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Creation and the Theology of Sexuality

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Introduction

In my recent paper for the Hermeneutics Hui I focused on the theology of sexuality in the Creation accounts in Genesis. I chose to explore these accounts with the feminist biblical theologian, Phyllis Trible, and her book, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*.¹ I went with Trible because her close reading of the texts has brought fresh new interpretations that have challenged some traditional readings of key texts in a way that I regard as important for a biblical theology of sexuality. In the Hui paper I suggested that the theological implications of these interpretations go even further than Trible ventured. In this paper I draw out those theological implications more. I maintain that the Christian doctrine of marriage rests on a theology of sexuality which has its basis in the biblical theology of creation – that is, in the creation of human sexuality as expressed in these accounts.

In the first part of this paper I essentially repeat the analysis of the text in the Hui paper, adding some annotations along the way. In the second part of the paper I draw out the theological and hermeneutical implications for a Christian doctrine of marriage.

Analysis

To begin then with the first creation account:

Needless to say, the key text here is v27:

And God created humankind in his image,
In the image of God created he him;

¹ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

Male and female created he them. (1:27 RSV)²

Trible identifies Genesis 1 as a liturgy of creation.³ It is poetic in form and, as such, it has a sophisticated structure full of parallelisms – more about that later. The immediate pre-context to verse 27, in verses 24-26, is the creation of land animals to fill the earth and share its vegetation, followed by God’s deliberation to create humanity ‘in our image, after our likeness’.

The immediate post-context to verse 27, in verse 28, is blessing.

And God blessed them, and God said to them:

‘Be fruitful and multiply,

And fill the earth;

Subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea,

Over the birds of the heavens,

And over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ (1:28 RSV)

Trible notes that that these blessings of fruitfulness and dominion are not inherent to the creation itself, but follow on from it, and also that, while the blessing of dominion is unique to humanity as male and female, in v22 the blessing of fruitfulness – that is, procreation – is shared with other living creatures.⁴ However, here, with the creation of humankind, the blessing follows the statement of creation in God's image. The implication of this is that the state of being in which humans are commanded to be fruitful (that of being God-imaging) is qualitatively removed from the state of being in which other living creatures are commanded to be fruitful. I will pick up on this later.

To return to verse 27:

And God created humankind in his image,

² The exclusive language in the texts quoted is due to Trible's use of the RSV translation, therefore I make no apology for it.

³ Ibid. 12. ‘And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”’ [1:20-22 RSV]

⁴ Ibid. 15.

In the image of God created he him;
Male and female created he them.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this verse is the repetition of certain words. It is only three lines long, but 'God' appears twice, 'created' three times, and 'image' twice. But for all its apparent redundancy, the verse has a sophisticated structure with two important parallelisms:

The first parallelism:

In the image of God created he him;
Male and female created he them.

There is a correspondence in meaning between 'image of God' and 'male and female' – that is, between the lesser known and better known elements in the parallel. The better known sheds light on the lesser known. This parallelism indicates that the narrator sees maleness and femaleness as being intrinsic to humankind's being created in the image of God. Tribble relates this to the male and female imagery used for God throughout the OT, but at the same time emphasises that YHWH is consistently understood to be neither male nor female.⁵

In other words, this is by no means the crass reading of sexuality into divinity that it might seem, for the emphasis through repetition on 'created' conveys another message. OT scholar Gerard Von Rad comments that the narrator's emphasis on sexuality as a part of creation is to be read in the context of the neighbouring Ancient Near East pagan religions in which sexuality and sexual practice were seen to be inherent to divinity. Verse 27 of chapter 1 appears to be a subtle but strong polemic against the 'divinisation of sex' endemic in the thought of Israel's pagan neighbours. Because throughout the mythology of the Ancient Near East, the sexual activities of the gods form a dominant motif, the narrator identifies and emphasises sexual differentiation as God's creation to make it quite clear that it is not part of the divine order itself. The people of Israel were not to believe and do as their neighbours did.⁶

⁵ Ibid. 21.

⁶ In the fertility cults of Palestine and Mesopotamia, creation was often understood as emanating from the union of male and female deities. 'Copulation and procreation were mythically regarded as a divine event. Consequently the religious atmosphere was as good as

Yet, important as these points are, interpreting the whole thing as a polemic against the divinisation of sex would be to lose the primary meaning. In fact such a reading must skate over an important particularity. If the polemic is the whole thing, then why the counter-productive reference to creation in the image of God?⁷ More about this later.

To return to the text: the second parallelism is between ‘humankind’ (Hebrew *hā-’ādām*) and ‘male and female’ (*zākār ûn^e qēbā*) and their corresponding pronouns, ‘him’ (*ōtô*) and ‘them’ (*otām*).

