

THE THEOLOGY OF MALE AND FEMALE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Studying the theology of the Old Testament is never an easy task. The Hebrew Scriptures are a library of works written at different times by different authors in different contexts. It therefore often seems impossible to arrive at a common Old Testament theology on which all can agree. Seldom is this made more obvious than in the case of what may be described as "male-female theology," which perhaps has become an area of more debate and disagreement than any other in contemporary biblical theology. With the development of the feminist movement and the growing awareness of the role of women in history and in the church, there has been an increasing amount of study devoted to relationships between the sexes and to human sexuality, both from socio-historical and theological perspectives.

The increased awareness of this subject is a very positive development in theology as well as in the life of the Christian community. Unfortunately, much of the work that has been done in recent years has been remarkably biased. Traditionalist scholars have continued to assert their views of the sexes, their relationships with each other, and their relationship with God without making a proper exegetical study of the Scriptures. And feminist scholars have been no better. They, too, have been guilty of reading their values and prejudices into the texts without examining them carefully. Both groups have considered the Old Testament to espouse male superiority and female subordination. According to both, that library of Scripture describes a male deity (Yahweh) who gives clear divine endorsement to a patriarchal society in which women are to be both subordinate and submissive to men. Traditionalists look at the texts as *a blueprint for the proper relative positions of men and women in the church, the home, and in society*; feminists consider the Old Testament to be an "obviously" sexist set of books which should be ignored when it deals with the status and roles of men and women. They see the biblical witness to male and female sexuality as

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existing in a purely sociological context *outside the bounds of divine ordinance*.¹

Scholars concerned with objectivity should avoid both these views. The Old Testament is not a collection of proof texts which can rightly be used in a legalistic fashion to justify an existing position or establish a new one. Neither, however, can what it says be relegated to time-bound sociological situations which have no bearing on contemporary life. While the conscientious scholar must take various historical Old Testament contexts into account, he or she must also attempt a serious exegetical study of the Old Testament as a whole to determine whether a common theme or theology of male-female exists throughout it. For the Old Testament does speak to the question of male-female relationships in God's overall purpose for humanity. Moreover, the biblical witness in the area of human sexuality is one which shows God's infinite love in giving purpose, dignity, and equality to all humans—whether male or female! If such a study is ignored, there is a danger of completely relativizing the Scriptures—something which would effectively render them useless as anything more than a source of literary and historical information.²

In trying to find an Old Testament theology of male and female, the logical place to start is with the creation accounts in the first three chapters of Genesis. Those chapters have traditionally been used (and often still are) to attempt to prove that women are inferior to men and, thus, should be in subjection to them. For centuries, Catholic and Protestant theologians have examined this textual material and most have argued that God willed that human society should be perpetually hierarchical in nature, with men holding positions of superiority over women. Such theologians have also tended to assert strongly that this order should be maintained in the home, the church, and society in general. Interestingly, they have turned most frequently to Genesis 2 and 3 in support of this argument, while practically ignoring Genesis 1, which they have much more difficulty in using in support of their thesis.

MALE AND FEMALE IN GENESIS 1

Genesis 1: 26, 27 reads: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness....' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Here the

¹ Mary Hayter, *The New Eve in Christ: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in the Debate about Women in the Church* (SPCK: London, 1987), p. 3.

² *Ibid.*

key words are: "so God created man in his own image ... male and female he created them," for the fact that both man and woman were created in God's image is something which has been ignored or twisted out of its evident original meaning by many theologians. For example, fourth-century church fathers like Diodore of Tarsus and John Chrysostom did not regard women as having been made in God's image. They felt that only men, that is male human beings, are created in his image. Thus they held that men exercise power and dominion, attributes which are rightly denied to women by both God and society. So women only reflect God's nature *in a secondary sense through men*.³

Before attempting to determine biblically whether or not women are created directly in the image of God, it is necessary to determine what the Scripture means by "image." We need not think that God has a literal form like a man. The *imago Dei*—the image of God—is that which reflects God on a creaturely level as is shown rather clearly by Genesis 1: 28. There man (*'ād ām*) is told to exercise dominion as does God. Hence man alone of all visible creation has been given powers of rational transcendence and a self-determining will. Man alone is related to God and his (or her) neighbor as a free and responsible subject.⁴ He (or she) is the only earthly creature that can and does exist in relationship with God.

