

RAW MATERIAL

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

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CHAPTER 2

Sexuality and Gender, Divine and Human

Genesis 1-2

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Sexuality and Gender: Divine and Human

Genesis 1-2

A friend of mine complained about modern Bible scholars who pretend that the Biblical God has no gender. He most certainly does, she insisted, throughout the Bible he is definitely a “he”. I couldn’t disagree with her, but as we conversed I was struck with the fact that the God of the Bible has no sex. Yes this God is a “he,” but this God is never described as having sexual activity or possessing genitals. In the provocatively titled book *God’s Phallus*, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz comments on God’s lack of a phallus. “If we shift attention back to the divine, we find a great deal of information is available about the gender of the monotheistic God, but the sex of this God is carefully obscured.”(p 24) It may be carefully obscured, or it may be altogether absent (Frymer-Kensky 293-294). If God does not procreate or otherwise need to use semen he needs no organs to produce or dispense semen. There is no particular reason for the Biblical God to have genitals, and even if he does there is no reason for a Biblical writer to mention the unused organs.

In Genesis 1-2 God creates sex along with gender. First animals are created with instructions to “be fruitful and multiply” Then humans are created with the same instructions. Like eating and breathing, sexual activity and the genitals necessary for sexual activity are something we have in common with animals, not God. Sexuality is a characteristic of the created order, not the Creator. If Genesis 1-2 describes humans as the animals created in the image of God, our sexuality is part of our animal nature, not part of the “image of God.”

The Non-Procreating God

This Israelite tradition is unique. It is extremely odd for an ancient culture to understand God as being sexless. In other cultures the gods are in the human sexual image, but this is not the orthodox concept of God presented in the Bible.

All of the known religious systems from Bronze and Iron Age Greece, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Levant and Egypt tell stories of their gods and goddesses who procreate in a variety of ways, or even have sex without procreation. Most often the stories are human and unexceptional, telling how a god and goddess have coitus and produce offspring. But there also are parthenogenic births, semen which impregnates inanimate materials, semen which forms offspring

of itself and even cases in which one male divinity impregnates another male divinity. From the *Enuma Elish* to Hesiod's *Theogony* the themes of divine sexual activity and procreation dominate stories of primordial creation. Some of these stories are told dryly and clinically while others seem to be intentionally lascivious.

In the *Enuma Elish* Apsu and Tiamat mate and beget the first gods who in turn mate and beget others, etc. In the *Theogony* Gaia (Earth) mates with Ouranos (sky) until Ouranos is castrated by his son Kronos. And the genitals and semen of Ouranos impregnate the sea while various deities reproduce through coitus or parthenogenesis. Then Gaia takes Pontos (deep sea) for her mate and begets yet other gods. Meanwhile Kronos and his siblings are mating and begetting their own offspring, one of whom overthrows Kronos. This god, Zeus, proceeds to beget innumerable gods and heroes with a variety of goddesses and women. In Greek literature there is a multitude of other texts with similar divine reproductive activities (Gantz 1-151). In the Ugaritic texts we find Baal tugging a cow to produce a special calf (KTU 1.5. 5.17-22; 1.10.2.26 - 3.25), and in another story two young female divinities manage to arouse and copulate with the elderly god El (KTU 1.23).

Divine semen is so powerful it can even impregnate another male. In the Hurrian/Hittite¹ *Song of Kumarbi* the god Kumarbi has just overthrown Anu and Anu flees into the heavens. Kumarbi grabs him by the feet and bites off Anu's genitals, swallowing. As Anu wiggles free and escapes upward Kumarbi is laughing. Anu turns and asks why Kumarbi is laughing, for Kumarbi has just made himself pregnant with Anu's semen and Anu's children by Kumarbi are destined to overthrow Kumarbi. Kumarbi tries to spit out Anu's semen but it is too late, for the semen has become alloyed with Kumarbi's insides "like bronze." And the high god Kumarbi, the alpha male and lord of his domain, is pregnant with the children of the god he defeated.