And God created humankind in his image,’

In the image of God created he him;

Male and female created he them.

As Tribble points out, ‘all five words are objects of the verb *create*, with God as its subject’.⁸ The shift from singular to plural pronouns shows clearly that *hā-’ādām* is not one single creature but rather two creatures, one male and one female. *Hā-’ādām* functions as a generic collective noun that should be translated as humankind or similar. This interpretation is reinforced by the immediately previous verse 26. There is a plural verb form in ‘let them have dominion’ which refers back to the singular word *’ādām*:

And God said,

‘Let us make humankind [*’ādām*] in our image,

After our likeness;

And let them [*otām*] have dominion ...’(1:26. RSV).

These shifts from singular to plural rule out an androgynous interpretation of *hā-’ādām*. ‘From the beginning, humankind exists as two creatures, not as one creature

saturated with mythical sexual conceptions’. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York, 1962), 1:27. See also Raymond Collins, “The Bible and Sexuality,” *BTB* 7 (1977), and Richard M. Davidson, ‘The Theology Of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 1-2’, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26.1, Spring 1988, 5-21: 6.

⁷ However relevant it may be to us today to take on board the warning.

⁸ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 17.

with double sex.’ Nor is there a male ‘him’ before there is both male and female as some traditional readings have assumed from the male gender of the noun and article. Hebrew grammatical gender does not indicate sex. Instead, there is original unity that is at the same time original differentiation.⁹ From the beginning, the word ‘humankind’ parallels -- is synonymous with -- the phrase ‘male and female,’ although it does not follow from this that the components of this phrase are synonymous with each other. Male is not parallel to female. The relation is one of complementarity, not mimesis. Unity embraces sexual differentiation; it does not impose sexual identicalness. This interpretation is established by the parallelism between ‘humankind’ and ‘male and female’. A later reference at the beginning of Genesis chapter 5 subsequently confirms this:

When God created humankind [*'ādām*],
In the likeness of God made he him;
Male and female created he them
And blessed them and called their name humankind [*'ādām*],
When they were created. [5:1b-2, RSV]¹⁰

To move now to the second creation account:

Tribble translates verses 7 and 8 thus:

Then Yahweh God formed the ‘earth creature’ [*hā-'ādām*]
From the dust of the earth
And breathed into its nostrils the breath of life:
And the earth-creature became a *nephesh* [a living being]. [2:7-8]

Sexuality cannot be assumed here because it is created later, which is why Tribble uses the neuter pronoun ‘it’ as an unambiguous way to refer to this ‘earth-creature’. At this

⁹ The singular *hā-'ādām* and *'ōtô* (his) indicate unity rather than opposition: *Ha-'adam* is not an original unity that is subsequently split apart by sexual division [ibid. 18] – however much this is suggested by the Latin origin of our word ‘sex’ in *secare*, from which our words ‘section’ and ‘dissect’ also come.

¹⁰ Ibid.

point *hā-'ādām* is not male, not the first *man*, because so far it is sexually undifferentiated.¹¹

The creation of the sexual differentiation which is to follow in verses 21-24 is signalled by another divine decision in verse 18 (again, this is Tribble's translation):

It is not good for the earth creature to be alone.

I will make a companion corresponding to it.

Tribble considers that the word *ēzer* (companion) has been traditionally mistranslated as 'helper'. A helper is a subordinate¹² whereas a companion is alongside on an equal footing. The word *kenegdo* (suitable) may be translated as 'alongside' or 'corresponding to', which reinforces the 'companion' rendition of *ēzer* in connoting identity, mutuality, and equality. More about this later.¹³

Tribble goes on to note that '[t]his divine act [the creation of sexuality] will alter radically the nature of the earth-creature (*hā-'ādām*) and bring about new creatures so that male and female together become the one flesh that is wholeness rather than isolation.'¹⁴ In its becoming material for creation, '[t]he making of the sexes is intrinsic to the earth-creature. From one come two ... Continuity exists in the one-ness of humanity, but here stress falls upon the discontinuity that results from sexual differentiation.'¹⁵ So when *hā-'ādām* next speaks, in v23, a different creature is speaking – a man. For the first time, this newly differentiated *hā-'ādām* speaks (again the translation is Tribble's):

¹¹ Ibid. 79-80.

¹² Although the word *'ēzer* elsewhere in the OT usually refers to a divine super-ordinate Helper (Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 68.

¹³ Ibid. 90. The meaning of the word 'identity' in this context (that of mutuality and equality) appears to be 'identification with'. It is apparent from what she goes on to say that Tribble does not mean identity in the sense of identical-ness. On *kenegdo*, see also Stanley J Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 275.