Yet this does not imply, as some have suggested, that because man is both male and female, God must also be a sexual being. In saying that man is created in God's image, Genesis does not state what God is but, rather, what man (*'ād ām*) is. It does not speak of God's nature in any ultimate sense, although it does indicate something of how he relates to humanity. As Paul Jewett notes: "This implies that already in the divine Being there must be, though in an eminent way beyond what we can conceive, whatever is affirmative in sexuality and sociality in masculinity and femininity.... God transcends the distinction of sex, but he does this not by sheer exclusion, but by prefiguring whatever is of value in sexuality on an altogether higher level."⁵ Therefore, sexuality is not in itself an aspect of the *imago Dei*, but it is a reflection of the divine purpose and the natural basis of human community which is made up of both male and female.⁶

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 88.

⁴ Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study of Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶ J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1977), pp. 329-30. For a more detailed discussion of the meaning of "image" in Genesis,

Another argument that has been common in history, and that has been used on the basis of Genesis 1: 26-28, is the theory that originally humanity was sexless, and sex only came into being as a direct result of the Fall. This theory seems to have grown out of a Gnostic worldview which considered flesh, and therefore sexual intercourse as that act which brings flesh into being, as not of God or good. In fact, flesh and sexual intercourse were held to be thoroughly *evil*. The result of this concept has been an attitude of fear and hatred of sexuality which has existed throughout the history of Christianity since the second century and which permeates much Christian thinking throughout the world today.

This negative attitude towards sexuality has often resulted in a fear and hatred of women as those responsible for causing males to fall into the sin of lust and a desire for sexual relations with them. Women have been seen as temptresses, leading men away from the true, spiritual path of celibacy. Yet the question needs to be raised whether or not the arguments which are used to support this attitude are inherent in the Old Testament view of human sexuality.

A close look at Genesis reveals that they are not. Not only is there no suggestion in that book that celibacy is "more spiritual" than a sexual relationship, it actually indicates just the opposite. Man and woman were created *together* as part of God's original divine plan for the race. Accordingly, the subject of creation at Genesis 1: 26-28 is '*ād ām*, a word which like the comparable English word "man," is often used as the collective Hebrew noun for the species *homo sapiens*.⁷ Both male and female together were named '*ād ām*—man—when created. Hence both men and women were to share and manifest the image and likeness of God. It was his intention for them that they live together in harmony and community *as both male and female*.

Not only does Genesis 1: 26-28 indicate God's creation of both male and female in his image, *it reflects the fact that to be a sexual being is fundamental to what it is to be human*. It was God's intent to create sexuality, and he pronounced it good. As is shown by verse 28, sexual relations and human procreation through such relations were to occur in response to God-given commands; they were not deviations from some perfect ideal of sexless being! Although many early church fathers moved away from this positive view of sexuality as early as the beginning of the second century, it was not one foreign to Judaism. Marriage and sexual love (although always taking place within a patriarchal society)

see James Barr, "The Image of God in the Book of Genesis—a Study of Terminology," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 51 (1968), pp. 11-26.

⁷ Hayter, p. 88.

were considered as gifts of God by the Israelites. Celibate life was something which they did not even consider.

In Genesis 1, man and woman, male and female, are created together. There is no temporal or natural (ontological) supremacy given to one sex over the other. True humanity does not exist within the confines of one sex only; to be real and complete, humanity comprises both male and female. Both the man and woman are equal in their standing before God and in relation to one another. Together they are blessed and together they are commanded to fill the earth and subdue it. Neither is given dominion over the other.⁸ Therefore, to attempt to argue that sexuality is something which is to be transcended and suppressed is to say that God was wrong when he created male and female, and that humans know better about what real humanity should be than does he. Sex is based in the creative purpose of God. He sanctifies human sexuality and thus has nothing to do with denigrating it. Fear and hatred of sex (and of women) are outside of God's plan for humanity.