The Egyptian classic story collection *Horus and Seth* tells how Horus manages to inseminate and impregnate Seth when Seth thought he had inseminated Horus. Other myths tell of divine semen impregnating a variety of substances from carded wool to sea water. Sometimes the semen alone produces offspring such as Ptah producing the Nine (Shakaba Stone 498.55-56). And not all divine births require semen, for goddesses are capable of producing children on their own, such as Gaia in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Divine semen and divine wombs alike are extremely fertile, and the pantheons

¹ The text is in Hittite, though scholarly consensus attributes the song to a Hurrian source (Hoffner 40-41).

of many cultures are well stocked with divinities of both sexes. As a minor deity in the *Odyssey* (11.249-250) said, “for the sex acts () of the immortals are never in vain.”

Demonic semen also seems to be active in some Sumerian and Akkadian texts (Wu). The foamy saliva of rabid dogs is described as “semen” and the resulting affliction of the bitten person is the “child/pup” (*izbu*)² of this semen. Though there are similarities to modern germ theory (germ = seed), Wu understands the insemination in the texts as demonic reproduction.

The preserved literature of every Bronze and Iron Age culture tells the stories of how their divinities are sexual and fertile with one exception — Israel; more specifically, the Israelite and Judahite traditions which were preserved in the Bible. If the religious tradition of the Bible is the “orthodox” tradition, there were certainly many “heresies” which followed the ways of surrounding cultures. Some of these heresies may have ascribed sexuality to Israel’s God. The most important examples are the plaster fragments and jars discovered at Kuntillat Ajrud and Khirbet al-Qom which mention “YHWH and his Asherah” (Day 49-51; Hadley). The writings of the prophets and the book of Kings witness to many in Israel and Judah whose beliefs and practices were unacceptable to the orthodoxy of the Bible. We should not be surprised to find that some of these people would accept Asherah as a divine sexual partner to YHWH (Day 59-61; Schmidt). Some scholars argue that the “asherah” mentioned in these inscriptions was a cult object somewhat disconnected from a mythological goddess (Hadley), though they usually assume a goddess lies somewhere in the history of the asherah objects. These inscriptions have provoked vigorous scholarly discussion due in part to their provocative implications. In any other ancient tradition there would be nothing provocative in the suggestion that a god had a female consort, but in the study of ancient Israelite culture the issue is very contentious.

Another goddess associated with YHWH is Anat. During the Persian Period there was a Jewish garrison at Elephantine in Egypt, and the papyri unearthed there mention Anat-Yahu and Anat-Bethel. These references suggest a tradition in which Anat was consort of YHWH / El (Day 142-144). In Ugaritic literature Asherah is usually the consort of El and Anat the consort of Baal. As YHWH was attributed with characteristics of both El and Baal it is no surprise that some worshipers of YHWH also attributed to him a goddess as consort, Asherah or Anat.

² The term is specific to malformed or misbegotten newborns, human or animal.

The Biblical writers often complained of how the people apostatized and their leaders erected “asherot”. It is entirely possible that these asherot were dedicated to YHWH worship and that they were related to the Kuntillat Ajrud inscriptions. But if these asherot were for YHWH worship or indicated a divine consort for YHWH, this is carefully left out of the Biblical texts. Sometimes the Bible writers associated the asherot with Baal, but not YHWH.

The God of Israel does have “sons” but they are not products of divine sexual activity. These “sons” are adopted humans with a biological father and mother in addition to the divine parent (e.g. 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7; 89:26-27 / 27-28H). Or they may be remnants of a former pantheon (Job 1:6; 2:1?) and possibly rivals to YHWH who have been demoted to human status (Ps 82:6-7) or to non-existence. There is an interesting expression in Psalm 8:5 (MT 8:6) where humans are described as being a little lower than “gods” (often translated “angels”). So when Genesis 6:2 says that when humans increased on the earth the “sons of the *Elohim*” took interest in the “daughters of the man”, we are not quite sure whether to translate this, “sons of God” or “sons of the gods”. Are these the sons of Seth desiring the daughters of Cain? Are these (fallen) angels and human women? Is this a remnant of polytheism where lesser gods seduced human women? The passage is brief and the term “sons of the gods” cannot be pinned down. But even here there is no attempt to interpret the phrase as indicating biological children by sexual reproduction of the one supreme God.