¹⁴ Moreover, in the taking of the rib and forming it into the woman, 'the creative act comes out of the earth creature itself.' This makes woman unique in creation – the only creature to be formed from another living creature. [Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 94, 96]. Grenz notes that this is also unique among the Ancient Near East creation stories [Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 270].

¹⁵ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 97.

And *hā-'ādām* said,
This, finally, bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh.
This shall be called woman ['iššâ]
Because from man ['iš] was taken this.

Trible dispenses swiftly with the traditional (and patriarchal) reading of this text which subordinates the woman through seeing her as derivative from (and moreover named, and thus defined by) the man. In the Hebrew literary tradition the act of naming confers power over the person or thing named, however Trible demonstrates that the statement 'This shall be called woman' is not naming as such, but recognition of sexuality. 'The word *woman* ('iššâ) ... itself is not a name; it is a common noun, not a proper noun. It designates gender; it does not specify person.'¹⁶ Moreover,

The use of the female pronoun 'this' (*zō'it*) unmistakably emphasizes the woman whose creation has made the earth creature different. It is through woman that man becomes man. At the same time, the earth-creature that was 'it' gives himself new identity in a word that is new to the story – 'iš [man]. Only after surgery does this creature, for the very first time, identify himself as male.¹⁷

The basic word for humanity before sexual differentiation, *hā-'ādām* [earth-creature] now becomes a sexual reference and from here on it is used frequently, though not exclusively, for the male (an ambiguity still lurks here). However, as Trible points out,

no ambiguity clouds the words 'iššâ and 'iš: one is female, the other male. Their creation is simultaneous, not sequential. One does not precede the other, even though the time line of this story introduces the woman first (2:22). Moreover, one is not the opposite of the other. In the very act of distinguishing female from male, the earth creature describes her as 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' (2:23). These

¹⁶See, for example, the instances of naming in Gen 4:17, 25, 26a. (Ibid. 98-9.) 'The verb *call* [*qr*] by itself does not mean naming; only when joined to the noun *name* [*šēm*][as in v20 in which *hā-'ādām* names the animals] does it become part of a naming formula'. Here 'the noun *name* is strikingly absent from the poetry. Hence, in calling the woman, the man is not establishing power over her, but rejoicing in their mutuality.' (Ibid. 99-100.)

¹⁷ Ibid. 98.

words speak unity, solidarity, mutuality, and equality. Accordingly, in this poem the man does not depict himself as either prior to or superior to the woman. *His sexual identity depends upon her even as hers depends upon him.* For both of them sexuality originates in the one flesh of humanity.¹⁸

The point Tribble makes here is a fundamental one. The creation of the sexes is in the first instance about identity. Without the difference of male and female, we would have no way of determining what it means to be either male or female. Sexuality would have no meaning. It is through and within the sexual differentiation which confers identity that the correspondence – alongside-ness – of unity, solidarity, mutuality and equality takes place. I suggest that this conferral of identity in male/female differentiated unity is at the heart of the creation of humankind as male and female in God's image and, as such, initiates the horizontal and vertical covenantal relationship between God and humankind.

There is a lot more theologising that can be done here (and has been done), but to return to the text: the man, in order to fulfil his identity as male, which depends on the complement of femaleness, abandons familial identity for the one flesh of sexuality. In the words of v24: *'Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his woman'* (2.24 RSV, my italics). The word 'therefore' is an indication of both entailment (consequence) and *telos* (purpose). It is because of the need to fulfil his newly defined male identity that the man now becomes united to the woman. It is clear that here the narrator is giving an account of the 'why' as well as the 'how' of marriage. Theologian Stanley Grenz interprets v23 as expressing a yearning for completeness now satisfied.¹⁹ Tribble sums up the creation of sexuality in this second creation account thus:

'From one comes two

¹⁸ Ibid. 98-9. My italics.

¹⁹ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 278. 'Adam's cry of delight at the presence of the woman rescues him from his debilitating solitude, with which the second creation story reaches its climax, suggests ... an even deeper aspect of human sexuality. The narrative indicates that individual existence as an embodied creature entails a fundamental incompleteness or, stated positively, an innate yearning for completeness.'

From wholeness comes differentiation
Then differentiation returns to wholeness
From two come the one flesh of communion between female and male.²⁰

OT scholar Gordon Wenham comments that the use of the terms 'leaves' and cleaves' 'in the context of Israel's covenant with the Lord suggests that the Old Testament viewed marriage as a kind of covenant',²¹ that Genesis 'contains essential background for understanding those events which constituted the nation of Israel as the Lord's covenant people', and that its first two chapters must be seen from this perspective.²² According to Wenham, Genesis 1.27 states the understanding of the nature of God, and of the God-human relationship that undergirds the covenants which define Israel's identity as People of God.²³ More on this too later.