Genesis 1 vindicates the equality of purpose and design for both men and women. It states that man and woman were created together for the same purpose. There is no hint that male supremacy or superiority were any part of God's plan in the ordering of society. As mentioned earlier, however, theologians have traditionally used Genesis chapters 2 and 3 to prove their thesis that woman is, by God's order, to be in subjection to man. Even feminists who deny the validity of this argument hold that these chapters denigrate women. At first glance, they may seem to be difficult passages with which to deal in the light of Genesis 1: 26-28. Furthermore, they may lead to certain assumptions depending on the bias of the reader. But with careful exegesis and an attempt to distance oneself from traditional, theologically slanted views, it is possible to obtain a clearer picture of what the writer of those chapters is saying.

MALE-FEMALE RELATIONS IN GENESIS 2

Genesis 2: 20-23 states: "...but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'"

From this passage assumptions have been made about the place and role of women in relation to men, one of which is that because man was

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 89.

created first, he is ontologically superior to woman. Another holds that since woman was created from man—from his rib—this also proves his natural superiority and her natural inferiority. Surprisingly, few people have questioned whether or not these are the meanings to be taken from this passage of Scripture. Both ideas have become commonly held doctrines against which few in the past have argued. In recent years, however, there have been a number of scholars who have deduced different meanings from this text.

One of the more outstanding of these is Phyllis Tribble in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Tribble evades the problem of male temporal-ontological superiority by saying that the term 'ād ām does not speak of the prior creation of a male. She argues that the term in Genesis 2 refers to a sexually undifferentiated "earth creature," and it is only at Eve's creation that male and female came into being. Tribble is not suggesting an ideal androgyny as some have done, for she says that, according to God, 'ād ām alone was not good. According to Genesis 2: 18 the creation of humanity was not yet complete until the sexes had been created. With the creation of iś and iśša or man and woman, the term 'ād ām acquired the second meaning of man as the male. Prior to that event, 'ād ām had simply referred to the "earth creature."⁹

Tribble's argument is certainly attractive from a feminine point of view in that it does away with the suggestion that the male is superior because he was created first or that woman was derived from him. None the less, there are a number of problems with her thesis. First, as Brevard Childs says: "there is no indication that 'ād ām was split into an iś and an iśša but rather the iśša is derived from the iś. There is no sign of a simultaneous creation of sexuality."¹⁰ Another problem with Tribble's position is that it cannot be sustained linguistically. The term 'ād ām is not used any differently before than after the creation of the woman. In fact, after her creation iś and iśša are paralleled with 'ād ām and iśša. Finally, although it does not prove anything by itself, the Masoretic tradition uses the term man, 'ād ām, as a proper name both times in the verse in question. In both the Hebrew and Greek traditions there was general agreement that 'ād ām referred to a male of the species.¹¹ Hence Tribble's argument, although enticing to many women, is not borne out by a careful examination of the context.

⁹ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 96-99.

¹⁰ Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 190.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 190, 191.

Does this mean, then, that the traditional male-oriented views of this text are correct? Is woman to be in subjection to man because she was created after man and from his rib? A careful study of what the Scripture says will show that such views do not follow logically from what is said. That man was created first in no way implies his natural superiority. If that argument is used, it follows that the animals should be superior to man because they were created before him. The creation of woman is seen here as *the culmination of creation*, not an afterthought to God's perfected creation in the male. It was "not good for the man ('*ād ām*) to be alone." Hence God created woman, and the creation of humanity was not complete until she was created.¹² So, even though '*ād ām*' means man as male in this instance, temporal priority of creation cannot be regarded as a basis for male dominance or female subordination.