The Bible knows of no divine family with a divine wife and children for God. The prophets make Israel a metaphorical wife for God, but rarely with metaphorical children (Hos 1-3), and sexual expression is clearly avoided. Even in Ezekiel 16:8 where the prophet comes closest to assigning metaphorical sexuality between God and Israel, the metaphor stops short of sexual intercourse. Though there are many Israelite prayers for the fertility of fields and herds none call upon divine semen. The clear and consistent avoidance of sexuality for God is an important theme in the Bible.

The Bible does not provide us with a clean, monolithic text with all divergent theologies carefully excluded. Remnants of heretical religious elements may be found in a variety of Biblical texts. The Bible witnesses to a past with human sacrifice (Miller, 53-67). In the Akedah (Gen 22) there is no hint that human sacrifice was taboo, and Jephthah seems to have gone through with a similar sacrifice (Jud 11:34-40). At the time of the exile Ezekiel speaks of human sacrifice to YHWH and Jeremiah hotly denies that YHWH ever commanded anything of the sort (Ezk 20:25-26; Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:35). The implication is that many did think YHWH commanded human sacrifice.

Meanwhile the book of Kings describes human sacrifice as one of the sins which brought down various kings of Judah, and finally the kingdom itself.

Even the famous passage from Micah 6:6-8 treats human sacrifice as a supreme form of sacrifice, with no more or less legitimacy than animal or oil sacrifice.

With what will I approach God? With what will I bow before God on High?

Will I approach him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves?

Will the LORD take pleasure in thousands of rams, with multitudes of torrents of oil?

Will I give my first-born as my sin-sacrifice, the fruit of my belly for the sin of my soul?

He has told you, Adam, what is good, and what the LORD seeks from you.

For it is to do justice and to love loyalty, and humbly to walk with your God.

Human sacrifice was not orthodox within the Biblical tradition, but this tradition could not manage to keep human sacrifice out of some high profile texts.

We also find Biblical texts which allude to a primordial conflict in which God battles with mythological monsters such as Rahab or Leviathan (Ps 74:13-14; 89:9-10; Is 27:1; 51:9-10; etc.). Again the primordial battle is characteristic of the religious lore of many surrounding cultures, such as the wars of Baal against Yamm and Mot (the Sea and Death) or the conflict between Marduk and Tiamat in the *Enuma Elish*. Though the primordial battle story is excluded from Genesis 1-2 and could be viewed as heretical, this story is clearly alluded many times in the Bible.

The Bible retained remnants of human sacrifice and the primordial conflict. In sharp contrast there is no divine sexuality anywhere in the Biblical texts. Attempts to find divine sexual imagery in the Biblical texts result in heavy speculation on texts which are ambiguous at best. For instance Toews (55-68) is forced to import significant Ugaritic material into similar Biblical texts, expanding them to include some divine sexuality. A reader might be impressed that the Biblical texts carefully excluded precisely the material which Toews claims to find. A wide array of Biblical scholars have recognized the lack of sexuality attributed to God in contrast with surrounding cultures, and even in contrast with parts of Israelite culture excluded from the canon (e.g. Niditch 1997, 50-63).

If the historical people of Israel and Judah ascribed sexual partners and lusts to their God, such traditions somehow did not manage to leave their imprint on any Biblical texts. This is one area where the Biblical tradition is thoroughly united in exclusion. Texts were censored, purged or

otherwise excluded from this corpus of Israelite and Jewish literature which hinted at any divine sexuality. Either they firmly believed God is not sexual, or they held an extremely strong taboo against describing any sexuality of God. The taboo was stronger than the taboo on human sacrifice, and the efforts to exclude were more thorough than those concerning the primordial battle.

The thoroughness of this exclusion should not be underestimated.

