

Is Genesis 1-11 irredeemably sexist?

Introduction

Genesis 1-11 is Israel's wonderfully-constructed fiction about the origins of life and the beginnings of humanity, a series of primeval stories about the God who would become Israel's God, and the world which God created. It is a complex collection - its writers combining tales of lore and original invention with what Robert Alter calls 'conscious artistry'¹. Their intentions were *priestly* - to express the divine origins of all things and to describe the covenant relationships which God made with the people, and *Jahwistic* - underlining God's faithfulness to the people despite their rebellion against their creator. This is fiction with historical and social significance, these are stories which enabled the Hebrew writers and their readers to 'realize history'²:

Perhaps more than any other biblical text, the texts which comprise the book of Genesis have traditionally been and are perceived to embody cultural emblems. The attribution of emblematic properties to them facilitates their implementation for religious, spiritual, cultural, socio-economic and political ends, a praxis which may be on the decline but is still widespread.³

This makes Genesis a 'powerful, cultural document'⁴, writing which is *etiological* because 'it explains the reasons for current names and traditions'⁵. A key concern of Genesis 1-11 is captured in the word *toledot*, or 'begettings'. J.P. Fokkeman writes that 'The begettings provide a solid framework that supports and meticulously articulates the various sections of Genesis'.⁶ Three instances of *toledot* in Genesis 1-11, at 5.1, 10.1 and 11.10 separate the three different sections - 'creation' / Adam and Eve (chapters 1-4), 'flood' / Noah (6-9) and 'scattering' / Babel (11). In each of these instances human fathers beget human offspring. In a fourth, at 2.4a, it appears that God begets the whole of creation: 'these are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created'. This structure underlines the centrality of fertility, reproduction, generation, intimate human (and divine-human) relations in Genesis 1-11.

Everything converges and fits perfectly at the highest level, that of theme,

¹ Alter, R, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981), p.32

² *ibid*, p.32

³ Brenner, A, *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p.13

⁴ *ibid*, p.13

⁵ Boadt, L, *Reading the Old Testament, An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), p.121

⁶ Fokkeman, J.P, *Genesis*, in Alter, A & Kermode, F, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Fontana, 1997), p.41

expressed in the words of God concerning fertility that permeate the book. From the primeval age on, God's general commandment, 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth' (1.28), predominates.⁷

Thus fertility is at the heart of Genesis 1-11's tales of humanity's origins. And consequently the relationship between the sexes is a core issue. Thus Adam and Eve have been adopted as core emblems for the religious, spiritual, cultural, socio-economic and political life of all Judaeo-Christian societies. Their relationship, in the text and as interpreted from the text, is key to an understanding of gender relations and difference within these societies. Furthermore, the 'begettings' and other sections of Genesis 1-11 provide insight as to the relative status of, and relationship between, men and women.

This essay will look at these key texts, majoring on Genesis 1-4 but also addressing other parts of Genesis 1-11, to try to determine whether they are completely androcentric, the irredeemable expression of a patriarchal society 'where social convention clearly invites one to see women as subsidiary to man, her proper place, in the Psalmist's words, as a "fruitful vine in the corner of your house."⁸ I shall look at a range of forms of feminist criticism, some which find that the text 'breaks with patriarchy'⁹ and is thus redeemable in itself, others which insist that the texts are irretrievably soaked in patriarchal structures and that any 'redemption' of them must involve a whole new approach which involves addressing the very structures of the biblical tradition¹⁰.

Throughout the history of Judaeo-Christian societies Genesis 1-11 has tended to be interpreted along 'patriarchal' lines, and I shall begin by outlining how this 'conventional' reading looks.

