



BRILL

VETUS TESTAMENTUM 69 (2019) 167-172

Vetus  
Testamentum  
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## *Short Note*



### **An Unnoted Nuance in Genesis 2:21-22**

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#### **Abstract**

Rather than understanding the creation of woman in Gen 2:21-22 as an etiology of some physiological feature, this brief article suggests that the removal of part of Adam's body to create Eve can instead be seen as parallel to a horticultural process, namely, the taking of cuttings.

#### **Keywords**

Genesis – creation – Adam – Eve – horticulture

The history of scholarly attention to the process of the creation of woman in Gen 2:21-22 has often focused most on the question of the *šēlā'* that is taken from the man in order to form his mate. The traditional and most common rendering of the word is “rib,” though *šēlā'* never refers to a human rib bone anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Along with this translation have come a number of interpretations regarding the rightful place of woman at her husband's side (whether as an attitude attributed to the ancient Israelite authors or, occasionally, as one seemingly adopted by the conservative modern scholar).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 55-56: “The mode of her creation was to lay the actual foundation for

Often too there is an etiological element assumed or read into the passage.<sup>2</sup> For those who understand the text to refer to a rib, there have been a variety of suggestions: the tale explains the presence of ribs only on the upper half of the body;<sup>3</sup> it explains why not every rib is necessary;<sup>4</sup> it explains the navel, through which the rib is thought to have been removed (an idea that is at once at odds with the plain meaning of *šēlā'*, “side,” and one that would seem unnecessary given the true origin of the navel visible during every human birth).<sup>5</sup>

Most recently, and most daringly, Ziony Zevit has suggested that as none of these etiologies works particularly well, there may be a better translation and understanding of *šēlā'*: he suggests the baculum, the penis bone, which is absent in human males though it is known in a wide variety of other animals.<sup>6</sup> Surely the ready objection to this suggestion is the fact that Yahweh<sup>7</sup> is said to take “from among his *šal'ōt*,” plural; Zevit responds by taking the noun to mean, broadly, “appendages.”<sup>8</sup> Then again, as each male has only one such “appendage,” it is unclear why the author would not simply say what he meant, and specify the appendage in question. If this is indeed an etiology for the lack of a baculum in human males, it is an awfully well-disguised one.

I would like to suggest an interpretation of these verses that alleviates the need for any such etiological speculation regarding what sort of mark the process may have left in the male human body. Indeed, I would like to suggest, at least for the most part, that this part of the story is not really etiological at

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the moral ordinance of marriage. As the moral idea of the unity of the human race required that man should not be created as a genus or plurality, so the moral relation of the two persons establishing the unity of the race required that man should be created first, and then the woman from the body of the man. By this the priority and superiority of the man, and the dependence of the woman upon the man, are established as an ordinance of divine creation.... If the fact that the woman was formed from a rib, and not from any other part of the man, is significant, all we can find in this is, that the woman was made to stand as a helpmate by the side of the man.”

- 2 For an overview of ideas related to the rib, see Heinz-Josef Fabry, “צֵלָע *šēlā'*,” *TDOT* 12:400-5.
- 3 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 84.
- 4 Otto Procksch, *Die Genesis* (3rd ed.; KAT 1; Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1924), 39.
- 5 Paul Humbert, *Études sur le récit du paradis et de la chute dans la Genèse* (Mémoires de l'Université de Neuchâtel 14; Neuchâtel: Secrétariat de l'Université, 1940), 57-58.
- 6 Scott F. Gilbert and Ziony Zevit, “Congenital Human Baculum Deficiency: The Generative Bone of Genesis 2:21-23,” *American Journal of Medical Genetics* 101 (2001): 284-85. See more fully Zevit's discussion in *What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 40-50.
- 7 Though the canonical text refers to the deity with the title Yahweh Elohim, throughout this passage, for the sake of ease (and in recognition of the probable original form of the text), I will use “Yahweh” throughout.
- 8 Ziony Zevit, “Was Eve Made from Adam's Rib—or His Baculum?” *BAR* 41:5 (2015): 32-35.