The Body of God

A person cannot be clothed without a body on which to place the clothing. Ancient Israelite texts describe God as having a body which could be seen — though the sight of God’s person was a terrible and risky thing to experience. A select group of Israelites ascended the mountain to dine before God, and apparently they dared not raise their eyes above God’s feet. But they did observe that God did have feet and beneath those feet the ground was a pavement of sky-blue (Ex 24:9-11). Moses begged to see God but was forbidden to see God’s face. Rather he was allowed to see God from behind after God had passed by (Ex 33:17-23). Abraham entertained three visitors who turned out to be more than human (Gen 18). Two of these visitors traveled on to Sodom where Lot met them at the gate. When the (two) travelers left for Sodom Abraham was left conversing with God. It is easy to conclude that the third visitor was God himself posing as a human with his glory concealed. When Isaiah had a vision of God the divine garments filled the temple (Is 6), and Ezekiel experienced him as having the “appearance” (*demuth kemareh*, כְּמֵרֵאָה, דְּמוּת) of a fiery and metallic body, but certainly human in form (1:26-29).

The “image and likeness” of God is the way in which human creation is described (Gen 1:26-27). The terms “image” (*tselem*, צֶלֶם) and “likeness” (*demuth*, דְּמוּת) imply physical characteristics. Though these terms may be extended to imply characteristics of personality, intelligence and creativity, their basic meaning is physical. The “image” is a three-dimensional representation of someone or something, a statue or raised relief, and the “likeness” is a visible similarity, as in Ezekiel 1. The God of the Bible has a body which looks human, and this is why our bodies have their shape. The “image of God” is visual, whatever else may be included in the concept.

But though God has “breath” he does not need to breathe. God has no appetite for physical food, nor are sacrifices needed to keep God nourished. Likewise though humans are given the same command as animals, “be fruitful and multiply,” God does not procreate. Humans have the same

physical equipment as animals to breathe, eat and procreate, but there is no more reason to ascribe genitals to God than to ascribe a digestive system or a respiratory system to God. Apparently genitals are not part of the “image and likeness” of God.

Consider Genesis 2, the story of Adam and his woman (who would receive the name Eve in chapter 3). When God decides that Adam needs an “appropriate partner” he has the man name the animals which God had made. In the process the appropriate partner is not found. When Eve is finally created and brought to Adam, the man declares “this time” he has an appropriate partner. It seems that the naming has two purposes. The first purpose is to give primordial unction to the ban on bestiality. Animals are not appropriate partners. But the other purpose for the naming was to make the man realize that all animals come in two types — male and female. All animals, that is, except Adam himself. Once Adam fully realizes that he lacks a gender he is presented with the other gender of his species, a woman.

Genesis 2 may be understood as the story synopsis in Genesis 1:27. Though Adam is in God’s image, it is not from God that Adam learns he is half of a species. It is from the animals that he understands there should be a counterpart for him of the other gender. But God, in whose image Adam was created, has no such “appropriate partner” of the other gender. Adam cannot learn about gender complement by observing his Creator for his Creator has no sex, and though he seems to have a gender it is an uncomplemented gender.

The Animal in God’s Image

As noted above, Genesis 1-2 understands humans as a special type of animal — the only animal in the image of God. Like animals, humans are created from the earth and have the breath of life in their nostrils. Like animals humans are given a variety of plant life for food. And like animals humans are created in two genders and commanded to “be fruitful and multiply.” Our breath, our appetite for food, our earthly origins and our sexuality alike distinguish us from the God in whose image we are made. Commentators have long recognized that Genesis 1-2 treats humans as having significant animal characteristics as well as significant non-animal characteristics (GenRab 8.11; 14.3). Humans were created as something more than animals, but not something less or other.

As Adam was given an animal appetite for food, so also was he given a variety of seed-bearing plants which were “good for food.” This means the fruit of these plants were not only

nutritious, but also tasty, something to be enjoyed. Likewise as Adam was given animal sexuality, he was given a sexual partner of his own species. The partner was not merely for procreation, but also for enjoyment.

Marriage, Genesis 2:24

Genesis 2:24 is an oddity in describing sexual relationships within the Hebrew Scriptures. The text mentions nothing about procreation. Instead it deals solely with the emotional and social bond between a married (presumably monogamous) couple described as “one flesh.” In Genesis 1:28. As with most of the Hebrew Scriptures, the sexual relationship is described in terms of reproduction. Because Genesis 2 is relational rather than reproductive, and because it implies a solitary bond not to be shared with others, this text was destined for heavy use in the New Testament where monogamy is promoted and reproduction in marriage is largely ignored.

