

Dear Jerri, #2

Last week I gave a brief overview of the multiple ways that marriage and sex are represented in the Hebrew Bible. I am not arguing that any of those arrangements were normative for God's people. The whole point is that those arrangements were far more determined by the times and the cultures in which they were embedded than in a specific religious understanding of marriage.

Two particular texts from the Hebrew Bible stand out, however, as potentially vital to the topic of marriage and same-sex relationships: The creation story and Leviticus 18:22. Let's look at the creation story first.

Whenever people refer to the creation story as a way of structuring marriage, they are typically speaking of the second creation story, which begins in Genesis 2. This is the story where Adam is created first, then Eve is created from his side as a companion. There are some interesting features of this story worth knowing.

First, "*adam*" is not a proper name at this point, but the Hebrew word for 'human' that is derived from the word for 'ground' (*adamah*), the substance from which the *adam* was made. It is like the relationship between the English terms 'human' and 'humus.' The first creature was originally what one Old Testament scholar calls "the groundling." God breathed the breath of life into the groundling and it became a living being. Since the word "breath" in Hebrew is the same word as "spirit," *adam* is now an inspirited groundling. Significantly, *adam* is not yet gendered.

Second, unlike the first creation story where each day's creation is declared "good" or – in the case of humans – "very good," God looks at this inspirited groundling and says, "It is *not* good for the *adam* to be alone." The inspirited groundling needs community. You know the story: God puts *adam* to sleep, takes a rib, and fashions a woman, yes? Well, almost. The word translated "rib" there is not terribly precise. It means, more or less, "side." God took the groundling's side and made another being. One rabbinical tradition argues that this story means that God took the one being and tore it in half, making two corresponding beings. That sounds gruesome, but it is not unlike some of the other creation stories to which the Israelites could have been responding in their time. At any rate, *adam* says of the woman, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken," pointing toward an original unity at the root of their community. The groundling, which was inspirited with God's own breath, is now differentiated into two inspirited beings, male and female, the most basic differentiation of humanity. It is, at once, the beginning of diversity and the beginning of community.

Then, the story concludes with what appears to be the narrator's voice: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." That conclusion shows that this creation story is an "etiological" story. That is, it is not a story of how the world came into being, but a story that explains the origins of a community's practices.

Etiological stories tell why we do things ‘this’ way and not ‘that’ way. The Hebrew way was for sons to find a mate, separate from the parents and begin a life with her that is similar to how his father and mother did years before. This creation story describes that cultural practice as something that is rooted in the nature of humanity itself.

There are three final things to notice about this story. First, the word “love” is nowhere to be found here. This is not a story about marital bliss. It is a better explanation of why human beings have such an overwhelming desire to have sex than about why we fall in love. You and I have a mutual friend who described his impending marriage as when he and his lover would become “one flesh, one soul, and one spirit.” That was a lovely sentiment, but the biblical writers stopped with “one flesh.” Second, the story itself only mentions the man leaving his father and mother. I point that out because it is important to remember that this story is embedded in a specific culture of patriarchy, where only the man leaving his family home needs explaining. One can appreciate this story without accepting the cultural practices in which it is embedded. We do it all the time. And finally, I *suspect* that there is an economic issue behind this story that prompted the explanation. Every family land ends up running into the Malthusian problem that land produces arithmetically and families reproduce exponentially. The idea that a son “leaves” his father and mother to mate might address one of the really pressing issues of the agrarian community: “If you’re going to start producing mouths to feed – and you will; that’s what humans do – then you need to grow your own crops to feed them.”

Thanks for your patience. Next week we’ll look at the Leviticus text, before turning to the New Testament.

~ The Rev. Dr. D. Mark Davis