

IN THE BEGINNING...

Transgender Study

Session 1

Genesis 1:26-28a

Then God said, "Let us make an earth-being in our own image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humanity in God's own image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them. And God blessed them.

The question of gender occurs here, at the very beginning of the story of creation. If we are to examine the understanding of gender in the Bible, we need go no further than the first chapter before we encounter it. This passage has been used both to support a broadened understanding of a range of gender of humanity and God as well as a way to support the concept of the division of humanity in two distinct and separate genders.

Some people have used this text from the beginning of Genesis to argue that God created the binary divisions of humanity that humans should then observe. Because God created man and woman, they argue, these are the only two categories of humankind.

However, other people argue that the creation story in Genesis supports the understanding of a broad view of gender. A closer look at the text reveals nuances in its presentation of gender. We need to look closely at the ways in which gender is treated within the text, both the gender of God and the gender of humanity.

While most of us in the Jewish and Christian tradition have been taught that God is exclusively male, Genesis 1 clearly states that God encompasses both the female and the male since both women and men are made in the image of God. The New Interpreter's Bible states, "That both male and female are so created (see also 5:2) means that the female images the divine as much as the male; both are addressed in the command of v. 28." The New Interpreter's Bible goes on to state that a theological argument for God as both female and male could be made from this passage.¹

The earth-being (adam) created originally is both male and female, created in the image of God. This view is strongly supported by the Hebrew text, which uses the term adam, not as a name as is currently familiar in English, but in description of this being created from the earth. The word adam is a play upon the Hebrew word for earth, 'adamah. Rather than translating this word as a proper name, a more accurate rendering of the word would be "earthling" or "earth-being." Originally, this earthling was one, without gender differentiation, encompassing both female and male.²

The account of the creation, described in Genesis 1, tells a story that strongly supports a broader view of gender. Not only does God's own being incorporate both the male and the female, but so too does the human creation. The act of creation, even while differentiating between elements of creation, still leaves space for "in between" things: dusk, dawn, intersexed persons. God blesses all of those parts of creation, calling them good.³

¹ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 55-56.

² *Ibid.*, 58.

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

Genesis 2:4b-9, 18-24

At the time when God made earth and heaven - no shrub of the field being yet in the earth and no grains of the field having sprouted, for God had not sent rain upon the earth no human being was there to till the soil; instead a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the soil - God formed an earth creature from clods in the soil and blew into that one's nostrils the breath of life. Thus the earth creature became a living being.

God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the person whom God had formed. And out of the ground God caused to grow various trees that were a delight to the eye and good for eating, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of knowledge of good and bad...

God said, "It is not right that the earth creature should be alone. I will make an aid fit for the earth creature." So God formed out of the soil various wild beasts and birds of the sky and brought them to the person to see what that one called them; whatever the person would call a living creature, that was to be its name. The person gave names to all cattle, all birds of the sky, and all wild beasts; yet none proved to be the aid that would be fit for the earth creature.

Then God cast a deep sleep upon the earth creature and, when that one was asleep, God took one of the ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And God fashioned into a woman the rib that was removed from the man, and then brought her to the man. Said the man, "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called Woman, for she was taken from Man." Thus it is that man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh.

While this text is traditionally used to support the concept of heterosexual marriage, with the argument that we find our full completion only in a partner of the opposite sex, a sense is also here that from a single, androgynous being came two types of beings. More than one created being can come from the earth creature. The earth creature became a woman and a man when God removed a part of it and fashioned it into a whole. We could read this passage as opening up the possibilities of gender. If completeness comes from having both male and female, then a person who possessed both is a return to the original completion in the earth creature.