A second argument used to support the traditional, conservative view of male-female relations in the Old Testament is the idea that the word *išša* implies a "supernumerary" addition to *iš*. The words are used "to prove" that as woman is taken from man, she is a subtraction from him and therefore belongs to him. However, if one looks to the Hebrew words *iš* and *išša* in this way, then it is also necessary to consider the word '*ād ām*'. It is taken from '*ād ām ā*' (earth). So if the argument for *iš* and *išša* is followed logically, then man ('*ād ām*') is a "supernumerary" addition to the earth ('*ād ām ā*') and, therefore, subordinate to it. No sane Jew or Christian would suggest any such thing. Is there any meaning, then, in the similarities between the words *iš* and *išša*? The two words—although they are not related etymologically—may suggest to the reader that a close connection exists between the very nature of the man and that of the woman. They are related in the deep sense of being of the same race or species and having the same joint relationship with God. So the term *išša* in no sense implies female subordination.¹³

Another argument used as proof of male dominance is the view that because woman was created from the rib of man, she is somehow a derived being and, therefore, not an autonomous creature like the man. Many theologians have asserted that a rib is something rather unimportant from which to be created—thus attempting to justify their thesis of female subordination. But what is more humble, even humiliating, than to be created directly from earth? Because Adam was created from dust, does this mean he was naturally subordinate to it? No theologian would suggest such nonsense. Yet many follow that kind of argumentation respecting the creation of woman. Also, as far as autonomy

¹² Hayter, p. 98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

is concerned, the man was no more independent than the woman. Both were in complete subjection to God who had molded them from preexistent material. The man took no part in the creation of the woman—God caused him to sleep, and God himself created the woman. *Thus both man and woman owe their existence directly to God.* Again, the relationship and relatedness of the male and female are shown by this passage. The fact that woman was created from the rib of man shows that she is *homoousias with him*. That is, she is of the same nature and substance as the man, and thus the unity of God's human creation is established in Genesis 2.¹⁴

Finally, the text which is probably used most consistently to "prove" that God has "ordained" female subordination is Genesis 2: 18. Here, God says that he will make a helper for man. As the King James Version puts it, woman was created to be a "helpmeet" for man, and it is therefore argued that her primary function should be to support him and work for his benefit in a subservient role. While at first glance this verse may seem to support such a meaning, careful exegesis demonstrates that it is not really present in the text. In the first place, the Hebrew word for "helper" is *'ezer*, a word which does not denote a subordinate assistant. In fact, out of the 21 times it is used in the Old Testament, in 15 instances it refers to God as the helper of Israel (See for example Exodus 18: 4; Deuteronomy 33: 7; and Psalm 33: 20). Just as Israel needed God, so, too, does man need woman. However, this need does not, on the opposite end of the scale, point to female superiority any more than it does male superiority. For God says that he will create a helper "fit for him" (*kenegdo*). This implies that the helper would be his counterpart, one who corresponded to him as animals—or God for that matter—did not. There is no hint of superiority in the word, but rather one of similarity and complementarity. This passage emphasizes the need that humans have that can only be met by a complementary and equal figure—not by either a superior or inferior one.¹⁵

GENESIS 3 AND THE EFFECTS OF THE FALL

Contrary to traditional, conservative exegesis, it becomes clear that Genesis 2 does not lay the basis for a divinely established hierarchical order with men in roles of supremacy. Clearly, the ideal indicated by this passage is one of mutuality and equality. God created the male and the female as companions of like nature and substance. He did not cre-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

ate an order where men were to subjugate women and dominate them. Man and woman together were to fulfill the purposes of their creator.

The creation stories in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 celebrate, in different ways, the joy of God's purpose in creating both male and female. In chapter 3, this joy turns quickly into sorrow and pain. This chapter relates the story of the Fall. Humanity turns its back on God in rebellion, and the perfect, divine order of God is brought to an end. It is at this point in human history that the idea of male supremacy and female subordination enters. But this is not the result of God's will; rather, it is the result of human sin. It was only after Adam and Eve had sinned that God said to Eve "your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3: 16). As a result of sin, mankind's proper relationship with God was destroyed. In turn, the proper relationship between man and woman was also destroyed. Hence, men become dominant, women became subservient, and neither benefited. Their new relationship did not represent God's purpose for them; nor was it healthy for either.