The 'Patriarchal' Reading of Genesis 1-11

With measured satire, David Clines summarises the conventional 'patriarchal' reading of Genesis 2-3:

Before feminism, everyone in the garden of Eden knew their place. At the top of the pyramid, even though the garden was not in Egypt, was God. Under him was his under-gardener Adam, created to carry on the maintenance of the garden that the master-gardener had planted. On the next rung down, the pyramid having mutated to a ladder, came Eve, who

⁷ Fokkema, p.42

⁸ Alter, p.146

⁹ An assessment of Phyllis Trible's approach by Milne, P, *The Patriarchal Stamp of Scripture* in Brenner, op cit, p.150

¹⁰ A precis of Milne, p.149, to which I shall return later in the essay.

had not originally been thought of but had been created out of Adam as a 'helper' once all the animals had been paraded before Adam without a single helper being found among them. Beneath Eve were the animals, obviously unsatisfactory as helpers, but not in every respect inferior to her; for the cleverest of them has theological insight that Eve lacks.¹¹

Phyllis Tribble calls this 'a love story gone awry'¹², because she sees that familiarity with this simple tale of origins has bred stereotypes, mistakes and contempt, and has nurtured an interpretation of the story in which male superiority and female inferiority is proclaimed as the will of God:

It portrays woman as "temptress" and troublemaker who is dependent upon and dominated by her husband. Over the centuries this misogynous reading had acquired a status of canonicity so that those who deplore and those who applaud the story both agree on its meaning.¹³

Predominant among the aspects of this reading are the following interpretations:

- A male God creates first man (2.7) and last woman (2.22); first means superior and last means inferior or subordinate;
- Woman is created for the sake of man; a helpmate to cure his loneliness (2.18-23);
- Contrary to nature, woman comes out of man; she is denied even her natural function of birthing and that function is given to man (2.21-22);
- Woman is the rib of man, dependent upon him for life (2.21-22);
- Taken out of man (2.23), woman has a derivative, not an autonomous, existence;
- Man names woman (2.23) and thus has power over her;
- Man leaves his father's family in order to set up through his wife another patriarchal unit (2.24);
- Woman tempted man to disobey and thus she is responsible for sin in the world (3.6); she is untrustworthy, gullible, and simpleminded;
- Woman is cursed by pain in childbirth (3.16); pain in childbirth is a more severe

¹¹ Clines, D.A.J, *What Does Eve do to Help?* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), p.25

¹² Tribble, P, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p.72

¹³ *ibid*, p.73

punishment than man's struggles with the soil; it signifies that woman's sin is greater than man's;

- Woman's desire for man (3.16) is God's way of keeping her faithful and submissive to her husband;
- God gives man the right to rule over woman (3.16).¹⁴

Other aspects of Genesis 1-11 reinforce a patriarchal perspective. The genealogies (5.1, 10.1 and 11.10, previously referred to as the 'begettings') which list the descendants of Adam, name only the males, suggesting that only the fathers of the people were important. Similarly, the story of the flood names Noah and his three sons; the man walked with God¹⁵; the women in the flood narrative appear to be there only, literally, to 'make up the numbers'. The strange tale of the Sons of God and the Daughters of Men in 6.1-4 reduces women to passive objects of men's desire and bearers of their children while the men are celebrated as 'heroes ... warriors of renown' (6.4). Permeating all of this (as throughout most of scripture), is the very fundamental *naming of God* - in the *male* pronoun.

But Genesis 1.1-2.4a offers a contrast. In *this* creation story no distinction of status or role is drawn between women and men; here, male and female are created in God's image, together, and blessed, together. This offers a strong suggestion that Genesis 1-11 *can* be read in different ways, that there may be more going on in these texts than has appeared to be the case for so long. Taking their lead from early practitioners such as Tribble, feminist theologians have in recent times made real the possibility that patriarchal readings of these texts can be challenged, that other interpretations are possible.

