

A MAN, A WOMAN, AN ADAM

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The phrase ezer cenegdo found in Genesis 2:18 is usually translated 'helper' with the suggestion that the second human was of inferior rank to the first. However, ezer's meaning is 'strength' or 'power' when the initial letter ayin represents an original ghayyin, as in the majority of its occurrences outside Genesis 2. The preposition ce in cenegdo means 'of the same kind.' Neged means 'facing as an equal.' In the creation of a woman God proposed nothing less than another adam. In the naming of the creatures the solitary adam would realize that none was, nor could be its ezer cenegdo. Only the woman could truly be one like himself. The creation of the human species, the adam, was completed only with this final step. While still alone, the adam was truly human, but it was not the completed human species God still was creating. This final step would complete both the man and the woman, individually, as adam/human, as well as complete the creation of the species adam/human. Sexual union is important, in and of itself, but it also lays a foundation for, and symbolizes, the many other profound and complex ways a woman and a man become a unit over a lifetime together, even while remaining at the same time two individuals. 'One flesh' is another way of emphasizing the equality between the genders God intended from the beginning of our creation.

In the first of this series, our discussion of this narrative began with a single *adam*, the garden, and the two trees. We move now to the account of God's completion of the *adam*.

A Power (ezer)

Reflecting on the phrase *ezer cenegdo* (Genesis 2:18) for fifteen years now, I am convinced that if the church came to understand and live by *this* creation intention, that one change by itself would be enough to spark a new reformation/renewal so thorough and so profound that the postmillennial hopes of our nineteenth century Wesleyan forebears would be realized in a generation. Hyperbole? If so, I think it is not by much.

'It is not good [for] the *adam* to be by itself' (v 18) introduces the beginning of the preparation for the second and final step in the creation of the *adam*. This was not a case of God setting out to

correct a mistake, as though it just then had occurred to God, seeing the single human standing there alone. God enjoys the fellowship of community within the Triune Godhead; God had created most of the animal species male and female; from the beginning, God designed the *adam* to be male and female, also. However, to value rightly the presence of another human when God should present her, the lone human first needed to discover and to experience its solitude. Thus, God said, 'I will make for it an *ezer cenegdo*.' To understand as we ought God's creative and redemptive intentions for the human race, we must understand this phrase. Before we examine it, one or two reminders are in order, because the evidence presented here, and the conclusions drawn from it, are different from anything most of us have encountered previously.

First, we should note that most observers in the Wesleyan theological tradition have understood the *problem* with the traditional translation for many years. The *solution* presented here is now three decades old, in print. So far as I am aware, R. David Freedman first presented it in a study entitled, 'Woman, A Power Equal to Man,'⁷⁵ and this discussion is adapted and expanded from Freedman. For this student, Freedman's solution/translation has been the key to integrating the totality of scriptural teaching on gender and related subjects. This includes interpreting so-called 'problem texts' of the New Testament often brought forward as though they were valid objections to a biblical view of God's intention for human gender equality. Interpreting by the principle of the *analogia fidei* - and *without* violating hermeneutical canons within their own contexts - we now can read these texts as the positive instruction they were intended to be, and not as 'problems.'

Second, it should surprise no one that new discoveries occur from time to time, in various areas of biblical studies. If God's revelation required no study for the plumbing of its depths, the scaling of its heights, if it carried no potential for revealing new understandings and affirmations of its timeless truths, we hardly should regard it as coming from the God of infinite wisdom. Unless God's revelation now and again challenges and refines our finite understandings, even sometimes of important facets of God's eternal redemptive enterprise, we hardly can call it *God's* revelation. We need think only of Luther's rediscovery of the place of grace and faith in God's redemptive economy to know it could happen again. If

⁷⁵ R. David Freedman, 'Woman a Power Equal to Man,' *Biblical Archaeology Review* 9 (Jan-Feb, 1983), 56-58.

Freedman's discovery, with all its proper implications, should gain the recognition and practice in the church that God intended all along for this important teaching in the creation accounts, it will be as transformative as was Luther's breakthrough, both within and outside the church. This is, to be sure, a strong claim, but I ask only that the reader follow with me the biblical evidence itself wherever it leads, to the refining of both our orthodoxy and our orthopraxy.

