

Religion and Gender – A Reflection on the Biblical Creation Accounts

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Abstract

It is the view of most people who claim the authoritative nature of the Bible that, women's assigned secondary status in relation to men is ordained and supported in the Bible. Many have quoted different texts of the holy writ to support their culturally-biased position on issue of gender equality. Most often views in respect to gender issues are culturally-based and interpreted rather than divinely-based and interpreted. There is therefore the need to look back at Jesus' words, "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'" (Matt 19:4; Mark 10:6). The two accounts in the Book of Genesis by the Priestly and Yahwistic strands give a complimentary account of the creation of humankind (both male and female) in the image and likeness of God and their creation from a single stock (אָדָם) who was not a male gender. At a cursory reading of the creation accounts, one will tend to see אָדָם as the male gender, but looking at the Hebrew text more closely it will be noticed that the Hebrew words אִשָּׁה and אִישׁ were only introduced after the two genders have been separated. Note carefully that it was not אִישׁ that was asked to tend the garden, who named the animals, was given instruction of what to eat or what not to eat, who fell into a deep sleep or whose ribs was used in the creation of אִשָּׁה, but it was אָדָם. It was after the creation or 'separation' of אִשָּׁה (woman – the female אִשָּׁה) that the other part was called אִישׁ (man – the male אִישׁ) (see vv 23 & 24). It will therefore not be right to speak of the creation of אִשָּׁה out of אִישׁ, because as at the time of the creation of the former, the later was not in existence as אִישׁ. To view these creation accounts with the sense of gender superiority (either male over female or vice versa) is to read the texts using lenses which have been obscured and tainted by patriarchal, matriarchal or cultural biases.

Key Words: Religion and gender; male and female; masculine and feminine in Hebrew Bible; Genesis

Introduction:

Uchem argues "For many centuries, Christians believed that women's assigned secondary status in relation to men was ordained by God and supported in the Bible" (2005:11). This assertion is not only the view of Eya but a widespread view of most people who claim the authoritative nature of the Bible. Many have quoted different texts of the holy writ to support their culturally-biased position

on issue of gender equality. Most often views in respect to gender issues are culturally-based and interpreted rather than divinely-based and interpreted. There is therefore the need to look back at Jesus' words, "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'" (Matt 19:4; Mark 10:6). Why did Jesus refer back to the creation account in the matter of gender relationship? It means that if the issue

of religion and gender must be viewed properly especially in the religious settings of Judaism and Christianity, the foundational point should be 'at the beginning of creation' principle.

Does the creation account(s) in Genesis give room for gender inequality? How should the text be interpreted? Is there a taint of superiority of one gender over the other? It needs to be pointed out that in the traditional culture of most societies as Meo has noted, "women are regard as important, but the quality of that importance remains questionable" (Meo, 2003:150). What accounts for the questionable importance of women especially in gender issue remains the concern of religion in particular and the world at large today. What should be the view of religion in this matter? Does the creation account(s) in Genesis give a clue to the issue of gender equality, especially to those religions that hold as authority this document?

This paper will attempt the definitions of Religion and Gender, x-ray within its limited space the creation account(s) in Genesis chapter one and two, and the insights thereof vis-a-viz the subject under discussion before drawing conclusion on religious perspective on gender.

Definitions of Religion and Gender

Religion: The word 'religion' tends to be one of the most common words in human vocabulary yet its definition is so complex that each group of persons defines it from its own point of view without all the various schools of thought agreeing on a particular definition. Eric Sharpe

Underscores the magnitude of the problem when he says that defining religion is reminiscent of the fable of the blind men attempting to describe

an elephant after touching it. One person touched its trunk and described it as a snake, another its ear and described it as a winnowing fan, other its leg and described it as a tree, another its tail and described it as a broom. In the end, none of them could give acceptable description of an elephant," (qtd in Wotogbe-Weneka 2005: 3).