Discussion

Biblical scholarship has swung in favour of reading the two creation accounts as a duplet – that is, as mutually interpreting. It is possible to read the second account of the creation of human sexuality 'through' the first one (and vice versa) without attempting to harmonise them.²⁴ We could think of this as a kind of 'spread out' parallelism of key words and phrases which are read together to give greater depth and nuance to their meanings, or alternatively and probably better, we could regard one account as a 'thick description' of an aspect or aspects of the other – here the narrative nature of the second account may be seen as 'thickly describing' the terseness of the statement: 'male and female created he them' of the first account.

²⁰ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 104.

²¹ Gordon Wenham comments that in this story's 'often poetic phraseology are expressed some of the Old Testament's fundamental convictions about the nature and purpose of marriage'. (Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 69,71.)

²² Ibid. xxii. 'Genesis is not merely an extrinsic prologue to the other books of the Pentateuch; many of its stories from chap. 1 onwards look forward to the institutions of the Mosaic era.' (xliv)

²³ Ibid. xlix. This verse not only 'affirms the unity of God over against the polytheisms current everywhere in the ancient Near East ... [but also] gives [humankind] a very different place in the created order from that given [them] by oriental mythology'. See note 5 above.

²⁴ As Grenz notes (*The Social God and the Relational Self*, 269.)

Reading the two accounts together gives the picture of a primordial wholeness of human personhood which yields a differentiation that realises wholeness through a mutual indwelling. The logic of sexuality is the unity-in-differentiation of male and female. Male and female sexuality are mutually defining. Each can only be what it is in relation to the other. It is plain that sexuality is not seen as an essence or property that an individual possesses. Nor can an individual human being function properly in isolation.²⁵ Personal wholeness through unity-in-differentiation does not require procreation to be what it is; therefore procreation is identified as a blessing following from sexuality and not as inherent to sexuality.

The structure of both accounts when read together make it clear that that it is the *unity* of humankind that is basic and thus logically prior to sexuality as *differentiated* unity. If it were not for this basic unity, there would be only differentiation and therefore no common humanity. Male and female would be two different creatures rather than mutually defining persons sharing the same creatureliness. The nature of this differentiated unity is further explained by the meaning of the phrase, 'a companion corresponding to it' in the second account.

Trible argues that 'corresponding to' connotes the qualities of companionship that define the nature of the male-female relationship: that is, identity, mutuality, and equality. There is perhaps an intentional ambiguity in her use of the word 'identity'. Here it appears we have 'identity', as in 'identification with'. Yet in her analysis of Genesis 2:23 she describes the newly created male/female relationship in terms of both 'identification *with*':

This, finally, bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'

and 'identification *of* femaleness in relation to maleness:

This shall be called woman because from man was taken this'.

It is the unity in *difference* – the 'identification of' in the context of the 'identification with' which makes this relationship qualitatively different from the companionship of

²⁵ This challenges the prevalent late-modern view of the person as an autonomous self-defining individual who happens to 'possess a sexuality'.

same sex relationships. As Tribble reads cogently out of Genesis 2:23, this is not identical-ness but mutual identification of difference in unity. Male identity is defined in relation to female identity and requires the complement of female identity to be whole. 'Iššâ, while sharing some of what is 'iš, is not a clone of 'iš but is fashioned into a different creature.²⁶

Yet Tribble's reading of qualities connoted by *kenegdo* (identity, mutuality, equality, and later also unity and solidarity) into *ēzer* is nevertheless problematic. While the qualities themselves may seem quite uncontroversial, their abstractness distances the particularity of the story in a way that is alien to the concreteness of OT Hebrew and potentially opens the way to investing in the story more (or less) than can be read out of it.²⁷ More on this too later.

I have suggested that reading the two accounts together gives the picture of a primordial unity that yields a male/female differentiation which maintains unity through a mutual indwelling. Karl Barth suggests that this interplay of sameness and difference is present in a prior way in the triune God.²⁸ He therefore concludes that the primal human relationship is the union of male and female in marriage and that this is a covenantal relationship. The parallelism in Genesis 1:27 between creation in God's image and creation of humankind as male and female reveals a theological significance in the reality of humans as sexual beings that distinguishes it from the reality of other-creaturely sexual being. As I have mentioned, the state of being in which humans are commanded to be fruitful in 1:28 is that of being God-imaging and as such is qualitatively removed from the state of being in which other living creatures are commanded to be fruitful. It is as a sexual differentiation in unity *before God* – corresponding to each other and as such corresponding to God – that the man and woman are commanded to be fruitful and multiply. This is what makes marriage

²⁶ There is the recognition here that all the components of differentiated unity that may be read out of the creation accounts are essential components of marriage.

