

The Creation Stories (Gen. 1-2) and Women

Let us start with the creation story. It is known that there are two creation stories in the Book of Genesis: 1:1-2:4a and 2:4b-25. In the first creation story of Gen. 1:1-2:4a, God created human beings in God's own image lastly after creating all others – the world, animals and plants – and God blessed them, charging them to tend to the world. However, in the second creation story of Gen. 2:4b-25, God created a human being first from the dust of the earth and then God created a woman from the rib of this human being.

Fundamentalists who believe in the inerrancy theory (every word in the Bible is God's word so it is without error or contradiction) claim that both creation stories were written by Moses and Gen 2:4b-25 is just an extension of Gen 1:1-2:4a, not a separate version of creation. Therefore, fundamentalists believe, the creation story must not be critiqued, and we must believe in every word as it is written.

However, progressive scholars employ historical, cultural and textual criticism and claim the two creation stories were written at two different periods of time using two different sources, and therefore, two different sets of intention and purpose, and two different historical and theological points of view. From the perspective of progressive scholars, understanding the background of the two stories will help us understand the creation stories less literally and likely more accurately. Von Rad of Germany, Walter Brueggemann of U.S.A. and Chung Choon Kim of Korea, all of whom are the renowned Old Testament scholars, belong to these schools of thoughts.

With regard to the source and date of the creation story, progressive scholars claim the first creation story came from a P source (Priestly) and the second story from a J source (Jehovah). The first creation story was recorded circa 586 BC when Judah was taken into Babylonian captivity, the second circa 950 BC in the era of Solomon's reign. Since there is such a huge time gap between the

two stories, their motifs, historical backgrounds, story structures, expressions, emphases and theological insights are different.¹

The background of the first creation story dates from when the Priestly writers were suffering in Babylonian exile. They wanted to communicate to the next generation that Israel's God was superior over their contemporary local Babylonian gods. In the context of exile, Israel faced a twofold crisis that invited Israel to despair and, as a result, they abandoned confidence in Yahweh. Behind the visible authority of the Babylon Empire is the legitimating power of the Babylonian gods who guaranteed the regime and appeared to be stronger than the counter power of Israel's own God. In the face of that challenge, Israel's despairing doubt is countered by the witness of faith that asserts that Yahweh is stronger than the Babylonian gods. It is testimony to Yahweh's work as Creator that counters the ostensive power of Babylon. Thus the Priestly writer used the creation faith to witness to Yahweh God, who is the only exclusive God who created the world and who will also liberate them from their sufferings, and thus dismiss the claim of the other gods and raise Israel's self-esteem and pride from despair to hope. Another intent of the first creation story could have been to teach Israel about God's creation of the Sabbath and urge them to keep it in the life of exile.²

As mentioned above, the second creation story is dated 950 BC, during Solomon's reign. Viewing it from political, economic, cultural standpoints, it was an unprecedented golden time. For the J writer, the Solomon era was the time when Israel exercised power as the strongest sovereign nation in the region of Canaan and throughout the entire medieval world. The J writer uncovers the roots of the citizen's rage at Solomon's collusion with oppressors, with his wealth and extravagance, with the waste of national resources (1 King 4:22-23), and with forced labor and excessive taxation. The J writer also points to the resulting human rebellion that challenged God's sovereign power. Therefore,

¹ Chung Choon Kim, *Study on the Book of Law and Prophets* (Seoul: Han Kuk Theological Institute Pub, 1988), 41.

² Chung Choon Kim, *Law and Prophets*, 22-27, 42.

men's predominance over women was not the central theme of the creation story. The major theme of the creation story was the confession of the Almighty God who is superior to Babylonian pagan gods. It also indicts the human sin of challenging God's sovereign authority.³

Keeping this context of the creation stories in mind, we present the following five major texts that frequently have been quoted in the debate over women's leadership in the church.

If we read them literally as the fundamentalists do, it seems to provide clues to the resulting inequality of women and men in the church. Literal reading of the texts would sound like this:

Issue 1. God creates first man (2:7) and last woman (2:22); first means superior and last means inferior or subordinate. Therefore, she is not equal to man and must be subject to man.

Issue 2. In Gen. 2:21-22, woman came out of man's rib, dependent upon him for life. Taken out of man (2:23), woman has a derivative, not an autonomous, existence. Therefore, woman is not equal to man and must be subject to man.

Issue 3. In Gen 2:18-23, woman is created for the sake of man; a helpmate to cure his loneliness. Therefore, woman is not equal to man and she should be subject to man.

Issue 4. In Gen. 2:23, man names woman (2:23) and thus has power over her.