Redressing the balance: Phyllis Tribble and others

Dealing with each of the 'conventional' points of interpretation outlined above, Phyllis Tribble offers perspectives which 'redeem' the text from patriarchy. She does this not from a naive perspective that the texts may not be sexist - rather, she insists that 'Biblical religion is patriarchal' and 'Hebrew literature ... comes from a male dominated society'. But Tribble qualifies this by adding that 'the intentionality of biblical faith ... is neither to create nor to perpetuate patriarchy but rather to function as salvation for both women and men'. To Tribble 'the hermeneutical challenge' for the contemporary critic is not to

¹⁴ Tribble 1978, p.73

¹⁵ Genesis 6.9

identify the sexism that is in the Bible, far less to reject the Bible because of its sexism, but 'to translate biblical faith without sexism'¹⁶

The main aspects of the patriarchal reading of Genesis 2-3 can be reduced to six points. In turn we shall see how each may be 'redeemed' to a reading which challenges the sexist approach. Tribble and associated feminist theologians inform each of these points.

Woman is created last (2.22) - Tribble points out that in Biblical literature often the last is regarded as 'first'. This is the case in Genesis 1.27-28 where humankind is created last but is immediately given dominion over all other living things. Taking this line of reasoning, woman may be seen as the *culmination* of creation.¹⁷

Woman is to be a helper (2.18) - Tribble insists that 'while the English word *helper* suggests an assistant, a subordinate', 'the Hebrew word *ezer* carries no such connotation'. This word is often used to describe God, who is a superior who creates and saves Israel. Thus a 'helper' is not an inferior. Furthermore, the word *neged* which is used alongside *ezer*, connotes equality. The text speaks of 'a helper who is a counterpart'. What is specified is not an unequal relationship but rather 'identity, mutuality, and equality'. Woman is 'neither subordinate nor superior, [but] one who alleviates isolation through identity'.¹⁸

Woman is taken from the man's rib (2.21-23) - While this is true, the interpretation that asserts that man was thus responsible for the creation of woman, is challenged by Tribble. Woman's creation is an *act of God*. For both man and woman 'life originates with God'. When the man says 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' he is not implying that woman is derived from him or subordinate to him but rather that woman shares equally with him and the dust of the ground in owing their origin to 'divine mystery'.¹⁹

The man names the woman (2.23) - Tribble rejects the suggestion that Adam named Eve. The text states that 'she shall be *called* woman'. By contrast, when Adam named the animals the text states that he called them by *name*. Because the writer uses this different formula in this instance, Tribble is able to conclude that 'in calling the woman, the man is not establishing power over her but rejoicing in their mutuality'.²⁰ Additionally, Eve herself names her firstborn son in 4.1. Naming is thus not only Adam's prerogative, as Ilana Pardes underlines.²¹

¹⁶ Based on a summary of Phyllis Tribble's approach to biblical criticism in Clines p.26/27

¹⁷ Tribble, P, *Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation*' (Journal of the American Academy of Religion 41, 1973) pp.30-48, quoted in Clines, p.27

¹⁸ Tribble 1978, p.90

¹⁹ *ibid*, p102

²⁰ *ibid*, p.99-100

²¹ Pardes, I, *The Politics of Maternal Naming* in Brenner, op. cit, p.174

The man leaves his family to set up a patriarchal unit with his wife (2.24) - Tribble notes that while the man is associated with his father and mother, 'the woman continues to stand alone'. She is a unique and independent human being to whom the man comes. The terms used in the text are terms which affirm that it is the man's sexual need for the woman which causes him to come to her, rather than the need to establish a family unit. This is about sexual attraction rather than structural domination; it is about the wholeness of the 'one flesh of communion between female and male'.²²

Woman is responsible for sin in the world and is punished severely for it (3.6, 3.16) - Tribble notes that the man is with the woman during the exchange with the serpent and does not object. Nor does he refuse to eat the fruit of the tree. Because of this she insists that both man and woman are equally culpable for disobeying God's commands in the garden: 'If there is moral frailty in one, it is moral frailty in two ... They are equal in responsibility and in judgment, in shame and in guilt, in redemption and grace. What the narrative says about the nature of woman it also says about the nature of man'. Because neither accepts responsibility for their actions, both are punished. Thus the sin of the one is the sin of the other, and through the punishments their sin distorts their relationship to God, to the land and to each other.²³