Beginning with the Fall, human sexual relations moved from "polarity" to "polarization." With polarity, opposites are related by mutual attraction: they are drawn to unite without destroying the distinct individuality of each. On the contrary, the individuality of each is heightened and realized. With polarization, opposites retreat from one another and, when they do meet, they conflict with one another. The two "poles" split apart and seek to destroy the individuality of their opposites.¹⁶ With human sin came a distortion of the human male-female relationship, and the battle of the sexes began.¹⁷

While many traditionalist theologians agree with the view that sin was the cause of the disruption of perfect human relations, they hold that the submission of women to men was based on a God-given command. The original woman was to be subservient to her husband because God had created her to be weaker, both physically and mentally. Accordingly, she was "weak" and, from her weakness, "fickle" from the beginning. Hence it was she who "nagged" Adam to disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit. Eve is thus seen not only as a weak woman but, also, as a temptress who lured her husband into disobedience.¹⁸ So, not only was she inferior to man by nature, it was she who is held to be the primary source of original sin. According to some early church fathers, Adam on his own would have been too strong morally for Satan to have

¹⁶ A.B. Ulanov, *The Feminine in Jungian Psychology and Christian Theology* (Evanston: 1971), pp. 296-7; cf. 301-3.

¹⁷ Hayter, p. 109.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

seduced him. As Tertullian says to womankind through Eve: "You are the one who opened the door to the Devil, you are the one who first plucked the fruit of the forbidden tree, you are the one who first deserved the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him who the Devil was not strong enough to attack. All too easily you destroyed the image of God, man. Because of your desert, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die."¹⁹

This argument has been one that has remained very popular and has been used regularly to justify the suppression of women. Yet it is simply an example where something has been read into Scripture on the basis of certain readers' biases. If one studies the Genesis text which recounts the sin of Eve and Adam, it is clear that *both* are punished for their disobedience to God. There is no evidence that the woman's sin was greater or that she was held responsible, to the exclusion of the man, for bringing sin into the world. In fact, the man himself tries to escape censure for his action by blaming both the woman and God: "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3: 12 AV).

The idea that Satan tempted the woman because she was an easier target also does not follow logically. The Scripture says that Eve simply gave Adam the fruit to eat and he ate it. If he was strong enough to withstand the devil, why was he not strong enough to withstand his wife? The account tells that the woman questioned the serpent, but it says nothing about the man doing so. Hence, Genesis 3 actually makes the woman appear the stronger willed and bolder of the two persons—she took the initiative while the man remained passive and followed his wife's example.

After looking carefully at the first and second chapters of Genesis, it is obvious that God did not create superior and inferior sexes. *His purpose was to create man and woman as two complementary partners who together made up humanity.* The creation stories of Genesis, far from giving legitimacy to the idea of male supremacy are actually a celebration and recognition of the equality and mutuality of the sexes. Both male and female share identical humanness, equal dignity, and the common task of multiplying, filling, and subduing the earth. They are both created in the image of God and owe independent obedience to him as their creator. Male supremacy is not a divine right, nor is the concept of female subordination based on a divinely ordained law.²⁰

Does the fact that man and woman were created equal mean that they should have exactly identical roles? Certainly it is obvious, from

¹⁹ Quoted in Hayter, p. 103.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

biological differences alone, that men and women are formed to play different roles and are better able to perform different tasks on the basis of their sex. Women are made to bear children, something men cannot do. Men are ordinarily naturally stronger than women and, therefore, can do work that women cannot. Hence, the roles of each of the sexes are determined in part by their physical make-up. The Scripture also says that God made woman as a "helper" for the man. As has already been discussed, the idea of helper in this sense is a person who helps to make the man complete and fulfilled. This text does not say that "helper" means one who necessarily cooks, cleans, and acts as a housekeeper, as has frequently been held. Because of the time period and the environment in which Genesis was written, a patriarchal society was built around the idea that men were the bread winners and women the bread makers. There is, however, nothing divinely ordained in the creation accounts which states that these roles are natural or necessary to men and women. The only specific which the passage mentions is that the man and woman were to act together to multiply and to fill the earth and subdue it.²¹

The Genesis creation accounts should be regarded as positive affirmations of the equality of the sexes in God's eyes and the equal importance of both in salvation history. Careful exegesis demonstrates a positive view of womankind in the first three chapters of Genesis, yet it is impossible to argue that this attitude is present throughout all the rest of the Old Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures were written within a male-dominated society where women were treated as little more than male possessions. While it would be wrong to suggest that women had no influence and were generally treated badly by their fathers and husbands, there is certainly much evidence which demonstrates their lack of equality within Israelite society. It is important, therefore, to examine the Old Testament in light of Hebraic patriarchal society to determine whether or not the view expressed in Genesis continued to be regarded as the correct one by later Israelite and Jewish Bible writers.

