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Jared Wolfe

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The Relationships of Genesis 2.4b–3.24: Past, Present, and Future

JARED WOLFE

The creation narrative found in Gen 2.4b–3.24 has intrigued scholars and laity for centuries. The preconceptions and misconceptions that accompany the text in both popular interpretation and dogmatic theology are myriad and detrimental to both individuals and churches alike. The problem perhaps lies in the fact that we naturally impose our own agendas and presuppositions on the text, making it prescriptive, normative, restricting, and absolute. We emphasize our intentions for the text rather than the author's. While these impositions are unavoidable, we must simply try to *read* the text and follow its own rhetorical flow.

First, why Gen 2.4b–3.24? This demarcation of the story follows traditional scholarly argument that 2.1–4a function as a completion of the creation text beginning in Gen 1.1, rather than as the beginning of the story of the Garden of Eden.¹ The first three verses of Genesis 2 continue the rhythmic cycle preceding it by moving into the next consecutive day and giving an epilogue of sorts, informing the reader of God's restful activity, and therefore providing an etiology for the Sabbath. Whether one begins the second creation story at 2.4a or 2.4b is inconsequential to the larger question, that is, what should we, the readers, be attuned to in the Eden narrative?

Many scholars speak of a "second" Creation story here, so it will be helpful to notice what distinguishes it from the "first" Creation story (Gen 1.1–2.4a).² The differences between these two stories are manifest. The first creation story follows a set rhythm of, "And God said," "And God saw that it was good," "And there was morning and evening the X day." There is a symmetry between the creation of habitats in the first half of the week, and the creation of inhabitants in the second half: God creates light on Day 1, and he demarcates the light into sun, moon, and stars on Day 4; he creates waters and sky on Day 2, and the fish and birds that inhabit the waters and sky on Day 5; and finally, he creates land and vegetation on Day 3, and its animal and human inhabitants on Day 6. Day 7 concludes the narrative nicely, describing the converse of conditions in 1.1–2. The repetition and symmetry in this cosmic creation recital has led many scholars to conclude that the Creation story of Genesis 1 is in fact a liturgical recitation honoring creation and Creator. Genesis 1 is not narrative mythos; it is worship.

Not so in the creation story in Gen 2.4b–3.24. This narrative bears no repetition, no symmetry, and no formulaic statements. Rather, the story of Gen 2.4b–3.24 is a narrative that subjects the reader/audience to suspense, excitement, disappointment, and relief; it is a well-told tale. This is a tale of humanity, of companionship, of relationships, of heartbreak, and of grace. This story is told to explain human nature, human companionship, marriage, temptation, punishment, and mercy. The relationships depicted are between the man and the earth, God and the man/humanity, and the man and the woman. These relationships are at stake in this tale, and are what we shall emphasize and investigate. Gen 2.4b–3.24 is not

1. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis* (WBC 1–2; Dallas: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987–1994), 49.

2. The terms "first" and "second" Creation story are not meant to imply that there are two different versions of the creation of the earth. Rather, the "first" story is more macrocosmic in its scope, while the "second" story is more microcosmic, describing a specific occurrence in the larger creation.

worshipful encomium, but suspenseful drama. This story is not a systematic, set liturgy, but an emotionally charged tale of human relationships.

The first, and primary, relationship that permeates the second Creation story is between God and the man/humanity. In the first Creation story God is transcendent in his creative activity, but in this story God is actively engaged in the creation and care of the man/humanity. In Genesis 1 God's creative activity is expressed by the Hebrew verbs *bara'* (to create) and *'amar* (to say). The first verb takes only YHWH as its subject and designates a transcendent type of creative power. The verb *'amar* (to say) expresses God's creative activity by divine fiat. However, in Genesis 2–3, God is the subject of much more personal and anthropomorphic verbs. God “makes” (*'asah*) the “heavens and earth,” “forms/fahions” (*yatsar*; as a potter forms) the man, “breathes” (*naphakh*) into the man, and “plants” (*nata'*) the garden. Rick Marrs sums it up aptly, observing that while “in Genesis 1, God is preeminently pictured as a royal monarch, [in Genesis 2–3] God is fully and intimately engaged in his created world.”³ Throughout these two chapters God is constantly participating in open relationship with the man/humanity. Later, God will walk, talk, and eventually judge his creation. Genesis 2–3 is anthropocentric in its focus and much more personal in its depiction of YHWH's creative behavior—relationships are at the fore.

In addition to the anthropomorphic language of God's creative activity, it is important to note what God does for the man in order to ensure his happiness and security. God plants a luscious garden with all manner of trees and plants for food (2.8–9). God notices the man's need for companionship, and searches the creation exhaustively, finally resorting to a new creation to meet the man's need. Moreover, God gives man a purpose within the creation. Walter Brueggemann states that “human beings before God are characterized by *vocation*, *permission*, and *prohibition*. The primary human task is to find a way to hold the three facets of divine purpose together.”⁴ Many readers focus primarily on the *prohibition* and its consequences, neglecting the other two facets of human purpose in the story. God is characterized as the great prohibitor and judge, rather than the relational God that purposes humanity with a relational vocation within the creation, an expansive permit to enjoy the creation, and a small, but important, prohibition on the man's freedom. As new readers we want to see all three parts of this relationship as they exist in tension with one another, rather than focusing solely on any single part of the human purpose. God's relationship with the man exists in this tripartite task. This relationship is tenuous, and we will see it put to the test in chapter 3; but first let us discuss the other relationships evident in the text.