Theologians debate the appropriateness of regarding God's judgment on the snake, woman and man as *punishments for sin*. While disobedience and its consequences feature here, Carol Meyers points out that the vocabulary of sin is not introduced to the text until the murder of Abel in Genesis 4, and that other concerns feature here²⁴. Tribble suggests that the focus is on the *consequences* of knowing good and evil. Lyn Bechtel supports this, explaining the story of the garden as a myth about human growth, by the end of which the humans have become adults, having found their identity in the community and come to grips with 'the inherent oppositional forces of life created by God in the beginning'.²⁵ This is a tale describing the origins of work (for the man) and childbearing (for the woman) which (Meyers insists) implies no female subordination but does accept 'the sad state of hostility between the sexes which results, ironically, from human aspiration to be like gods and goddesses'.²⁶

All of this section of the essay has reflected a 'reformist' approach to feminist biblical scholarship, an approach which has been identified with 'soft' feminism by Beverly

²² Tribble 1978, p.104

²³ Tribble 1973, p.40, discussed in Gardner, A, *Genesis 2.4b-3: A Mythological Paradigm of Sexual Equality or the Religious History of Pre-Exilic Israel?* (Scottish Journal of Theology, vol 43, pp.1-18), p.10-11

²⁴ Meyers, C, *Gender Roles and Genesis 3.16* in Brenner, op. cit, p.127-129

²⁵ Bechtel, L.M, *Rethinking the Interpretation of Genesis 2.4b-3.24* in Brenner, op. cit, p.116

²⁶ Meyers, op. cit, p.117

Wildung Harrison.²⁷

Soft feminism regards the problem of sexism primarily as one of attitudes and opinions which can be changed through education and persuasion.²⁸

The interpretations of Genesis 2-3 outlined above are in this category; seeking to redeem the texts from patriarchy. However, there are many other writers who tend towards 'hard' feminism, which 'regards such a view as interpretive illusion'.

For hard feminism, the problem of sexism is to be located in the very structures of our society. Translated to the realm of biblical studies we might ask whether the sexism of the Bible and its interpretation is a matter of superficial patriarchal bias or whether it is integral to the very structure of the biblical tradition.²⁹

In the section which follows the interpretations of Tribble and other 'soft' feminist biblical scholars are discussed in the light of nonreformist, 'hard' feminist investigations, to try to identify whether or not the texts can be redeemed after all.

'Hard' feminist criticism - Tribble's critics

From the above sketches it can be seen that Eve is constructed as a character with some initiative, independence and esteem: 'Too innocent to be evil, too guileless to be seductive, she is a child testing her boundaries, weighing her options, making her choices. She makes her decision independent of those who claim authority over her'³⁰ Nevertheless many critics cannot escape the ultimate impression that the social world constructed by Genesis 2-3 is inescapably patriarchal.

Fewell & Gunn typify this standpoint, concluding their investigation of Genesis 2-3 by confirming that:

An entire social world is constructed by a simple story about a tree in a garden, a world which underlies the remainder of Genesis-Kings, a world in which humans are valued on the basis of gender, a world in which women are subdued and the needs of children are suppressed in deference to those of adult men, a world in which human sexuality has only one legitimate expressions, and that is too often described in terms of domination and subjugation.³¹

²⁷ Discussed in Milne, P.J, *The Patriarchal Stamp of Scripture* in Brenner, op. cit, p.149

²⁸ Milne, p.149

²⁹ Milne, p.149

³⁰ Fewell, D.N & Gunn, D.M, *Gender, Power and Promise, the Subject of the Bible's first Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p.38

³¹ Fewell & Gunn, p.38

Granting that Eve's character does have some positive aspects, they conclude nevertheless that she is 'eventually cast into the shadow of the Adam, not to speak of the tree'. She and other women in the biblical canon, fade into invisibility:

And when we see them most starkly, it will often be to witness the patriarchal "punishment" inscribed on them and in their bodies because they have dared to usurp men's (divine?) authority.³²

Writers supporting this view have tended to find wanting the redemptive assertions of Tribble and her associates. Placing the text against parallel Mesopotamian mythology, Anne Gardner challenges most of Tribble's main arguments :

Woman is created last (2.22) - This was a 'dubious honour' in the mythological background material, for though created last, humankind was created for the sole purpose of serving the gods.³³

Woman is to be a helper (2.18) - Tribble's argument that the woman and man share an equal relationship of 'identity, mutuality, and equality'. However, Gardner insists that the translation on which Tribble's argument depends, 'simply denotes a complementary creature, one of the same species, and says nothing about the balance of the relationship between the male and the female'.³⁴

Woman is taken from the man's rib (2.21-23) - In ancient mythology the notion of the male giving birth is well known. It functions to undermine goddess worship. Her servitude to the man is confirmed by her punishment in 3.16 being associated with him, in the same way as his punishment is associated with the ground from which he was created:³⁵ 'If she stands in the same relationship to him as he does to the ground, then the purpose of her existence was to tend him'.³⁶

The man names the woman (2.23) - Tribble rejects the suggestion that Adam named Eve on the grounds that a different formula is used than when man names the animals. However Gardner finds that other texts do use 'call' in the sense of name, bringing into question whether theological significance can be drawn from the words used in Genesis 2.23.³⁷

³² Fewell & Gunn, op. cit, p.38

³³ Gardner, op.cit, p.5

³⁴ *ibid*, p.5-6

³⁵ *ibid*, p.6-7

³⁶ *ibid*, p.9

³⁷ *ibid*, p.8

Gardner finds that she is able to affirm Tribble's arguments that the man leaving his family to set up a patriarchal unit with his wife is about the wholeness of the 'one flesh of communion between female and male', and that they are equally culpable for the sins of which God convicts them.

But criticism always returns to the need to grapple with misogynistic assertions in the text. Clines majors on the difficulty of the role of Eve as 'helper', and concludes that the one distinctive role which Eve performs is to *bear children*. This is the point of her existence; 'This is what Eve does to help'.³⁸ It is clear that those who seek to make a case for the 'soft' feminist option have to contend not just with 'centuries of misogynist reading'³⁹ but with many details in the text which refuse to be easily redeemed.

Conclusion

In a survey of structural critical surveys of Genesis, Milne presents the case that:

The dilemma that the Bible presents to feminists has not lessened, but intensified. We can either accept the patriarchal biblical text as sacred and content ourselves with exposing its patriarchy or we can expose its patriarchy and reject it as sacred and authoritative. ... If we want an authoritative sacred Scripture that does not make it possible to believe that women are secondary and inferior humans, it appears that we need to make new wine to fill our new wineskins.⁴⁰

If this argument is accepted then the answer to the question posed by this essay will depend on our interpretation of the term 'irredeemable'. Some do indeed find 'redemption' for the text in the 'soft' feminist approach of accepting the text as sacred and exposing its patriarchy. Others move into the area of discussion around the authority of the Bible in connection with its implementation for religious, spiritual, cultural, socio-economic and political ends. While it may be in itself irredeemably sexist because of the culture which produced it, there may yet be redemption for the text in reconstructing it for a post-patriarchal society. David Clines notes that *authority* is 'a concept from the male world of power-relations and that a more inclusive human language of influence, encouragement and inspiration would be more acceptable to everyone'.⁴¹ I close with his positive assertion that we concentrate not on the *authority* of the text but on its *function*, believing that, despite all its handicaps the text can still help, inspire and bring out the best in people, not least in human gender relations.

³⁸ Clines, op. cit, p.36

³⁹ Tribble 1978, p.72

⁴⁰ Milne, op. cit, p.167

⁴¹ Clines, p.48

Bibliography and Notes

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Notes

1. All scripture quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) except where otherwise stated.
2. Essay length: 3700 words.