THE BOOK OF RUTH

Of all of the books of the Bible, there are only two whose principal subjects are women—Ruth and Esther. And since the setting of the book of Esther is a Persian harem, only the story of Ruth is really relevant to an Old Testament male-female theology. In this account the two central characters are Ruth, a young Moabite woman, and Naomi, her Jewish mother-in-law. At the beginning of the book, neither Ruth nor

²¹ Tribble, p. 104.

Naomi are mentioned by name. They are only described by their relation to their husbands *who are named*—evidence of the strong patriarchal society in which fathers alone gave families their identity.

Following the death of their husbands, each woman “receives” her own identity and is called by her personal name. Thereafter, the two determine and pursue their life course. Not only do they return to Israel on their own, but Naomi devises a plot to get Ruth married to one of her kinsmen. Thus, it is either Naomi or Ruth who takes the initiative throughout most of the story. Even when Ruth goes into Boaz to “uncover his feet and lie down” to wait for him to instruct her with regard to what she should do (Ruth 3: 4), it is actually she who tells him: “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.” (Ruth 3: 9 NIV).

Women are pictured as being in charge of their lives. Despite this, it remains obvious that the book of Ruth was written during patriarchal times. For as much as Ruth and Naomi are described as responsible for their own affairs, men are still pictured as ultimately controlling their futures. Their situations, and the reasons behind what they do, are given from a totally different perspective by Boaz, the male character in the story. Naomi’s desire to find someone for Ruth to marry was not for Ruth’s own pleasure and well-being but, according to Boaz, was for the buying of land, the maintenance and restoration of property rights, and for the restoration of a dead man’s name (Ruth 4: 9,10).²² Thus, the story of Ruth takes place within a man’s world and “concerns of women may well be subsumed, perhaps even subverted, by this patriarchal climate.”²³ Still, Ruth is an account of two women whose independent actions bring the blessings of God upon them personally and ultimately upon the whole nation of Israel. The two initiate action and act according to *their* will.

So the book of Ruth tells of Naomi and Ruth making a new beginning—with the help of God—in a world controlled largely by men. Thus, while they are forced to live according to the rules of their culture, they none the less demonstrate that in God’s eyes their role in salvation history is just as important as that of men. In fact, they are not dependent on men for what they do or in their relation to God. *They suffer and struggle solely as women and are blessed for it.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 192.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

MALE AND FEMALE IN THE SONG OF SONGS

Another Old Testament book which is important to the subject of a theology of male-female relations is the Song of Songs or Canticle of Canticles. Over the centuries theologians have had a difficult time in knowing what to do with it because of its overt eroticism. Some have treated it as an eschatological book dealing with future society. Others have viewed it as an allegory dealing with God's relationship with his people. It is, however, something much simpler and more straightforward than either of those two things: it is a description of human love. There is no plot and God is not mentioned in it. It is nothing more nor less than a series of erotic poems which tell of the joys and delights of physical love between a man and a woman. Considering that it was written within a patriarchal society, what is fascinating is the fact that *a woman* is the most prominent speaker in the poems. Not only is she the main character, but her equality with the man in a mutual relationship is illustrated and illuminated. It is *she* who actively pursues the man to join with her in the act of physical love. Female imagery and references, such as "daughters of Jerusalem," "house of your mother," "my mother's sons," abound throughout.