The second relationship presented is that between the man/humanity and the earth. The correspondence between the man and the earth is evident in the language used to express the formation of the man in 2.7: “Then YHWH God formed man [*'adam*] from the dust of the ground [*'adamah*], and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” The grammatical correspondence and alliteration in the Hebrew text between *'adam* and *'adamah* strikes the reader's ear and arouses curiosity as to the nature of this relationship. On the one hand the ancient writers may simply—and cleverly—have been noting the relationship between the human body and the dust of the earth. In this case, the correspondence is etiological; it explains why humans decompose into “dust” after death. At the same time, the theological explanation of this correspondence may point to humanity's vocation as given by God in 2.15: “YHWH God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” The man's vocation is to work and care for the earth, the very substance that YHWH drew upon to form the man. This relationship between the man and the earth is one of care and harmony. The ground corresponds and responds to the man. This relationship will be violated after the man and the woman's transgression in the following chapter.

The third relationship is that between the man and the woman. Several important rhetorical devices are imbedded in the telling of this relationship, both at its inception in chapter 2 and its distortion in chapter 3. Let

3. Rick R. Marrs, *Embracing the Call of Genesis: Finding Ourselves in Genesis* (Missouri: Covenant Publishing, 2003), 44.

4. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (IBC 1; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 46.

us attend to its inception first. The story of the creation of the woman spans verses 18–24, and is a miniature, self-contained narrative.⁵ This narrative is a tightly woven tale of suspense, in which the primary question is: What will make the man whole? The answer is not given immediately, as expected, but instead is discovered only through a process of trial and error that builds suspense. The process requires successive acts of creation on the part of God, and these too are unexpected and exciting. God, for reasons left unmentioned in the text, does not deem himself worthy of being the type of partner the man needs to end the man's loneliness. God creates the animals and brings them before the man, who names them. Naming here, like the naming of the woman, does not suggest domination or superiority, but rather implies a relational understanding of each creature.⁶ As the man names each animal, he understands and evaluates its character. In the process, he discards each as the type of "helper" or partner he needs for completion.

At this point, the narrative is bursting with suspense. If God is unfit, and all the creatures on the earth are unfit, then what is to be done? Since nothing is left to bring before the man, God goes back to the drawing board and, in a mighty finale, creates the woman from the very being of man. The apprehension heightens as she is brought to the man. The question on the tip of every reader's tongue is: Will this new creation finally be a suitable helper for the man? With relief we are told that the man not only discovers the woman, but himself as well.⁷ The act of naming transforms the original relationship of the man ('*adam*') with the earth ('*adamah*') to man ('*ish*') and woman ('*ishshah*'). Man now corresponds, both grammatically and personally, with woman. The exclamation made by the man in verse 23 is one of mutuality, equality, and relationship, "This *at last* is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman [*ishshah*] for out of Man [*ish*] this one was taken."⁸ The initial relationship between man and woman, *as God intended it*, is one of harmony and equality—of oneness. This precious, but fragile, relationship will be terribly distorted in the ensuing events.

Before moving on to examine the distortion of these relationships in chapter 3, a quick excursus of the phrase in verses 18c and 20b is in order. Many readers assume that the phrase "a helper as his partner" denigrates the woman's status below the man's, or that it refers to her ability to complement the man sexually or with lesser physical labor; but this is not the case. This phrase is much more robust in its meaning. In Hebrew, the word for "helper" is '*ezer*', and it is being qualified by the phrase, "as his partner," which in Hebrew reads *kenegdo*. The term '*ezer*', in both its noun and verb form, is used 108 times, and most often, YHWH is its subject (e.g., Deut 33.29; Ps 33.20). Interestingly, when YHWH is the subject of '*ezer*', the cry for help is made with the implication that YHWH is the *only* person that can be of any aid; thus it seems that if this is the case then the woman is the *only* being that can perfectly remedy the present dilemma of the man's solitude. The qualifying phrase, *kenegdo*, is composed of two prepositions (*ke*, "as, like"; and *neged*, "opposite of, corresponding to, equal") and the singular masculine pronoun (*o*, "him"). The qualifying phrase requires that the '*ezer*' be an equal correspondent to the man. If this is the case, then the full phrase, "a helper as his partner," infers equality rather than inferiority or submissive laborer. As Claus Westermann states, "What is meant is the personal community of man and woman in the broadest sense—bodily and spiritual community, mutual help and understanding, joy and contentment in each other."⁹

So we see that a close reading of Genesis 2 yields a microscopic picture of a creation abounding with relationships. Creation is relational in this narrative. We have identified and elucidated several of those relationships, but must now turn to the events of chapter 3 and their distortion of the relationships of the original creation. Full exegesis of this chapter is beyond the scope of this article, but let us recount the happenings of the tale up to the entrance of God and the pronouncements of the curses and punishments.

5. Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (CC 1–3; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984–86), 225.

6. See Gen 16.13 and Hagar's naming of God. Surely this implies understanding rather than superiority.

7. Marris, *Embracing the Call*, 47. See also Westermann, *Genesis*, 226, for the story's similarities to Enkidu in the Gilgamesh epic.

8. Westermann, *Genesis*, 232.

9. *Ibid.*, 232.

The plot thickens in this narrative with the introduction of the serpent. The serpent cunningly deceives the man and the woman while they are together in the garden, and “their eyes are opened” as they abuse the permission and violate the prohibition given to them. YHWH comes to walk and commune with his creation, and it is here that we rejoin the story to make rhetorical and theological notes on the terrible distortions that occur to the original relationships.

When YHWH appears on the scene, the relationship between the man and the woman bespeaks distortion. There is no more talk of mutuality and oneness, now the primary pronoun is “I” (“I heard,” “I was afraid,” “I was naked,” “I hid myself,” “I ate”). The man no longer considers himself and the woman to be one, as he quickly puts all blame on her (3.12). No longer is the woman the joy and missing part of the man, now she is an object for the man to cower behind. In fact, the man not only blames the woman, but subtly blames YHWH himself: “The man said, ‘The woman whom *you* gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’” The lack of accountability and vulnerability is evidence that all previous relationships are now strained. Honesty has been neglected in favor of blame. The woman follows suit, though she can blame only the serpent (3.13). Individualistic casting of blame, not relational unity and accountability, is now the hallmark of human relationships.

The judgments for the crime follow swiftly. The serpent is cursed for his relativization of YHWH’s prohibition. Moreover, there is now a rift between the serpent and humanity. The woman’s punishment follows. Her punishment occurs according to her positions of honor in an agrarian community: mother and wife. The woman’s greatest source of honor—the bringing forth of offspring—will now come only through great pain. In addition, the woman’s status as wife will forever be a power struggle with her husband, though he will ineluctably prevail. This verse has long been used as a source-text for the subjection of a wife to her husband. However, the astute reader observes that this distortion of creation stands in opposition to that which YHWH intended—the mutual and equal relationship we saw in Genesis 2. The woman’s punishment is not the norm for continuing existence; it is a distortion of original creation. The man is also punished according to the activities in which he engages, namely, agricultural labor. The man will no longer enjoy a harmonious relationship with the earth (*’adamah*). Now, the earth will rebel against the man, just as the man rebelled against God. The relationships between man and woman, humanity and earth, and humanity and God have been strained indeed.

As God cared for his creation at the beginning of the tale, so he does now at its end. After the transgression of the prohibition in 3.7 the man and the woman make a feeble attempt to “cover up” themselves and their shame, but it is not enough. Now, even though the deserved punishment for violating the prohibition was death, God deals out grace. Punishment is given, but God’s final act is to again provide for his creation by making them proper clothing. Westermann elucidates the verse’s significance.

Scarcely any attention has been paid so far to the fact that the verb *’asah* (to make), which hitherto had been used only of the creative action of God, is used here—and only here in the Old Testament—of “manual work” on God’s part; he fabricated something out of material at hand to him. The statement retains its meaning in the context; last action of the creator toward his creature before expelling him from the garden is an action of care and concern. It is just this primitive anthropomorphic language that is such a wonderful expression of their concern: the creator “protects” his creatures while putting them at a distance, and the protective action accompanies them on their way.¹⁰

Thus the story of the Old Testament begins the Story of Salvation that continues today, visible in God’s saving acts—acts of grace and compassion when the punishment deserved is death.

10. Ibid., 269.

Finally, the story can now be viewed from a different, more transparent lens. The story has moved from utopia to distortion to redemption. It gives us a clear look at the creation God *intended* for this world and its relationships, and it gives a lucid picture of what humanity has done with it. Yet, not for a moment do the biblical writers accept this distortion of creation as acceptable or normative. God moves quickly and powerfully to restore and redeem. Henceforth, other human beings will engage in God's redemptive activity of the creation.

The question that now remains is how will we—the individual and the church—join God in his redemptive purposes. How will we join God in restoring the creation to its intended state? Some steps, from the scientific/technological realm, have been taken already to ease the punishments given by God in chapter 3. Though mankind still tills the earth and is forced to deal with difficulties in crop production, surely the advancement of farming equipment, pesticides, and plant growth catalysts have eased this task. Though women still feel pain in childbirth, the amazing advancements in pain management and relief have greatly eased this punishment (though my wife may say differently). If these punishments have been eased in the name of technology and scientific advancement, then why hasn't the punishment concerning the distorted relationship between man and woman been tackled more by individuals and the church? It is my experience that overcoming this punishment has been woefully neglected, and has, in many cases, been abused. If we are serious about joining God's redemptive purposes, then perhaps we should take his intentions for the creation as our starting point, and actively work to recreate the garden's mutuality, equality, and harmony.

JARED WOLFE IS A PH.D. CANDIDATE IN NEAR EASTERN LANGUAGES AND CULTURES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA IN LOS ANGELES.