This is because religion is multifaceted in nature. Etymologically, the word religion is derived from the Latin word *religio*. There are differing opinions within scholarship as to the etymological meaning of this Latin word. It is in connection with terms like "*relegere* (to reread), *relinquere* (to relinquish), and *religare* (to relegate, to unite, to bind together)" (Nigosian, 1990: 1). The word *religare* has been understood in the most common or classical sense of persons being bound to God or to superior powers. It is on this note that Cicero defined it as "the giving of proper honor, respect and reverence to the divine, by which he meant the gods" (qtd in Howkins, 1991: 575). Cicero distinguished religion – a dutiful honoring of the gods, from superstition – an empty fear of them. His definition falls in line with that given by scholars like James Martineau that "Religion is the belief in an ever living God, that is, in a Divine Mind and Will ruling the universe and holding moral relations with mankind" (qtd in Wotogbe-Weneka, 2005: 4). This definition like other ones which are theistic in nature undermines the fact that there are some religions which are not theistic in nature. Apart from being theistic, it is

monotheistic in nature, thereby excluding those religions which are polytheistic in nature. It is therefore too narrow a definition for religion.

According to Sigmund Freud, religion is a mere “illusion, a neurosis, born of the need to make tolerable the helplessness of man, and [is] built out of the material offered by memories of the helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race” (qtd in Wilson, 1982: 18). For Karl Marx, “religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature. It is the opium of the people.” (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2005: 5). For Karl Marx, religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself. Marx and Freud’s definitions are not really definitions but description of religion from their perspectives and also puts religion as a momentary phenomenon which will most likely disappear once human problems have been solved

Another major definition of religion is that propounded by a famous sociologist, Emile Durkheim who opined that “the idea of society is the soul of religion” (Wilson, 1982: 19), and that “religion is the unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2005: 5). Durkheim therefore gives religion a social perspective and moves it from the perspective of only ‘belief’ to that of practice. In the same way Melford Spiro defines religion as “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings” (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2005: 5). In this way, religion is directly linked with culture in particular and ethos (practice and way of life). It is on this note that teachings of some religions are referred to as ‘the way of the gods’ as in Shintoism; ‘the Way’ in Taoism; Jesus Christ being ‘the Way’ in

Christianity and the ‘Noble Eightfold Path’ in Buddhism.

Religion can be defined descriptively, normatively, essentially and functionally, but the underlining question in all these definitions should be ‘what is the main concern of religion?’ According to C. S. Lewis a British author and literary critic functionally, religion is “the means by which men fulfill their universal human existential needs” (qtd in Wilson, 1982: 33). Hence the search for joy, meaning in life, escape from alienation and loneliness, a relationship with others and the ‘other’ are all embraced in religion. It is on this note that this paper will peg its tent along the definitions put forth by Durkheim and Spiro not because they vividly define the subject matter but because they serve as a connecting pole between the subject matter and culture.

It is with the view of community in mind that Brown, David A. pointed out that religion is communal and that the following elements are found in most religions. These elements are:

1. The beliefs of the *community* about God
2. The beliefs of the *community* about God’s relationship with the world
3. The ways in which the people of the *community* worship God and pray to him
4. The rules which the *community* follows because of their beliefs about God, and
5. The places and people which the *community* believes to be holy and belong to God in a special way.

Religion is therefore not just an individualistic issue but a communal affair which overtly or covertly affects all facets of individual’s life in

particular and the societal life in general. The people's religious faith translates into their daily action and attitude even in matters of reaction to gender issues.

Gender: Microsoft Encarta 2009 defines gender as "sex of a person or organism or of a whole category of people or organisms". In this particular definition gender is linked up to sexuality of a being. In another definition, gender is linked up to the categorization of nouns and is defined thus, "the classification of nouns and pronouns in some languages according to the forms taken by adjectives, modifiers, and other grammatical items associated syntactically with them." It is on this note that nouns, pronouns and adjectives are categorized into masculine, feminine and neuter genders. English and Greek languages for example have three classes of gender – masculine, feminine and neuter, while Hebrew language have only two – feminine and masculine. Such classifications may not directly or indirectly be linked up with the sexuality of the classified. In some languages like Greek, definite articles have gender with which they complement the noun or adjective which they are used with. It is on this note that the Greek have τόν λογόν, τα τεκνα, ἡ γυνή.

Etymologically, the word gender is from the Greek word γεννάω which means "to procreate, to regenerate, bear, beget, be born, bring forth, conceive, be delivered of, gender, make, spring etc" (Strong, 2006a: 20). Büchsel, (1989: Electronic copy), opines that like τίκτω, "this term is used of the 'begetting' of the father and the 'bearing' of the mother, not only in Greek, but also in the LXX (Septuagint) and New Testament. It is used of producing without birth, as at 2 Timothy 2: 23". The English word gene, genetics and the like draw their roots from this word. Gender therefore has a lot to

do with the birth of a person biologically. This brings to the fore why sociologically gender can be traced to the behavioural pattern and differences of both male and female right from birth. Eteng (2008:102) rightly pointed out that, "One of the factors responsible for these differences is the peculiarities of the male and female hormones". Therefore while agreeing with sociologist and anthropologist that the society and culture are determining factors in gender roles, one should not lose sight of biological factor which is natural.