However, the problem that God sees with the earth creature was not that it lacked gender but that it was lonely. Traditionally, the loneliness was linked to gender, but nothing in the passage indicates that interpretation. Our reading of this passage can conclude, then, that gender is not the problem, but our isolation from love, connection, and relationship. Many trans people experience the breakup of primary relationships and isolation from their families of origin. This passage reveals to us that God is more concerned with our loneliness than with our gender and longs for us to have an appropriate companion and helper. Love brings completion, not gender, because a man and a woman who are together without love surely do not correct the problem that God identifies in this section. Rather, people who are appropriate companions and helpers for one another bring the creation back to a sense of goodness and completion.⁴

Questions for Discussion:

1. Read Genesis 1:26-28a and Genesis 2:4b-9, 18-24 in various translations (For example, KJV, NIV, and NRSV). Discuss the differences. How do the differences change the reader's perspective?
2. Do you read the Genesis creation stories as literal or metaphorical truth? What do you see as the overall themes of the Genesis creation stories? What are the stories trying to tell us?
3. When you think of God, do you have an image of God? Describe that image. What gender is God?
4. Is it difficult for you to image God as intersexed (possessing both gender characteristics)? When the Bible says that God created humankind in God's image, do you think it was talking in terms of physical traits or spiritual traits or both?

⁴ Ibid., 61-21.

DRAG ARTISTS AND CROSSDRESSERS

Transgender Study

Session 2

Deuteronomy 22:5

A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Sovereign your God.

Deuteronomy 22:5 is the only verse in the Bible that explicitly talks about cross-dressing. While it has not been used as extensively or stridently as biblical passages understood by some to condemn homosexuality, this verse has been troubling to faithful transgendered people who are concerned that they are breaking a biblical injunction and also to some people of faith concerned about the spiritual well-being of transgendered persons.¹

First, this verse includes prohibition against both men and women wearing the clothing deemed to be for the opposite sex. The word translated as “man’s apparel” refers to all things related to men, including weapons, ornamentation, and tools, while the second half of the verse refers only to men wearing women’s clothing.

Scholars cite a number of explanations for this section of Deuteronomy and its prohibitions, and no clear consensus exists about the meaning or reason for the prohibition of cross-dressing. Probably the most prominent explanation is that this verse was designed to prevent the Israelites from participating in pagan worship that included elements of cross-dressings and cross-gendered behavior.

Recent scholars cite as the impetus for this prohibition a connection with fertility cults connected with Canaanite and Syrian religious practices. They posit that male priests dressed as women as part of their devotion to a goddess, most probably Astarte and later Cybele. Cultic prostitution was forbidden in Hebrew Scriptures, and cross-dressing was seen as related to that practice. The Torah emphasizes keeping Israel pure and distinct from the religious expressions of neighboring societies, and this prohibition may have functioned as part of that process. One scholar notes, “Deuteronomy 22:5 then has nothing to do with unisex jeans, but aims to preserve the purity of Yahwehistic faith by checking the encroachment of such distortions as the manipulative fertility cults.”

Another theory is that cross-dressing could be used as a disguise. A disguise could allow a member of one sex to move freely among the opposite sex in a gender-segregated society, and thus increase the opportunities for forbidden sexual contact between women and men. This passage could be interpreted as an attempt to prevent men, while disguised as women, from gaining access to women’s spaces in order to commit rape. Similarly, this passage would also speak against women gaining access to male sacred spaces, such as the temple, where they were forbidden to go. With a disguise of the opposite sex, women could potentially gain access to those places, and this ban was designed to protect the integrity of gender-segregated space.²

Yet another interpretation notes that this section falls in the midst of prohibitions against mixing and blending things of distinct nature. The verses following this section, in the same chapter, state that:

You should not sow your vineyard with a second kind of seed, or the whole yield will have to be forfeited, both the crop that you have sown and the yield of the vineyard itself. You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together. You shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together. (Deut. 22:9-11)

One speculation is that cross-dressing “blurs the sexual differences God created.” Mixing and blending various elements is a serious concern, and keeping these things separate was part of what distinguished Israel from its neighbors.

Note, however, that modern Christianity, and many in modern Judaism, no longer follow literally the prohibitions listed in Deuteronomy. We are not concerned about fields with more than one type of crop or with clothing made with fabric blends. We do not see these issues as part of the integrity of creation. We do, though,

¹ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 62.

² *Ibid.*, 63-34.

make many distinctions about what people view as “feminine” and “masculine,” and our society has a great deal of discomfort with individuals who cross those lines.

The concept of the natural order of creation is one that links ancient and modern thinkers. Yet, how do we determine what is naturally “feminine” and naturally “masculine”? The type of dress and articles appropriate for men and for women are culturally determined and change with the times. No one is advocating that modern women and men return to the dress of the seventh century B.C.E., when Deuteronomy was written. In fact, the book of Deuteronomy restates the law articulated in Numbers in a way more accessible to the people of that time. Surely we should follow that process, rather than attempting to impose an ancient practice on modern people.