²⁷ While it is impossible for us to avoid abstract nouns in the analysis of texts, we need to be aware of how this may skew the reading of the text.

²⁸ Grenz regards this as 'Barth's great insight.' [Ibid. 301]

the covenantal relationship which pre-figures all other covenants between God and humankind.²⁹ In God's bringing the woman to the man, and the man's acceptance of the woman, a double covenant between the couple and between God is sealed.

Because of its primal nature, all other human relationships are represented in this covenant.

Conclusion

The creation of humankind as male and female is a central focus of both the Genesis creation accounts. We read out of these accounts the creation of male and female sexuality as mutually defining – each enabling the other to be what he or she is. Any reading back into these accounts of theologies of human or Trinitarian personhood, however theologically important or helpfully elucidatory, must maintain a consistency with what is readable out of the text. A reading back of a more abstract or generalised interpretation will rid the text of its particularity and open it up to a reinterpretation in terms of various connotations of that abstraction or generalisation. I have suggested that this has tended to happen with Tribble's inferring of abstract qualities from *kenegdo* (corresponding to), and subsequent investing of *ezer* (companion) with these connoted qualities.³⁰

Male/female sexual differentiation in unity is a 'brute fact' of the Genesis creation accounts. (In contemporary philosophy, a brute fact is a fact that cannot be explained by way of some other fact.) The 'therefore' that opens verse 24 of chapter 2 makes a

²⁹ The *telos* of sexual differentiation as marriage (penultimately) is doubly covenantal in that the marriage relationship in its differentiated unity corresponds to the divine calling into being of humankind in correspondence to God. As Christopher Chenault Roberts comments, 'the biological differences between the sexes mean something not because they are superseded and given over to symbolic significance but through remaining what they are as they reveal a new teleology.' [Christopher Chenault Roberts, *Creation and Covenant: the significance of sexual difference in the moral theology of marriage*, NY: Continuum/T&T Clark 2007, 95].

³⁰ Theologian Graham Ward does something similar by abstracting sexuality from biological genital sexuality and equating it with desire. [See Graham Ward, 'The Erotics of Redemption – after Karl Barth', *Theology and Sexuality* 8 (1998), 70-1, and *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), chapter 5: 'Divinity and Sexual Difference'.] Roberts comments that 'In same-sex relations, Ward believes there are still irreducible distinctions, else there would not be desire.' 'Ward speaks of "transfiguration of biological difference" but what he really means is the annihilation of biological significance.' [Roberts, *Creation and Covenant*, 193, 195.]

direct link between this 'brute fact' and its *telos* (its purpose and fulfilment) in marriage. Another way of putting this is that marriage is contingent upon male/female sexual differentiation in unity. To query this reading out of the text is to step back from the text and question how we should interpret these creation accounts as a whole – whether we should regard them as illustrations of various principles, or whether we should instead look beneath the surface meaning for some alternative interpretation – for instance, that they are stories composed with a polemical purpose, developed to reinforce Israel's opposition to and separation from pagan sexual beliefs and practices, as Von Rad suggests. Yet before we rush to throw this particular idea out, we need to recognise the important truth it conveys – that to maintain sexuality is not divine is to reinforce by extension that it cannot itself be worshiped; it cannot be primary. God alone – the God who is the creator of sexuality – is primary. There can be no gods before *this* God. It follows that sexual fulfilment cannot be a primary value. If this seems even slightly counter-cultural to us, then we must question how much our church has bought into the secular culture of our age at the expense of its doctrine of God.

But this is not, and cannot be all there is to these stories. If the polemic were the whole thing, then why would the narrator throw in the counter-productive reference to creation in the image of God? To hang onto the belief that sexuality and marriage are indeed a fundamental part of God's creation that somehow mysteriously reflects the very being of God is to accept that the narrator of Genesis 1 is saying something highly significant about both divinity and humanity in these accounts. If as Christians we are to regard marriage as more than simply a human social construction, then regardless of our position on the theological spectrum, we cannot dismiss the Genesis creation accounts. The moment we move away from the particularity of the biblical account's theological self-understanding by either abandoning it for abstract principles or by trying to invest something else in it, we let go of the thread of particularity that runs through to Jesus' statements on marriage. If we are not serious about one, we cannot be serious about the other.