

# **OUTLINE THE BIBLICAL TEACHING ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SEXES**

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## **Introduction**

The theme of man-woman relationships pervades the Bible from the creation story to the marriage of the lamb to his church (his bride) in Revelation. We can divide the teaching into a number of components, focusing initially on the creation before turning to the fall and Old Testament teaching, and finally the proclamation of the new creation in the New Testament. We omit some aspects, such as those related to women's role in the church, for reasons of space.

### **1 The creation**

Genesis 1:27 states that at the creation man and woman are both made in God's image equally "So God created man in his own image.....male and female he created them". Underlining equality in this regard are later texts where God refers to himself as a mother as well as a father as in Deut 32:18 "You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth." Jesus correspondingly talks of wishing to protect Jerusalem "as a hen her chicks" (Mt 23:37). Consistent with equality, men and women are jointly given the ordinance to have children and be stewards of the earth. They are equally blessed and equally responsible, see Genesis 1:28 "God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. ""

As regards relationships, Genesis 2:18 stresses that "it is not good for the man to be alone". Men and women need one another for companionship. Adam and Eve are committed to one another in self giving love and hence in marriage, a new relationship replacing that with parents as in Genesis 2:24 "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh". "One flesh" highlights the sexual relationship as itself a gift from God. Differences of the sexes are introduced in Genesis 2; there is the concept of the woman as "helper" (2:20) while Eve is seen as taken from Adam's side and not simultaneously created. However, this need not mean subordination but complementarity, as discussed further below.

### **2 The fallen world and the Old Testament**

The fall introduces subordination and alienation in Genesis 3:16 "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" is God's curse for Eve – but note that it is a prediction and not a command. Following the fall, the Old Testament is replete with examples of bad treatment of women by men, in effect treating them as objects, although it is important to note that the Bible views these critically. Lot in Genesis 19:8 and the Levite in Judges 19:25 use their daughters and concubines respectively as sexual bait to deflect attacks on men. Other women are often seen as evil and leading men astray, such as the wayward wife behaving like a prostitute in Proverbs 7, who leads a young man to his doom.. There is also Delilah in Judges 16. But the wider message of Samson's story is that male promiscuity and desire for sexual encounters from which he suffers is also the source of downfall.

Whereas the Old Testament refers to polygamy as common, especially for kings, it does not specifically endorse it. Indeed its accounts highlight the pitfalls, as in the case of the quarrels within David's family, the way Solomon's wives lead him astray into polytheism and the bitter disputes between the wives of Abraham, Jacob and Elkanah. Only one wife is made for Adam, a model for the rest of humanity. The early example of Lamech (Gen 4:19) may show polygamy to also be an effect of the fall.

The Law seeks to mitigate the adverse effects of the fall on relationships. Exodus 20:14 “You shall not commit adultery” emphasises God’s desire that marriage be exclusive. The law in Leviticus and Deuteronomy elaborates on aspects of sexual purity, for example in Lev 18:17-20 there is proscription of having sexual relations with close relatives; taking a wife's sister as a rival wife; approaching a woman to have sexual relations during her monthly period; having sexual relations with a neighbour’s wife.

Whereas divorce is mentioned in the law, it is not as a command, indeed in Malachi 2:16 God says “I hate divorce”. Rather, Deut 24:1 appears to be regulating a common social arrangement “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce ...he may not remarry her” Rabbis took different views as to how “indecent” an act was sufficient for divorce. To some extent forbidding remarrying can be seen as protection for women from unscrupulous husbands. This assumes remarriage is permitted normally. Furthermore, the Law includes protection for widows in Ex 22:22 “Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.”

The Law assumes women are subordinate to men; for example, in Numbers 30:3-10 a woman is unable to make a vow against her father’s or husband’s wishes. But there is no stereotype of a submissive woman in the Old Testament; Deborah in Judges 4:4-5:16 is a leader of men, other women of influence include Miriam or Esther. In Proverbs 31 there is acclaim for a “wife of noble character” who is an active businesswoman and evidently equal with her husband.