For me, the most compelling argument against this passage as a prohibition against cross-dressing is that we fail to follow any of the other directives around it. No outcry is heard in Christian communities against the eating of shellfish, even though Deuteronomy is clear that the practice is forbidden. The same chapter in Deuteronomy includes a provision to stone to death a woman who has been rejected by her husband and who is not able to prove that she was a virgin at the time the marriage took place. Certainly our society would condemn any church or synagogue that attempted to put this into practice, and we would charge those responsible with murder. No one is preaching about the dangers of mixing two or more types of seed in the garden. Modern communities of faith are unconcerned about any of the blending of things cited in Deuteronomy, other than the blending of male and female. My conclusion is that the concerns are more about gender and very little about the need or desire to follow the dictates of ancient law.³

Questions for Discussion:

1. Make a list of “men’s apparel” (don’t forget things like men’s wristwatches, power tools, pants, men’s cologne, etc.), as well as a list of “women’s garments.” Discuss which items, if any, you feel should be confined to a particular gender. Talk about who makes the rules about which item belongs to which gender.
2. Why do you think our society is so intent on making distinctions between “masculine” and “feminine?”
3. What are some reasons why people might intentionally wear clothes associated with a gender other than their assigned gender?

³ Ibid., 65-66.

EUNUCHS AND THE OLDER TESTAMENT

Transgender Study

Session 3

Deuteronomy 23:1

No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Sovereign.

Deuteronomy places a great deal of emphasis on preserving the purity of Israel and making clear the distinction between Israel and its neighbors. Neighboring peoples did have traditions in which priests serving other deities were castrated and where those charged with protecting and serving royal women were castrated as a means to ensure the “safety” of these women from sexual intercourse. In addition, castration was a punishment used in some nearby societies.

The Hebrew Scriptures also emphasize the need for procreation, both as a part of God’s dictates in Genesis and through the various laws. The nation was small and often embattled, and the need to grow the population was strong. Castration would remove a male from the ability to assist with procreation and was thus discouraged in every way possible. Children were necessary for furthering the family, assisting in tasks necessary for continuing life for the community, caring for elderly parents, and as a way for life to continue. The Hebrew culture had no strong sense of the afterlife, and continuing the family line was one way to live on after death.

Concerns also existed about both offerings and priests being free from blemishes or physical deformities. In the culture of the time, only those who were considered whole should approach God, excluding those who were injured or deformed.¹

Questions for Discussion:

1. Given the context in which this Scripture passage was written, does it “translate” into modern-day post-operative transsexuals?
2. What relationship does it have to genital surgery for intersexed infants? If you have not discussed the controversy surrounding genital alteration for intersexed infants, take this opportunity to do so.

Isaiah 56:1-5

Thus says God: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil. Do not let the foreigner joined to God say, “The Sovereign will surely separate me from this people”; and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” For thus says God: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

In this passage, the prophet emphasizes that justice and faithfulness are the primary things that God wants from humanity. In earlier sections of the Scriptures, as we have seen, both eunuchs and foreigners are very specifically cut out of the covenant that God has with Israel and are forbidden to participate in the community’s worship of God. This passage reveals a new commandment from God that directly contradicts earlier law. Part of the justice that God now demands requires that the people practice an acceptance and inclusion of others in their midst, including foreigners and eunuchs. Not only are such people to be included, but the prophet goes on to declare that God will give them a name better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name. This declaration marks a radical change from the views of Deuteronomy.²

Questions for Discussion:

1. What are the priorities that are identified in this passage?
2. Read Isaiah 54 and chapter 56 in their entirety. What are the promises for the outcast?
3. What does it mean to be given a “name”?
4. This passage seems to contradict Deuteronomy 23:1. How do you resolve the contradiction?

¹ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 67-68.

² *Ibid.*, 69.