It is with this view that Cronin (2008: Electronic copy), a philosopher of science puts it that

Men and women look unlike, walk unlike, talk unlike. They differ in who is more competitive, single-minded and risk-taking; who is more likely to climb Everest, drive too fast, become President of the United States, commit a murder, or win a Nobel Prize; in what triggers their sexual jealousy, erotic fantasies, status envy. Differences such as these are universal, transcending culture, class, ethnicity, religion, education, and politics. They manifest themselves in all societies, across the modern world, and in every known record back through time.

Certain roles are meant naturally for the male gender and in the same vein, some are meant for the female gender. This does not in any way speak of inferiority but for complimentary nature of gender. Gender can therefore be define as those roles which nature and society (without bias of superiority) assign to different male and female and which makes them complimentary to each other.

Brief Introduction to the Book of Genesis

The texts under consideration in this paper are situated in the first book of the Hebrew Scripture whose title is Genesis coined from “the Latin Vulgate, which in turn is borrowed or transliterated from Greek LXX” (Harrison & Hubbard: 1990: 1). The name of the book therefore comes from the first word בְּרֵאשִׁית, which is simply the first word in the book. “This follows the custom of naming the books of the Pentateuch on either their first or two words, or an expression near the beginning of the first verse” (Harrison & Hubbard, 1990:1). The Book of Genesis states not in scientific way the beginning of creation, humanity, sin, God’s dealing with humanity and others, not without raising some complex questions whose answers are still obscured to mortals. The Book under review, “developed gradually over a period of centuries in a series of individual steps – only a few of which again we can reconstruct” (Westermann, 1988: xii). The components of this book once existed independently and were later edited into a whole by redactors. The Book Genesis is the first book of the Pentateuch (which is erroneously called ‘The first five Books of Moses in some quarters), which ends with the death of Moses (Deut 34). It is scholarly impossible to speak in any strict sense of the author of Genesis because the Book was composed fragmentally alongside the other Books jointly called the Pentateuch.

Victor Hamilton (1990: 14) distinguished the seeming dates of the different traditions wherewith the fragments that forms the book under review come to the present readers as; Yahwist ‘J’ and Elohist ‘E’ (850 BC), Deuteronomist ‘D’(ca 620 BC) and Priestly ‘P’ (550-450 BC) (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, 14). Reasons for not attributing the Genesis authorship to a single individual like Moses can be seen in the simple fact that in the

book under review there are different names for God, e.g. in the creation story ‘Elohim’ is used in 1:1-2:3, ‘Yahweh Elohim’ in 2:4-3:24 and the Flood accounts (6-9) uses both Elohim and Yahweh. Apart from this, there are duplications of some stories; compare the creation accounts (1-2:4a and 2:4bff); flood accounts (6-9); covenant between God and Abraham (15 & 17); Hagar’s banishment (16 & 21); Jacob’s change of name to Israel (32 & 35); two accounts of the sale of Joseph (37:25-28b and 37:28a, 36). There is also the presence of anachronisms which Hamilton posits that they date much later than the patriarchal or the Mosaic period; example of such is the use of ‘Ur of the Chaldeans’- the ‘Chaldeans’ do not appear in Mesopotamia until long after the patriarchal period, also the mention of ‘Philistines’ and domesticated ‘camels’ in the Genesis narratives. The list of Edomite kings in Chapter 36 seems not to be coherent with Mosaic authorship, because the Edomites did not settle in Transjordan before the 13th century BC

The entire Book of Genesis deals with not only the history of the Jewish Patriarchs (12-50) but tries to give the mythical origin of the world and the things therein (1-11). Our text of consideration falls under the part that is termed mythical.