The joy of sexual love as blessed by God is celebrated in the Old Testament in the Song of Songs in lines such as 4:5 “Your two breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies.”. Here again there is a sense of equality between the sexes in their mutual love; the woman has a choice in 8:12 “But my own vineyard is mine to give”. And a vision of the power and mystery of love as God intends is given in 8:8 “love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame”. Note the contrast to the individualistic and commercial trivialisation of love – and infidelity - today.

### **3 The New Testament and the new creation**

Equality between the sexes is re-established in Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, as anticipated by the prophets; see Joel 2:29 as quoted in Acts 2:17 “Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” Consistent with this, women come to the fore in the Gospels, as active partners for men. It is women who are given the first news of the resurrection. Women aid Jesus and Paul. The Samaritan woman, sinner as she is, is given Jesus’ time and thereafter becomes an evangelist to both men and women. Mary of Bethany is commended for learning from listening to his teaching. All of these would be seen as scandalous by convention of the time.

Jesus is forgiving of sexual sin, as in the woman caught in adultery John 8:10 “neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin”. This is also the case for the Samaritan woman, and the woman “sinner” who wipes his feet in Luke 7:39. In the Old Testament, forgiveness had also been shown to David, after his contrition and by Hosea for his unfaithful wife, symbolising God and Israel. As a corollary, these instances show men and women that they too must be forgiving of one another in their marital relationship, lest lack of forgiveness destroy it (Atkinson 1994).

Jesus develops God's plan for marriage by recalling Genesis 2 as quoted above in Matt 19:3, adding after "one flesh" "So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." Jesus is elaborating on key aspects of marriage at the creation, that it also is a physical, emotional and spiritual union of the partners blessed by God and one that is permanent, a form of covenant.

This account is used as background to Jesus' clarification of the Law in respect of divorce in Matt 19:8 "'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard.....anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.'" Jesus is saying that divorce (and remarriage) is an effect of the fall and not God's original intention. The only exception is infidelity, in effect allowing for human frailty – thus taking a very conservative view of "indecency" from Deuteronomy 24. Paul offers one further exception to this in 1 Cor 7:15 that if an unbelieving spouse leaves "let him do so".

Paul's basic view of women vis a vis men follows that of Jesus in seeing equality of standing before God in Gal 3:28 "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus". Again, Peter talks to husbands of wives as "heirs with you of the gracious gift of life" (1 Pe 3:7), i.e. equal in redemption through Jesus. Paul also notes that both partners have an equal obligation to please one another sexually, as in 1 Cor 7:3-5 "The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife." 1 Cor 6:18 warns against casual sex as destructive of our relationship with God and inseparable from the rest of our behaviour.

Elsewhere, in Ephesians 5:22-3 Paul urges "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour". Some argue that Paul is teaching subordination of women in marriage and indeed fundamental inequality, in contradiction of Genesis 1 and Gal 3:28. On the other hand he also urges in 5:25-8 that husbands should love their wives "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" "In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies". Hence he makes a parallel between the husband's love for the wife and Christ's for the church, and men for their own bodies.

Stott (1999) suggests that such "headship" is far from implying a domineering relationship, but rather suggests responsibility, protection, care and self-sacrifice from men following Christ's example, in line with complementary roles, enabling the woman to be fulfilled. Her interests are put first. Consistent with this, 1 Peter 3:1 says that while wives should "be submissive to husbands" – also to win over unbelieving husbands - husbands are urged in 3:7 to "be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner". Weakness can be seen in a positive sense as including virtues such as gentleness, patience and nurture that can flourish under masculine protection.

## **Conclusion**

We would suggest that an examination of Biblical texts on the relationships between the sexes shows God's intention at the creation was equality before him, a partnership in procreation, companionship and sexual union with some complementarily in roles of equal value. God sees marriage and sexual relations as fundamentally good. Whereas that relationship shifted to one of male domination in the fall, God through the Law and his scripture sought to protect women and give praise to those women who display active virtue. Even the Old Testament is not at all consistent with a view that women must be subordinate to men. The advent of Christ

reintroduces the perfection of creation, albeit with concessions to the still-fallen world in which relationships exist. Paul and Peter complement Christ's teaching in giving detail on how complementarity can be worked out, including the concept of male "headship".

### **References**

Atkinson D (1994), "Pastoral ethics", Lynx, Oxford

Stott J (1999) "New issues facing Christians today", Marshall Pickering, London