EUNUCHS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Transgender Study

Session 4

Matthew 19:11-12

But Jesus said to the disciples, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the dominion of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”

Many scholars argue that this passage is not to be taken literally, but refers primarily to those who have forgone marriage and become celibate in order to better serve the church. Jesus’ intention was clearly broader than that, because he includes not only people who abstain from marriage but all possible configurations of eunuchs. Limiting Jesus’ teaching solely to celibates oversimplifies this passage and does not hold us, as the community of faith, fully accountable to the full extent of Jesus’ words.³

The important aspect of this passage is that Jesus recognizes and comments upon the lives and situations of gender-variant people in his society. A number of transgendered authors write about Jesus’ saying regarding eunuchs. Virginia Mollenkott says the following about Jesus’ teaching:

Jesus’ words about eunuchs in Matthew 19:12 reveal an accepting, respectful attitude that ought to be the norm for the modern church: “For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth” includes at the very least all intersexual people; “and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others” includes post-operative transsexuals; “and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven” includes not only pre-operative and non-operative transsexuals but all other transgenderists, celibates, and homosexuals who do not engage in reproductive sex. The kingdom of heaven is located within us (Luke 17:21); so perhaps what Jesus means by being eunuchs “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” is the Jewish counsel of being true to one’s deepest nature.

In the web article “Jesus and Male and Female,” author Michelle Dee writes:

In Jesus’ day, there was no SRS, though there were transgendered people, naturally. (After all, why would crossdressing have been mentioned in Deuteronomy at all if it hadn’t existed for thousands of years?) Jesus openly acknowledges that “some are eunuchs because they were born that way,” and this naturally opens up the door to consider the intersexed hermaphrodite, whose sex is simultaneously both and neither. Jesus acknowledges sexual diversity and did not judge it.

This last point is critically important for Christians to consider. Clearly, Jesus knows that some people are born outside of the binary gender system and people whose lives lead them beyond it. He speaks of multiple ways in which someone might have become gender variant, and he does so with compassion and clarity. We are called to do likewise.⁴

Question for Discussion:

1. How do you describe the three classifications in this passage: a.) eunuchs from birth, b.) eunuchs made by others, and c.) self-made eunuchs? Do you think Jesus was speaking literally or metaphorically?

Acts 8:25-39

Now after Peter and John had testified and spoken the word of the Sovereign, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans. Then an angel of God said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied,

³ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 73

⁴ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

“How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

*“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”*

The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask, does the prophet say this? About himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of God snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

One of the most powerful stories in Scriptures for gender-variant people is the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in the book of Acts. The eunuch was a court official of the Candace, a title for the queen of Ethiopia. He was in Jerusalem to worship and was now returning home, reading a section of Scripture filled with words of consolation and inclusion, as well as the description of the Suffering Servant of God from Isaiah 53:7. As a foreigner and eunuch, he was in a spiritual border zone, both included and excluded in Judaism, and between genders.⁵

First century-commentators, such as Josephus,...regarded eunuchs as unnatural “monstrosities” who must be shunned on account of their gross effeminacy and generative impotence (Ant 4.290-91), and Philo, who classified eunuchs as various “worthless persons” banned from the sacred assembly because they “debase the currency of nature and violate it by assuming the passions and the outward form of licentious women.” (Special Laws 1.324-25).

The very negativity of the commentators’ reactions strengthens the argument that eunuchs are analogous to modern transgendered persons since they were considered to have crossed gender lines. Certainly these views sound familiar to us and are ones against which we have had to struggle.⁶

Question for discussion:

1. What do you think would have moved public opinion from Jesus’ statement in Matthew 19:11-12 to Josephus’s and Philo’s statements in the first century?

Galatians 3:28

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

This verse of Scripture calls into question, and ultimately into accountability, the human divisions of race, class, and gender. If those of us who are Christians would follow this mandate, such a change would have a profound impact on how we live and are. Among other things, transgendered people would not be excluded from or just tolerated in communities of faith but welcomed as equals; nor would distinctions be placed on the roles of women and men in our religious bodies. We would not have categories of acceptable churchgoers and respectable Christians, separate from unacceptable, disreputable queer folks. Rather, all would be welcome in the body of Christ.⁷

Questions for discussion:

1. What are some ways that we can live out this passage? What things can we be intentional about doing in our own church to blur any distinction between race, class, and gender?
2. How can we make our church more “transgender-friendly?”

⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁶ Ibid., 78.

⁷ Ibid., 80.