all—not, that is, if an etiology is understood to explain some continuing aspect of the present by recourse to an event in the past. We may note that etiologies in the Bible are not uncommon, and that in fact etiologies occur with some regularity in this, the non-priestly part of the Pentateuch. When they do, we rarely have difficulty recognizing them. Even within the narrative of Genesis 2-3, we have an etiology for marriage (2:24), for the nature of snakes (3:14-15), for pregnancy (3:16), for agriculture (3:17-19); elsewhere, equally clearly, we find etiologies for shepherds (4:20), musicians (4:21), metallurgists (4:22), Babylon and linguistic diversity (11:9), dietary restrictions (32:33), and the names of various towns and other geographical sites, among others. In other words, if this same author wanted to mark the etiology of the absence of the human baculum, he was more than capable of doing so. That this episode was not recognized as an explanation for a feature of the male anatomy until relatively recently suggests that perhaps all of these readings are simply looking for something that is not there.

If the taking of Adam's *ṣēlā'* in Genesis 2 is explanatory, what it explains is exactly what it purports to: where did women come from? Or, more abstractly, but perhaps also more pressingly: how is it possible for a single organism to become two organisms?

On the face of it, Yahweh takes some part of the man's body and "builds" it (*bānā*) into the woman. The language of building plays well with *ṣēlā'*, which is often used to refer to an architectural feature of the Tabernacle or the Temple.<sup>9</sup> It also maintains the artisanal sense of Yahweh's creation of humans suggested already by the verb *yāṣar* in 2:7.<sup>10</sup>

The text ultimately relies on the inimitable powers of the deity, but it is notable that Yahweh does not simply conjure woman from thin air, or even from the earth as he did the man and the other animals. That sort of creation is employed only when there is no preexisting model; once there are goats, all goats come from other goats. Once there are dandelions, all dandelions come from dandelions. This is the way that the observable world works—indeed, it is precisely along these lines that the author of the creation account in Genesis 1 imagined the initial stages of life: not with the creation of one of every creature, but of many plants, many trees, many fish, many birds, many mammals—and at least two humans (Gen 1:27). But in the second creation

9 Cf., e.g., Exod 25:12, 14; 1 Kgs 6:5, 8, 15-16, 34; Ezek 41:5-9, 11, 26.

10 In this regard the common use of the root *bānā* in cognate literature for the act of creation is relevant. For Akkadian examples, see CAD 2:87 (*banû*); for Ugaritic, G. del Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartín, *Diccionario de la Lengua Ugarítica*, vol. 1 (Aula Orientalis Supplementa 7; Barcelona: Editorial AUSA, 1996), 114 (*bny*).

account of Genesis 2, the question is a live one: how does that first one become two? The presence in the narrative of a discernible divine process at least suggests that there may be an analogous human process through which Yahweh's actions here are understood.

What possibilities would the ancient Israelite have considered for the creation of two organisms when there had previously only been one? Mitosis and binary fission, which we see on the cellular level, were unknown to the microscope-free ancient world. Every animal with which the ancient Israelite would have been familiar, from fish to bird to camel, requires both a male and a female to create a new life. From the vegetable world, certainly available was the process by which a plant drops its seeds onto the ground, but this was probably not the analogy that the biblical author here would have wanted. Not that it is unknown: according to one Hindu creation myth, it is precisely by Brahma's spilling seed on the earth that humans are created. Yet this would not fit well into the story of Genesis 2, where the creation of woman is performed by the deity but derives from the man. A deity spilling seed may result in the creation of a human, but it is fairly obvious to all that when a human spills seed precisely the opposite result is desired (see Genesis 38).

There is, however, another agricultural mechanism for turning one organism into two organisms, which would have been both available and useful to the biblical author of Genesis 2. The process of removing a small part of one plant and growing from it a new plant is well known even to the amateur gardener: taking a cutting. This a technique that produces a second plant that is effectively a clone of the original; or perhaps, in human terms, "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23).