The Septuagint has a slightly longer text of Genesis 2:24, containing the words “the two” (‘), so that the text reads, “the two shall become one flesh.” This version emphasizes the monogamy message implied in our Hebrew text, and is quoted as such in Matthew 19:5; Mark 12:8 and 1 Corinthians 6:16.

The New Testament accurately makes use of Genesis 2:24 in concord with its original context – which may seem odd. The New Testament is full of Scriptural quotations which often are distant from their original meaning and use (e.g. Matt 2:15). However, the use of Genesis 2:24 in Matthew 19:5 shows a careful and sophisticated understanding of the original text. The parallel text in Mark 12:7-8 and the allusion in 1 Corinthians 6:15-16 are slightly less precise. In its original context Genesis 2:24 does not target divorce and adultery as often supposed, but rather polygamy. Only by extension is Genesis 2 applied to divorce and adultery as well.

Biblical law concerning sexual practices tends to be gender-specific, and marriage is one of the sexual relationships governed by these laws. In the law of Moses and the narratives of the Hebrew Bible a man is allowed multiple wives and concubines as well as the use of prostitutes. However, a woman under marriage contract is allowed one man only. Yet, the narratives of Genesis take a special interest in the dysfunction of two polygamous families, Abraham with Sarah and Hagar, and Jacob with Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah. The dysfunction in these families is blamed directly on the practice of polygamy. The first polygamist described in Genesis is the second

murderer (4:19; 23-24), not a positive role model. Preceding these stories of dysfunction is the defining statement on marriage in Genesis 2.

Genesis 2:24 defines marriage as a once-in-a-lifetime change in social position for the man. Once does a man leave his parent's house and join himself to a woman. There are intrinsic difficulties with a man leaving his parents multiple times to become the mate of multiple partners. Likewise it is implied that with one mate does the man become one flesh, providing him with his life partner. Genesis 2:24 prejudices the reader against polygamy and strongly suggests the writer's bias against non-monogamous lifestyles.

Bernard Batto has found several points of similarity between Genesis 2 and the *Atrahasis* text from Mesopotamia. Though some commentators have attempted to divorce Genesis 2:24 from an interpretation which emphasizes the institution of marriage, Batto sees the similar text of *Atrahasis* as solidifying a marriage interpretation of Genesis 2. Given the points of similarity one particular contrast stands out. *Atrahasis* is very interested in human reproductive capacity, like most texts on sexuality in the Hebrew Bible. As Genesis 2:24 takes no interest in reproduction it stands in contrast to non-Israelite works such as *Atrahasis* as well as other Israelite writings. The lack of attention to reproduction is intentional and significant.

The Gospel of Matthew is the gospel most careful about its use of Biblical law. Recognizing the distinction in gender, there are two texts on divorce and remarriage in this gospel.³ The first text, Matthew 5:31-32, is specific to the divorced wife and introduces Jesus' belief that divorce is not recognized in the divine order. The second text, 19:3-12, is specific to the divorcing husband. In this text Jesus builds on his earlier denial of divorce. Even if a divorced husband is not truly divorced, the polygamy-friendly law of Moses would still allow him alternate wives. But Jesus turns to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 to establish monogamy as ideal and polygamy as inauthentic. By denying the validity of polygamy Jesus thus denies a man valid marital partners in the wake of a divorce.

Incidentally, Jesus understood Genesis 1:27 as "a male and a female he created them," in other words one of each. With this text Jesus understood the ideal mating unit to be a single pair. One other ancient Jewish text is known outside the New Testament which uses Genesis 1:27 against polygamy, *The Damascus Covenant* 5.9-11.

³ These two texts are examined in detail in the chapter Gender, Divorce and Adultery. Here the study is presented briefly.

Genesis 1:27-28 provides a goal basic to sexuality in the Hebrew Scriptures, a goal so pervasive that it is almost never absent in any treatment of sexuality in the Hebrew Bible. God blesses the first humans and tells them, “Be fruitful and fill the earth.” One of the few passages on human sexuality devoid of this reproductive drive, oddly enough, is in Genesis 2. Polygamy tends to be a method of maximizing reproduction (for the male), a way of being fruitful and filling the earth. Genesis 2 invokes a completely different concept of human sexuality without mention of the reproductive drive.