We begin with the fact that the sixteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *ayin*, represents what once were two separate consonants (phonemes), represented in writing by two separate letters (graphemes). Perhaps around 1200 B.C.E. these two coalesced into one. (Similar changes occur in many languages, e.g. an English phoneme that once could be written with the grapheme 'y,' as in 'ye,' now is written always with the two-letter grapheme 'th,' as in 'the'.) Both the letters we are concerned with here (phonemes and graphemes) still occur in the Arabic alphabet as *ayin* and *ghayyīn*. Both occur also in Ugaritic, contemporaneous with early Hebrew. That both letters were present in an early stage of the Hebrew alphabet can be demonstrated in several ways, but our necessary discussion of the two nouns, *ezer*, will suffice. Let us be clear: two words exist and now are recognizable again as two *different* words. They are spelled alike because only the one letter (grapheme) *ayin* now is available to write them. Many languages also exhibit this phenomenon; its common name in English is homonym. For example, 'bear,' the animal, and 'bear,' to carry, are spelled alike now, but are two different words, from two different roots in Middle English.

The spelling *ezer*, in noun form, occurs twenty-one times in the Hebrew Bible. Eight times (six of these in the psalms) it was spelled originally with *ayin*, and means 'saviour/salvation, rescuer/rescue, deliverer/deliverance.' Two familiar instances are together in Psalm 121:1-2, 'From where does my rescue come? My rescue [comes] from Yahweh.' Another occurrence that demonstrates this meaning clearly is Psalm 70:5: 'But as for me, I am afflicted and needy; O God, hurry to me! My rescuer (*ezer*) and my deliverer are you; O Yahweh, do not delay!' The parallelism of 'my rescuer' (*ezer*) and 'my deliverer' (*mephallti*) establishes that the *ezer* spelled originally with *ayin* means 'rescuer, deliverer, saviour.' In Hebrew poetry, the use of two nouns in this kind of parallel construction means they are synonymous, or at least have significantly overlapping semantic

ranges.

In the other eleven occurrences outside Genesis 2, *ezer* was spelled originally with *ghayyin*, and means 'strength,' 'power.' Deuteronomy 33:26 reads: 'There is none like God, O Jeshurun [or 'like the God of Jeshurun'], The One who rides [through] the heavens in his strength (*ezer*), And in his majesty (*gaavah*) [he rides] the clouds.' The chiasitic parallelism makes it clear that *ezer* in the second line lies in the same field of meaning as *gaavah* (majesty) in the third line. The meaning, 'strength,' does; 'help, rescue, deliverance' does not. Moreover, God does not ride the clouds 'in his help' (which makes no sense), but 'in his strength.' If riding *to* the rescue of Jeshurun (a poetic name for Israel) were what the poet had in mind, as some translations have it, we also would expect the Hebrew preposition *le*, rather than *be*, which actually is present.

Deuteronomy 33:29 speaks of God as 'the shield of your [Israel's] strength (*ezer*)' in parallel with 'the sword of your majesty (*gaavah*),' using the same two nouns in the same kind of parallelism as in verse 26. In Psalm 68:34, and also in Psalm 93:1, the Psalmist used the noun *oz* ('strength') in parallel with *gaavah/geut* ('majesty'). Since 'strength' (*oz*) parallels 'majesty' (*gaavah/geut*) in those poetic passages, we would expect the parallel of 'majesty' (*gaavah*) to be 'strength' in its two occurrences in this poetic passage (Deut 33:26, 29), also. In both verses, the parallel noun is *ezer*. That *ezer*, used as a synonym of *oz*, also means strength is, therefore, a solid conclusion. (To render *ezer* as 'helper, rescuer' in any of these contexts would make no sense at all.)