X-Ray of Genesis Chapters 1 & 2

According to Anderson (1986:29), the Jewish “patriarchs may have brought with them from their Amorite homeland some of the traditions that were later transformed and incorporated into the religions now found in the first eleven chapters of Genesis” and the story of the creation was part of this tradition. There are two different records of the account of creation – the Priestly account (1:1-2:4a) and the Yahwestic account (2:4b-25). These origin-

stories are not peculiar to the Hebrew people. Hence Hook reiterated that, “in the early literature of Egypt, Babylon, and Canaan, and indeed among most so-called primitive people, similar stories are to be found, purporting to give an account of the beginning of things” (Hook, 1963: 177). Such stories are mythical in nature not history – myth doesn’t profess to record of events which happened in a particular place and time. It represents “a kind of truth which cannot be expressed in historical categories” (177). Hook (1963: 177) went further to point out that the “use of myth in the Bible is only a particular case of the larger question of the use of symbols or images as a form of divine speech, an essential vehicle of revelation”. Myth is therefore taken for the truth it conveys not for its historical dating.

In these mythical stories, our next concern is to look at both the Priestly and Yahwestic accounts of creation with special attention to the creation of human beings.

Priestly Account (Gen 1:1-2:4a). In this particular account, it is easily noticeable that the creation is a six-day program that climaxes with the creation of אָדָם. הָאָדָם which was created was made up of the following components:

1. צֶלֶם *tselem* (tseh'-lem) of God. The word here is “from an unused root meaning to shade; a phantom, (figuratively) illusion, resemblance; hence, a representative figure, especially an idol, image, vain show” (Strong, 2006: 99). This word is used about sixteen times in the Bible and basically “refers to image as a representation of the deity or idol” (Harris, 1980: Electronic Copy). הָאָדָם was thus made in God’s image and this explains why הָאָדָם was given dominion over God’s creation as vice-regent. Psalm 8:6-9 cites this glory, honour and

rule of this God’s image. Harris (1980) further opines that “God’s image obviously does not consist in man’s body which was formed from earthly matter, but in his spiritual, intellectual, moral likeness to God from whom his animating breath came.” The word under review here is a common noun though used in the masculine singular gender can also be used in what is called ‘common’ or ‘both’ gender in Hebrew grammar. As noted earlier in this paper, there are only two genders in Hebrew grammar – masculine and feminine (there is no neuter gender as it is in English, Greek grammar and some other languages). ‘Common’ or ‘both’ gender in Hebrew grammar means “that the noun in question can be found both in the masculine and the feminine gender” (Wheeler, 2006: Electronic Copy). An example of such Hebrew word is אֶרֶץ, which means land or earth. It normally occurs in the feminine gender as in Gen 10:11–הָאֶרֶץ הַהִיא but sometimes it can occur as masculine as in Ezek 21:24–אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. The use of masculine gender here for the צֶלֶם does not make the object being created here a male gender, but an object that can be either male or female in gender. Hence there is no superiority of gender here – either the male or female gender as the case may be.

2. דְמוּת *demuwth* (dem-ooth') of God. The word means resemblance, concretely, model, shape and adverbially can be interpreted to mean like (-ness), fashion, manner or similitude” (Strong, 2006b: 31). It also means shape, figure or pattern. Without going into much study of the word, דְמוּת “signifies the original after which a thing is patterned” (Vine, 2000: 137), it is in this sense that it is being used in Gen 1:26. We need to note that two important passages (Gen 1:26; 5:1) speak of humankind being created in the image and likeness of God, and that Seth was in

the likeness of his father (5:3). There is nowhere else in the Old Testament that **צֶלֶם** and **דְּמוּת** occur together in parallelism or in connection with each other. Vine (2000) rightly pointed out that “no distinction is to be sought between these two words. They are totally interchangeable, [and that] in Gen 1:26, which is God's resolution to create, both words are used. But in v. 27, the actual act of creation, only **[צֶלֶם]** is used. The two words are so intertwined that nothing is lost in the meaning by the omission of the later”. Just like its parallel noun, **דְּמוּת** though used in a specific gender (feminine) it is a common noun and can also occur in ‘common’ or ‘both’ gender and therefore does not speak of superiority of any gender over the other.