Contrary to the situation in Genesis, where woman is told "her desire shall be for her husband," the Song of Songs speaks of the man having desire for the woman (Song of Sol. 7:10). His power over her vanishes and his desire becomes her delight. The two relate to each other in mutual joy.²⁴ In total giving, love, and desire, the couple treat each other with full respect and equality. There is no dominance, no submission. Without shame or fear the two celebrate their love together without stereotyping the role of either.²⁵ Human love and sexuality are celebrated for their own sakes, apart from any utilitarian motive such as procreation or religious service.

The Song of Songs celebrates the beauty of sexuality and the equality of the sexes. The amazing thing is that despite the strict morality of Israelite society under the Law, it deals with the joys of sexual relations without speaking of marriage or procreation. There is no hint that its male and female characters are married, nor does it give any purpose behind their relations other than their own enjoyment. Although this is a beautiful testimony to the fact that sexuality is something which is to be shared and enjoyed in love and mutuality, taken by itself, it could create a distorted idea of what the proper relationship between man and woman in a righteous, God-fearing society should be. While it

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

supports the view of sexual equality expressed in the Genesis creation accounts, the Song of Songs does not present a full picture of the way in which the two sexes should relate to one another in the family or in society.

At Genesis 2: 24, the Scripture says that a man "leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife." The book of Proverbs deals with this matter when it discusses the impropriety of sexual intercourse outside marriage. Proverbs 7 tells of a young man who allows himself to be seduced by a prostitute—something which is shown to be both foolish and sinful. Yet in the light of an isolated examination of the Song of Songs there is nothing inherently wrong with its lovers' tryst. However, the Proverbs text condemns such a relationship outside marriage and stresses that a misuse of sex will cause self-destruction. Rightly used, sex becomes the joyful possession of the wise. In Proverbs 5, it is suggested strongly that monogamy is the ideal state for a male-female relationship in which sexual love is included. Sexual relations, within such a relationship, testify to the divine order of God. They are a blessing given to humanity by God. While the Song of Songs is a joyful witness to the delight of sexuality, it would be wrong to look at it outside the context of the rest of the Old Testament. The total Old Testament picture presented is one in which love between two persons, male and female, is best expressed within a faithful, monogamous marriage.

THE CENTRAL OLD TESTAMENT VIEW OF MALE-FEMALE RELATIONS

Without doubt, the Old Testament is filled with stories which are shocking to modern readers. Those who believe strongly in the equality of women may have a very difficult time in reading various passages of the Hebrew Scriptures without feeling anger over the way women were viewed and treated. Through a careful study of the Old Testament as a whole, however, one can see that it has an elevated concept of the nature of the proper relationship between men and women. Jewish society was patriarchal, and women were considered inferior to men. Yet the overall witness of the Old Testament is that this was far from God's initial plan. He created humans—both male and female—to exist in harmony and equality. Each is to be a complement to the other. So from this standpoint, humanity is not made up of just one sex or the other; it is both sexes together. Men cannot live without women and women cannot live without men. It was not good for man to live alone. So God, in his loving kindness, created a companion for him. He created another being in his (God's) image, a being with the same nature and substance as man. Hence, man and woman were to work and play together in love

and harmony. The sexuality of humanity was also a blessing given by God which men and women were to share in joy and thanksgiving. Only with sin did this relationship become distorted. No longer was there equality; there was dominance and subjection—a perversion of God's original plan in creation. Therefore, like the first man and woman before their sin, like the man who takes pleasure in his wife in Proverbs, and like the young lovers in the Song of Songs, Christian men and women today are called to live lives of mutual respect, love, and harmony. Together they are to celebrate their love for one another, knowing that they are equal before God and that they stand together as partners and compliments, not competitors or adversaries.

Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold,
you are beautiful!
Your eyes are doves
behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
moving down the slopes of
Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes
that have come up from the
washing,
all of which bear twins,
and not one among them is
bereaved.
Your lips are like a scarlet thread,
and your mouth is lovely.
Your cheeks are like halves of a
pomegranate
behind your veil.
Your neck is like the tower of David,
built for an arsenal,
whereon hang a thousand bucklers,
all of them shields of warriors.
Your two breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle,
that feed among the lilies.
Until the day breathes
and the shadows flee,
I will hie me to the mountain of
myrr
and the hill of frankincense.