One more piece of evidence may help; this is, after all, a recent discovery in the study of the Hebrew Bible. King Uzziah of Judah reigned from about 792-740 B.C. The English '-iah' at the end of his name represents Hebrew *yah* or *yahu*, short forms of Yahweh that often are used at the end of sentence names. The first part of Uzziah's name is from *oz*, the other noun meaning 'strength,' that we have discussed above. Thus, Uzziah means, 'Yah is my strength.' However, in 2 Kings 14-15 Uzziah is referred to as Azariah. The first noun in this alternate name is *ezer*, the noun we are discussing; thus, Azariah also must mean, 'Yah is my strength.' To posit, 'Yah is my rescuer,' as the meaning of Azariah, when Uzziah means, 'Yah is my strength,' would be puzzling, to say the least. These two names of the same king, with the same meaning, are not necessary to prove our case, but they do constitute further compelling evidence.

With the coalescence of the letter *ghayyin* into *ayin*, i.e., with only one grapheme now available to represent the two different

morphemes, the spelling of one noun *ezer*, meaning 'strength,' now is the same as the spelling of the other noun *ezer*, meaning 'help/helper, rescue/rescuer.' It should not be surprising that the distinction between their meanings also became blurred. (A 'strength' or 'power' who 'rescues' is a 'helper' of the one rescued.) Eventually, knowledge of the previous existence in Hebrew of the letter *ghayyin* was forgotten. Exegetes and translators could not know the other noun *ezer*, meaning 'strength,' ever had existed in the language. The natural mistake of translating *all* occurrences of *ezer* as 'help/helper' (or the like) became unavoidable. Furthermore, because they did not know another meaning was possible, they hardly could have been expected to notice the problem in texts where the translation, 'help/helper,' does not fit the context.

We have established that 'strength, power' is the meaning of *ezer* when the initial letter *ayin* represents an original *ghayyin*, as in the majority of its occurrences, eleven of nineteen, outside Genesis 2. How do we know which meaning we should choose for 2:18, 20? Two lines of reasoning will help; one is positive, the other negative. First, the negative; the eight occurrences of *ezer* outside Genesis 2 which mean 'help/helper,' all refer to God as the help/Helper. Since the one who became the *ezer* here was not God, but the woman (Gen 2:21-23), *ezer* cannot mean 'help/helper.' If we argue that humans can and do 'help,' even 'save,' one another, we still are left with the fact that the helper is superior to the one helped. Here, that would mean the female is superior to the male. But matriarchy is no more God's creation plan than is patriarchy. A translation of 'helper' merely substitutes the one problem for the other. Moreover, to try to dress it up by calling it the woman's 'rescue' of the man from his loneliness is, in the end, only condescension toward both the man and the woman. The text does not address the issue of 'loneliness,' but of 'aleness'; the two are not the same thing.

The positive evidence for 'a strength, a power,' as the correct understanding here is the word that follows *ezer* in our phrase, *ezer cenegdo*. *Cenegdo* is two prepositions and a pronoun, written together as one word. The preposition *ce* means 'like, as, according to, corresponding to, of the same kind.' Here it means that what God purposed to create, and what the solitary *adam* could not find among the other living creatures (v 20), would be of the same kind, or species, as the *adam*; it would correspond to it as equally *adam*, with and as the first was *adam*.

The second preposition is *neged*. As always, context is key; here, inseparably attached as a prefix, *ce* is the context which cannot be ignored. With *ce*, *negd* means 'facing as an equal.' This is confirmed in post-biblical Hebrew, where these two prepositions together regularly mean 'equal.' The final letter of *cenegdo* is a suffix pronoun, third masculine/neuter singular, meaning 'his' or 'its.' As human gender was not identified until after the second step in human creation, we probably should translate 'it' here, though that will change within a few verses.

Altogether, then, *ezer cenegdo* means 'a power/strength like, corresponding to, of the same kind or species, equal to it.' God proposed nothing less than another *adam*. The one *adam* had as yet no way of knowing that, so of course could not yet know what it would mean. For the *adam* to come to that knowledge most vividly and effectively, it (he) first needed to learn what could *not* be *ezer cenegdo* in relation to it, or with respect to it.