Issue 5. In Gen. 3:6-7, woman tempted man to disobey and thus she is responsible for sin in the world (3:6); this makes woman a worse sinner than man, and she is not equal to man and must be subject to man.

³ Ibid. 46.

However, if we read them in the light of historical, cultural, and textual criticism a counter-argument is possible.

Issue 1: Gen. 2:7 states, “*then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.*”

Regarding the claim that the order of creation determines superiority or inferiority, “Calvin finds little reason to defend it and admits the weakness of the argument of priority, since John the Baptist preceded Christ yet was of lesser dignity.”⁴

According to Oo Jung Lee, a Greek language scholar, another argument is possible that the Hebrew word “Adam” translated in English Bible a “man” neither means a male gender nor the name of a male. “Adam” simply means “a human being” whose gender is not yet determined. Although the Korean Bible too interprets “Adam” as a male, there isn’t an independent word yet to differentiate male from female gender. It only appears in Gen. 2:23 in the event that God created a woman from the human being. This is the first time God uses the Hebrew word, “ish” – a male gender from Adam, a human being. In other words, male and female gender were created and named at the same time. Therefore, male gender as a man was not created prior to female gender, a woman but the two genders came to exist at the same time.⁵ The fact that God blessed man and woman equally and not just a man, *to have dominion over every creeping thing upon the earth* (Gen. 1:28) displays equality between man and woman from the beginning.

⁴ Jane Dempsey Douglas, *Women Freedom & Calvin* (Commentary, I Tim.) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 57.

⁵ Oo Jung Lee, *Theology for Women* (Seoul: Han Kuk Theological Institute pub, 1985), 156.

We also come to realize that the order of creation in the first and the second creation story reconcile with each other. The first creation story of Gen. 1:27 says: *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

We reiterate that according to this text God simply created “a human being” with no male or female gender yet. Adam is not a word that means either male or female but a term that includes both male and female. This creation story witnesses that male and female genders are created at the same time. Therefore, the order of creation cannot be the measure for superiority or inferiority. Therefore, the claim that woman is inferior to man because she was created after man cannot hold. If we use the order of creation as the measure of superiority or inferiority, we will run into trouble. For example, in the first creation story, human being is created after animals and plants. Does this mean that human being is inferior to animals and plants?

Issue 2. In Gen. 2:21, “*So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.*” A woman comes out of man’s rib. Therefore, woman is not equal to man and must be dominated by man.

This argument places emphasis on the material out of which humans were created. In other words, woman came from man’s rib and man is superior to woman. If the material God used in creation of human beings determines superiority or inferiority, how about the Adam who came from the dust of the earth? Is Adam inferior to the dust because that is the material Adam was created from? Can we also argue that rib is better and stronger than the dust, and therefore, man is inferior to woman? Roop, a Genesis commentator, asserts that the statement that woman was made from material taken “from

the man” does not imply that the woman is “lower than” the man. The phrase “from the man” describes a close relationship between the man and woman. In a similar relationship, *adam* is formed out of material taken *from the ground* (2:7). The story of the creation of human community is followed by statements of mutuality and intimacy, not of structure and hierarchy.⁶

Still another counter argument: man did not play any role in creating the woman. He neither participated nor watched the creation of the woman. He wasn't counseled about the creation of the woman. According to Tribble, the creature (ha adam) was totally passive throughout the episode (of creating the woman) because God caused him to fall into deep sleep while God “performed the surgery” of taking out one of his ribs and created a new and unique life – the woman.⁷

Just like the man, woman too received her life directly from God. Man and woman were created equally from the natural source – dust and rib. Rib only means solidarity and equality. Therefore, can the material itself that was being used by God for the creation dare judge who is superior or inferior? In short, the creation texts had never intended to mean one is superior and the other is inferior, or nor that woman was to be subject to man.

Issue 3. In Gen 2:18, “*Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help."*” Therefore, woman is not equal to man and she should be subjected to man.

In this text, the Hebrew word “ezer,” translated as a “helper/partner,” in English was used 20 times in the Old Testament (Ps.121:) to describe God's help for Israel in times of her trouble and crises. It is not the kind of help from the subordinate or an assistant or a helpmate but positive, active,

⁶ Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis* in Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 323-324.