It should be noted, of course, that actual genetic cloning of animals was entirely unknown in the ancient world; and, in fact, even the basic genetic identity of a plant and one produced from a cutting of it would also not have been evident. Whereas cloned animals or humans—at least if science fiction is to be believed—are visually identical, plants generated from cuttings do not look exactly the same as their parent plants. A begonia grown from a cutting will recognizably be from the begonia family, but will not be visually indistinguishable from its parent begonia. Thus we do not need to get hung up on the fact that Eve was not in fact a physically identical version of Adam—anyone accustomed to taking cuttings, and using that image as a basis for the creation of Eve, would never expect such perfect replication (and would not know anything about the genetics at work). The only requirement, as the only observable fact, is that the new organism that results from the process is of the same species: it may exhibit differences, even a different gender, but it is still a human—or a begonia.

The process of taking a cutting may remove part of the original plant, but it leaves no permanent damage; the plant grows back around the cut—in the terms of Genesis 2, “he closed up the flesh at that spot” (2:21), or perhaps even “flesh closed up at that spot,” either translation being grammatically possible.<sup>11</sup> Again, the need to see these verses as an etiology for some aspect of human anatomy may be lessened, or rejected entirely. The question the verses seek to answer is not about a feature of the human present, but about a process in the human past.

In the magisterial creation account of Genesis 1, this notion would be strikingly out of place. But Genesis 2 is agricultural throughout: earth and water and trees—it is the story of nothing other than a garden. What more reasonable place to find gardening imagery?

It must be admitted that there is no clear reference to taking a cutting anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible (and it is only implicit even in Genesis 2). Yet it was a well known horticultural method in the ancient world, as demonstrated most clearly by the description of it in Theophrastus’s *De Causis Plantarum*, the first botanical treatise.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, as Theophrastus was aware, viticulture—indisputably a part of Israelite agriculture—depends entirely on the taking of cuttings, as grapevine seedlings are typically markedly less productive in each successive generation.<sup>13</sup> It is thus difficult to imagine that an Israelite author would be unaware of the process of taking a cutting, even if it is never mentioned explicitly.

The use of such imagery to describe the creation of humanity would be entirely in line with what we find elsewhere in the Bible, where agricultural language is used to describe humanity and the relationships that exist between humans. Most famous, of course, is Isa 11:1, “A shoot shall emerge from the stump of Jesse/a branch shall grow from his roots.” But note also, among others, Deut 29:17: “Perhaps among you is a root sprouting poison and wormwood”; 2 Kgs 19:30(/Isa 37:31): “The survivors of the house of Judah that escape will again take root below and produce fruit above”; Isa 27:6: “Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and bud, and the face of the earth will be filled with fruit”; Hos 9:16: “Ephraim is stricken, their roots are withered, they will produce no fruit”; Job 18:16: “His roots below dry up/above his branches wither.”

11 Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1998), 134.

12 Theophrastus, *De Causis Plantarum*, 1.2-3.5. See Roger French, *Ancient Natural History: Histories of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1994), 78-79.

13 This process may well be at the root of the parable in Isa 5:1-7. See Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (LAI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 98-99.

Often God is explicitly rendered as the gardener: Ex 15:17: “You will plant them in the mountain of your possession”; Isa 60:21: “Your people ... are the shoot that I planted”; Jer 2:21; “I planted you as a choice vine”; Jer 12:2: “You have planted them and they have taken root, they go forth and bear fruit”; Amos 9:15: “I will plant them upon their land, and they will never again be pulled up out of the land that I have given them”; Ps 52:7: “God ... will uproot you from the land of the living”; Ps 80:9-10: “You pulled a vine out of Egypt/you drove out the nations and planted it/you cleared a place for it/it took root and filled the land.” Note especially Jer 24:6 (and similarly 42:10 and 45:4)—“I will build them and not tear them down; I will plant them and not pull them up”—with its combination of architectural and agricultural imagery.

In the New Testament, we find not the taking of cuttings but its reverse, the process of grafting, used famously in Rom 11:17-24.

In short, the use of agricultural imagery for humanity is persistent in the Bible, and God regularly depicted as the divine gardener. This is the world of the ancient Israelites, and it is no surprise that it is among the dominant metaphors they use to render the actions of their national deity. As they are responsible for the creation, cultivation, and destruction of plant life, so too they imagine God, by analogous processes, to be responsible for the creation, cultivation, and destruction of humanity. What we see in Gen 2:21-22 is part of that agricultural process of creation: the generation of two living beings where there was once only one.