And the reproductive drive is oriented toward having sons, a drive usually expressed through the women of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is a son which Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel seek, and Leah alone among the wives of the patriarchs bears a daughter – *one* daughter – along with her six sons. The levirate marriages of Tamar and Ruth likewise are in search of sons and reach their fulfillment when the son is born. Job begins and ends with the protagonist blessed by God with seven sons and three daughters (1:2; 42:13). It is remarkable that he is assigned so many daughters, and even more remarkable that they are named in the last chapter. Notably the two daughters of Lot are not named in the Bible, even though they name their sons by Lot, names which we are told (Gen 19:37-38). The reproductive values of the Hebrew Bible emphasize male children.

Notably no quotation or allusion to Genesis 1:28 is present in the New Testament, along with no mention of the value of reproduction. This absence will be explored in the chapter Beyond Genealogy.

Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28

Galatians has a famous and much exercised text with an interesting construction. This is the text which states that in Christ, “there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male and female . . .” The terms Jew and Greek are separated by the conjunction *oude* (οὐδὲ , nor), likewise the terms slave and free. But the terms male and female are separated by *kai* (καὶ , and). The significant shift in conjunction is noted by some commentators and dismissed by others.

The phrase “male and female” in Galatians 3:28 is a quotation from Genesis 1:27 in the Septuagint (Bruce 189; Martyn 376-377; Meeks 11-14). According to Martyn, Paul was suggesting that within the church, “the structure of the original creation had been set aside,” even though some marks of sexual and social differentiation remain. Bruce goes on to analyze Paul’s mixed message

about the role of women in the church and conclude that Paul's claim does not erase the social distinction in gender though it does reduce the distinction within the church. Bruce references gnostic sources for those who saw Paul's gospel erasing all gender distinction and promoting an androgynous ideal. Meeks situates the text within the larger context of gender issues within the early church.

T.W. Martin (118-119) has argued against reading Galatians 3:28 as a reference to Genesis 1:27. He finds that the topic at hand is circumcision – Jews are circumcised, Greeks are not, slaves of Jews must be circumcised, resident aliens need not be, males are to be circumcised, females cannot be. However creation and circumcision in Galatians 3:28 are not mutually exclusive. The differentiation between male and female stands behind the law of circumcision, and both stand behind the interest in patrilineal descent, an interest transcended in the New Testament. There is certainly no conflict between transcending circumcision and transcending gender.

Paul's declaration in Galatians 3:28 would not, by itself, suddenly produce equality between the genders in the church. The idea was probably not new when Paul wrote it. The controversy in Galatians is over gentile Christians, not over Christian women or Christian slaves. We might suppose that women and slaves had already been granted a large degree of equality within the Galatian churches by this time, with the gentile question remaining active. In fact, women and slaves may have already been accepted into full synagogue participation prior to the growth of Christianity in Galatia, leaving the remaining issue of gentile converts, the issue of Paul's epistle.

There is an interesting comment in the orthodox epistle of 2 Clement 12:2-5 in the Apostolic Fathers. Clement does not quote Paul's letter to the Galatians, perhaps because he was writing before this letter had universal distribution. Rather Clement quotes a saying of Jesus which did not make it into any of the canonical gospels in which Jesus describes the conditions of his coming kingdom. "When the two are one, and what is outside is as what is inside, and the male among the female neither male nor female."⁴ Clement understands the last part as describing a brother and a sister in Christ seeing each other without recognizing gender – without sexual attraction. Perhaps the writer was thinking of another saying of Jesus, how in the resurrection we will not marry but will be like the angels (Mt 22:30; Mk 12:25; Lk 20:35-36). Yet this epistle shows no knowledge of this

⁴ A more elaborate form of this saying appears in the Gospel of Thomas 22, which indicates that the saying was probably well known in the early church.

canonical saying of Jesus. 2 Clement finds an end of the distinction created in Genesis 1:27 without quoting a dominical statement found in the three synoptic gospels or Paul's famous Galatians statement. 2 Clement seems to be a very early text, showing little knowledge of texts in the New Testament Canon as well as containing important quotes which did not make the canon.