⁷ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 96.

personal and indispensable help just as one God offered for Israel. The word, “companion” in Hebrew means a pair that fits right for each other, a partnership bearing an equality and mutuality.⁸

According to commentators, nothing in the phrase *helper fit for him* suggests priority given to the man. Elsewhere the word “helper”(ezer) describes God as “helper” (P. 121: 1-2). In fact the use of the term in synonymous lines of Hebrew poetry has suggested to some that the word here means “power” (Deut. 33:29; Ps. 115:9-11).⁹

According to Tribble, the Hebrew word *ezer*, rendered here as “companion,” traditionally has been translated “helper”-- a translation that is totally misleading because the English word *helper* suggests an assistant, a subordinate, indeed, an inferior, while the Hebrew word *ezer* carries no such connotation. To the contrary, in the Hebrew Scriptures this word often describes God as the superior who creates and saves Israel. So it does in our story with connotation of superiority to specify identity, mutuality, and equality. According to Yahweh God, what the earth creature needs is a companion, one who is neither subordinate nor superior; one who alleviates isolation through identity.¹⁰

Old Testament scholars assert that when the text uses the term “helper or companion,” the intention of the J writer was not to name the woman as subordinate helper, but to say, that without her, the human being will be alone. And man alone cannot perform the perfect role as true human being. He used the term “helper” in the sense that man and woman needs each other to make complete human beings. Man alone cannot be the real image of human being. Not to emphasize man’s superiority but to give emphasis to the fact that only two together can become real human beings, and

⁸ Hyun Joo Bai. *Ordination of Women is Biblical* in the Collection of Women’s Ordination Source (Seoul: Clergy Women’s Association of the Korean Presbyterian Church, 1992), 60.

⁹ Roop. *Genesis*, 323.

¹⁰ Tribble, *God and Sexuality*, 90.

therefore, they are created for each other that fits right for each other, doesn't lead to discrimination or subordination.¹¹

Issue 4. *This one shall be called Woman (ishshah), for out of Man (ish)*

this one was taken" (2:23). And thus man has power over her.

Biblical scholars claim that "woman" was not a name for someone. "*This one shall be called Woman*" does not mean that man gave the woman a name but means that he found or discovered her as his partner/companion. Man and woman are just equal sexes. *Woman* is simply common noun and not a proper noun. It just means a gender but not a certain person. Adam is recognizing sexuality in words woman ('ishshah) and man ('ish). This recognition is not a commanding behavior claiming man's power. Neither partner holds any authority on the other partner.¹²

Issue 5. Woman committed sin first so she is a worse sinner than the man.

Therefore, she is not equal to man and must be dominated by man.

Calvin rejects even more decisively the argument that Adam was blameless and that only Eve sinned.¹³ Tribble also asserts: "the man was with her. Yet throughout this scene [of creation] the man has remained silent; he does not speak for obedience. His presence is passive and bland. He follows his woman without question or comment. She gives fruit to him, 'and-he-ate.' The story does not present him as reluctant or hesitating. He does not theologize; he does not contemplate. The man is passive, brutish, and inept."

Women committed sin by initiating eating the forbidden fruit and man also committed the same crime by eating it with the woman without questioning, as if he didn't even remember God's

¹¹ Chung Choon Kim. *Law and Prophets*, 70-71.

¹² Oo Jung Lee. *Theology for Women*, 158.

¹³ Douglas, Calvin. 57.

command directly given to him not eat it. They are accomplices and played the same role in committing sin. This counter argument exposes the injustice of patriarchal interpretation of the texts.¹⁴

By stressing man's voluntary participation in the sin, the counter argument overturns the traditional interpretation that a certain gender, the woman is weak to temptation and seducer of the man. It only emphasizes humanity's weakness and sinful nature.¹⁵

Although the Solomon era in which the J writer lived was a golden era in Israel history enjoying unprecedented prosperity and wellbeing, he presents the loss of the Garden of Eden due to human sin of arrogance, unfaithfulness, treachery, selfishness, greed, hunger for power, fame and luxury, applying theological criticism to that era. For Solomon, the national construction, economic revival, stable livelihood, strong army system, and national security appeared to be "*good for food, delight to the eyes, and possibility for everything.*" But in fact, it was Solomon's own sovereignty that reached to God's sovereign power. Biblical scholars interpret the J writer as being confident that the Garden of Eden built by Solomon will be ruined and his almighty power equivalent to God's power will perish.¹⁶

We pointed out that the above five texts have not mentioned that God created woman inferior. The assertion that God created woman lower than man is only a patriarchal interpretation and not the intent of these texts. We began to open our eyes to the reinterpretation and counter argument that the texts, previously interpreted to mean inequality between man and woman, rather intend to say "equality" in the relationship of man and woman. Therefore, those of us who live today must restore God's gracious intention to create man and woman equally. Then finally, man and woman can equally respect and love and serve one another.

¹⁴ Tribble, *God and Sexuality*. 113. Oo Jung Lee. *Theology for Women*, 161.

¹⁵ Jung Sook Lee. *Human Rights of Clergy Women: Study on Asian Women*. Asian Women's Study Institute, Sook Myung Women's University, 2003), vol. 42, 4.

¹⁶ Chung Choon Kim, *Law and Prophets*. 61