3. **אָדָם** **Adam** is the next word which demands attention. The word here under review is a common noun which is normally in the masculine gender (but as noted earlier the use of gender in Hebrew language does not necessarily mean or describe the sex of either male or female of the noun). The word is translated variously to mean humankind, human being (an individual or the species), and name of the first human being and is also a place in Palestine. In some cases it is used as the generic name of human beings and translated as ‘man’. It is from the same root with the Hebrew word **אָדָם** meaning red or ruddy, and speaks of the red earth out of which **אָדָם** was created from. In the original sense of the word it does not denote the male gender because God made **אָדָם** male and female. It needs also to be noted that though **אָדָם** is used as a singular noun, the end product of the creation of **אָדָם** is plural – “created he them”. Here again, both the male and female are said to be equal without any sense of superiority.

Summarily from the Priestly account of creation, it can be said that both male and female genders are created in the image and likeness of God without any sense of superiority but absolute equality.

Yahwistic Account (Gen 4b-25)

Our particular concern in this account is directed towards the creation of **אָדָם** and the purpose for which **אָדָם** was created. Recapping the story, the Yahwistic strand makes the creation of **אָדָם** from the dust of the earth and gives a picture of Yahweh being a potter. Thus **אָדָם** “was formed out of the dust of the earth and informed with the breath of life by Yahweh making (**אָדָם**) ‘a living soul.’” (Hooke, 1963: 179). While the Priestly account shows what God meant (**אָדָם**) to be, the Yahwistic account shows purpose for which God created (**אָדָם**). This was “to work it and take care of it.” (15). It was in respect of this divine assignment that God sees what human language describes as ‘not good to be alone’ and thus requires a suitable helpmeet. At a cursory reading of the text, one will tend to see **אָדָם** as the male gender, but looking at the Hebrew text more closely it will be noticed that the Hebrew words **אִשָּׁה** and **אִישׁ** were only introduced after the two genders have been separated. Note carefully that it was not **אִישׁ** that was asked to tend the garden, who named the animals, was given instruction of what to eat or what not to eat, who fell into a deep sleep or whose ribs was used in the creation of **אִשָּׁה**, but it was **אָדָם**. It was after the creation or ‘separation’ of **אִשָּׁה** (woman – the female **אָדָם**) that the other part was called **אִישׁ** (man – the male **אָדָם**) (see vv 23 & 24). It will therefore not be right to speak of the creation of **אִשָּׁה** out of **אִישׁ** because as at the time of the creation of her former, the later was not in existence as **אִישׁ**

From the above, it can be deduced that both the female and the male human beings were created out of אָדָם without any sense of superiority or inferiority of one to the other. Rather the Yawistic strand affirming the oneness and equality in the sense of 'male and female created he them' (1:27), went beyond that equality to show their relationship with each other which is more complementary than superiority. The emphasis here is that both the male and female genders are one with each other and none can exist without the other. They are meant to play complimentary role. The problem of always equating the male gender with אָדָם often arise firstly because the later is always in the masculine gender and over the time with the patriarchal lenses, the later has come to be used also for the male gender in some cases. Yawistic strand, therefore just like the Priestly strand unequivocally affirm the equality of the female and male genders of אָדָם showing more their divine responsibility and relationship with each other.

Conclusion

From the religious perspective, especially for the ancient near east where the creation story was a general myth and those religions who claim the authority of Genesis 1 and 2, there is no room for gender inequality as both genders were created from the same stock - אָדָם and made in the image and likeness of the same God. Each was made to compliment the other without any sense of superiority or inferiority, but placed in inter-relationship one with other with specific responsibility for each gender.

The question of what gender אָדָם was, is quite irrelevant. It is like asking 'what gender is God?' Or it is like trying to unravel all the mystery behind the Christian doctrine of Trinity. One thing about myth and parables is that they

don't answer all the questions posed by the readers or listeners. Furthermore, enquiring the gender of אָדָם is like enquiring who the wives of Adam's sons were or who were those given the command not to slay Cain (Gen 4:1-15). They are meant to convey a particular message and should therefore not be stressed beyond the boarder sense of the issue meant to be addressed. The two creation accounts are meant to show who human beings are in their creation vis-a-viz their relationship with their creator by the Priestly account, and their complimentary relationship one to the other by the Yahwestic account.

To view these creation accounts with the sense of gender superiority (either male over female or vice versa) is to read the texts using lenses which has been obscured and tainted by patriarchal, matriarchal or cultural biases. This is the result of the fall in Genesis Chapter three. Jesus, who himself was a Jew and the man behind the Christian religion knew too well this issue of complementary nature and lack of superiority of one gender over the other hence his words, "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'" (Matt 19:4; Mark 10:6).

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