divine quality: being one. The humans understand that they will not be able to overcome death, but they believe that through their combined efforts they will be able to reach heaven. Yhwh’s concern is expressed in this story in language comparable to that used when it is expressed in the Garden of Eden story:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 3:22 |  | 11:6 |
| **And Yhwh the God said** |  | **and Yhwh said** |
| **Now [הן]** that the man has become like one of us knowing good and bad |  | **If [הן]**, as one people with one language for all this is how they have begun to act |
| **[ועתה]** what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever! |  | **then [ועתה]** nothing that they may propose to do will be out of their reach |

The solution to the problem is to scatter the humans throughout the world so that they will not be able to unite (11:7-8). Here we see a resemblance between J and P, along with the sharp difference between them. Both sources tell us that humanity split up into different ethnic groups scattered in various places. That is a necessary component of the story, being the actual reality. There is common ground as well between the theological explanations suggested for this fact by the two stories: The scattering of humanity throughout the world is connected to their being like God. Yet the nature of the link between the scattering of humanity and their relationship with God is quite different between the two sources. In P, humanity is supposed to be like God in order to spread throughout the world. The likeness of humanity to God is the original plan, it is in God’s interest, and humanity’s being scattered throughout the world is a fulfillment of the blessing of creation: “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it” (1:28). By contrast, in J the likeness of humanity to God comes at the humans’ initiative, against the will of Yhwh. The likeness is not a visual one but rather is connected to the power to make moral judgments. Since the humans have succeeded, in opposition to Yhwh’s plan, in becoming like Him, Yhwh is forced to scatter them across the earth in order to impair this power.

It emerges that in J too the woman resembles God just as the man does. Moreover, the woman is the first to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and bad and so to become like God. It is she who gets the man to do it. The idea that it is only in P that the woman and the man are equal in their standing before God, and that in J only the man was created in God’s image, stems from a careless combination of reading the stories harmonistically and reading them separately. A coherent reading of J not based on Priestly assumptions shows that from the outset neither the man nor the woman was intended to resemble God, but eventually both of them did indeed resemble Him in equal measure, or more precisely, the woman was the first to resemble God and the man followed in her footsteps.

**IV. Conclusion**

Neither of the stories of creation at the beginning of the Pentateuch express an outlook of equality between women and men. Even though at first glance the Priestly story of creation seems more egalitarian than the Yahwistic one, looking at each of the stories not as an isolated episode but as the introduction to a broader literary tapestry displays a more complex picture. In both sources a preference for men over women is recognizable both explicitly and implicitly. All the same, it is clear that in both sources the status of man and woman with regard to God is identical, and in both the relationship between the creation of woman and the creation of man reflects a theological approach with regard to the purpose of humanity in God’s eyes.

According to P, humanity was intended to rule over the world by means of God’s own power. For this reason, it had to be created from the start in God’s image, to be granted the blessing of fertility, and afterwards, through natural means, to spread out through the length and breadth of the earth. That is why humanity was created both male and female. When P describes the fulfillment of the blessing, it only mentions men, and the word *adam* becomes Adam, the name of the first man. By contrast, in J the original role of humanity is to till the soil, and for this reason there is no need for more than a single man, who is not awarded lofty status or even a name of his own. But the loneliness of this one man forces God to create one woman, and fertility is the inevitable but unplanned result of this plot development. Just as in P, the man and the woman in J resemble God to the same extent; but the resemblance of humanity to God is not imprinted in the humans by their creation according to divine plan, but achieved at a later stage by the humans themselves, through violating Yhwh’s will. Finally, even the scattering of humanity across the world in J is not the fulfillment of the original plan but an unplanned alteration of it that Yhwh is compelled to make.

All this is not the end of the story, only its beginning. We must be aware of these quite different descriptions of God and the quite different approaches with regard to the purpose of humanity and its status with regard to God when we read the continuation of P and the continuation of J. For the Primeval History — in both sources — is nothing but an introduction to the history of Israel and its relationship with Yhwh.

1. The easing of the man’s loneliness serves here not just as an explanation for the creation of woman (2:21-22) but also, even earlier, as an explanation for the creation of animals (2:19-20). As Raanan Eichler has shown [[[citation to come]]], the word *ezer* (‘help’) in Biblical Hebrew does not refer to a slave, servant, or sidekick, but the opposite: a savior. In most of its biblical occurrences it refers to God. So the expression *ezer k’negdo* (‘a fitting help,’ 2:18, 20) does not imply that the woman is subordinate to the man. However, even if the woman is intended to rescue the man from his loneliness and not to be his servant, that does not negate the fact that he is created first and all the other creatures are created for his sake. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)