2 Clement is part of a set of independent texts which attest to an attitude in the early church opposed to gender distinction. Like Galatians 3:28, 2 Clement 12:2-5 uses the terminology of Genesis 1:27, the place where gender distinction begins. It is significant the Paul switches his phrasing in Galatians 3:28 to invoke Genesis 1:27. The caution of F.F. Bruce should carry some weight, for Paul was not trying to completely erase gender distinction within the church. However, in Galatians 3:28 Paul's attack on gender distinction was probably stronger than allowed in Bruce's commentary. Paul's use of Genesis 1:27 joins other early church voices which see an end to gender and sexuality in the church.

A Conservative Conundrum: Romans 16:1

Paul is extremely contradictory in how he envisions gender distinction in the early church. In one epistle he both commands women to be silent in church, and provides detailed instructions on how women should deport themselves when speaking before the church (1 Cor 11:2-15; 14:34-35). Though he states that women are not to hold leadership positions, he commends women in leadership positions in his letters, such as the last chapter of Romans. Consider Deacon Phoebe.

Romans 16:1 provides some conservative Biblical scholars with a conundrum. It identifies Phoebe, "our sister," as a *diakonos* (), the noun for deacon which could stand for either gender. Soon after the New Testament was written the church leaders would invent a new term, *diakonissa* (, deaconess) for the female deacons, and reserve *diakonos* for males only. But if *diakonos* in Romans 16:1 refers to a church office, this means that Paul did not differentiate by gender for this church office.

There are scholars who argue that Paul would not use the term *diakonos* for an official church position because such official positions were not yet invented (e.g. Fitzmyer 1993, 729). Clearly in the Pastoral Epistles (1&2 Timothy and Titus) there were church offices, deacon, elder and bishop (overseer), but the scholars who doubt church office in Romans 16:1 also doubt that Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles – for the same reason.

The conservative conundrum comes when the Pastorals are compared with Romans 16:1, for conservative commentators tend to believe that the Pastorals were indeed written by Paul, or at least under his authority. Disbelief in Paul's authorship of the Pastorals is usually equated with liberal Bible scholarship. For conservatives this means there was a formal church office titled "deacon" when Paul wrote Romans, and that Phoebe was indeed a deacon (not deaconess, Morris 528-529). But in the Pastorals the deacon is defined as "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim 3:12), the same requirement as for the bishop (*episkopos*,) and elder (*presbyteros*; ; 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:5-6). As a woman Phoebe cannot be husband of one wife even if her domestic partner is a woman. Yet Phoebe is a deacon. This means there is no exegetical basis for excluding women from being an elder or bishop based on the male-specific phrases of the Pastoral Epistles, an observation which does not sit well with many conservatives.

There is an interesting selection of Patristic quotes in The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture for the book of Romans (Bray 369). Bray alternates the comments between those church fathers who identify Phoebe as "deaconess" and those who recognize her as a "deacon." Origen merely recognizes Phoebe as holding an ordained office, which he finds acceptable for women. But pseudo-Constantius is more radical, insisting that this verse indicates there should be no distinction in church office between males and females.

Bray's selection is not representative. Most church fathers favored understanding Phoebe as a deaconess, distinct from a deacon, or at best recognizing that for this one office a woman may be ordained. However, the minority position of pseudo-Constantius is interesting. It is yet one more example of an undercurrent in the early church which saw the gospel erasing the gender line. Also this illustrates that the modern dispute over the ordination of women to clergy positions is not recent, but goes back to policy disputes in the early church. As in modern times, the ancient dispute often centered on the interpretation of Romans 16:1.

Another text in Romans 16 where this dispute was waged, in ancient times as well as modern times, is the apostle Junia or Junias in verse 7. Among interpretive issues of this text is the textual problem of the gender of Junia (f.) or Junias (m.). Apparently in ancient times this was one case where ideology or assumptions affected the copying of the text (Epp). The issue was sufficiently disputed among copiers that a certain reading of this verse now seems impossible.

Gender distinction among human beings begins with Genesis 1:27, but it is less than a sure

thing in the hands of the New Testament writers and early church traditions.