A Naming, and Names (*Shemim*)

Verse 19 simply reports that God brought before the one human, for the human to name, representatives of the previously created larger and more important land creatures, both the wild and the domesticated, and of the larger birds. This 'list' includes only the two broadest possible categories of potential candidates, 'all the living creatures of the field' and 'all the flying creatures of the skies.' We may understand 'all' here to mean 'all those animals and birds the *adam* could have taken as worthy of consideration at first encounter, not yet knowing what an *ezer cenegdo* really would be, or would look like.'

Fred Bush has shown that in biblical Hebrew a formal naming requires three elements: 1) the verb *qara*; 2) the common noun *shem*, 'name'; 3) a proper noun, the personal name (PN) actually bestowed.⁷⁶ Here God brought the larger land animals and birds to the *adam* for the *adam* to name - the formal naming of each. The first necessary element is present: the verb *qara* occurs three times (vv 19-20). The second necessary element is present: the common noun *shem* occurs twice. The third necessary element is present by implication, 'So the *adam* gave names to all . . .' (v 20). Obviously, not every name could be included in this brief account. For a

⁷⁶ Coleson and Matthews, *Go to the Land I Will Show You* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 7-9

multiple naming like this, the statement that the *adam* bestowed the names is sufficient.

To name is to claim and to exercise authority over the thing or person named. This is the first exercise of that human stewardship hegemony which God would confer upon the race as a whole, once both its male and its female representative were present. God arranged this anticipatory exercise of authority over the other creatures for a specific purpose. Once the solitary *adam* had observed all the larger birds and land creatures carefully enough to give each a suitable name, the *adam* would realize that none was, nor could be, an *ezer cenegdo* for the *adam*. This was so, even though some of these creatures were remarkably like the *adam*, and all shared with it the essential attributes that make animal life 'animal,' as the narrator reminds the reader by the repetition here (v. 19) of the phrase 'living creature' (*nephesh khayyah*), used of the newly formed *adam* itself in 2:7.

The narrator also had used the verb 'formed' in verse 7. He now repeated it here, too, to emphasize in another way that we share a common sensate life with our fellow creatures, also formed by God. The one difference between these notes here and the account earlier in the chapter is that only the *adam* is said to have received this life through the very breath of God (v 7) into its nostrils. The breath of God and the image of God are the two endowments that separate us from our animal 'cousins.' God already knew all this, of course, but the *adam* needed to discover it for itself, to be properly appreciative of and receptive to the *ezer cenegdo* when God should build her, as the climactic work of God's marvelous earthly creation.

We translate verse 20, 'So the *adam* gave names to all the livestock, and to the flying creatures of the skies, and to all the [wild] creatures of the field.' Here, the list is expanded by one category; it is natural, then, that the category of livestock should be mentioned first. Ancient Israel's first readers and hearers of this account would have had daily contact with these creatures, and both human stewardship and human hegemony over them were givens. Having named the livestock, the *adam* moved on to name the 'flying creatures' and the 'creatures of the field,' listed here in chiasitic order from that of verse 19, for purposes of literary variation, and for the artistic touch of placing creatures of the skies between the two groups of land creatures.

The final verb of verse 20 (*matsa*) is an active form. The single

task of the *adam* had a two-fold purpose: to name the other creatures, and to ascertain whether any of them may have been for the *adam* the 'power like it.' The *adam* did succeed in naming the other creatures, 'but as for the *adam*' itself, 'it did not find' among them one like itself. Now the solitary *adam* also was ready for the *ezer cenegdo* whom the Lord God would provide.

A Man and a Woman (*Ish ve-Ishah*)

With the solitary *adam* now ready, God brought upon it a 'deep sleep' and 'took one of its sides' (v 21). Of the forty occurrences of the noun *tsela* in the Hebrew Scripture, this is the only place it is translated 'rib' by the majority of English versions. Exegetical prudence, then, dictates that we look again at this occurrence. Many have noted that most often this noun refers to the walls or sides: of the Tabernacle in the Wilderness (Exod 26:20, 26-27; 36:25, 31-32); of the Ark of the Covenant (Exod 25:12, 14; 37:3, 5); of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 6-7). In 2 Sam 16:13, *tsela* refers to the 'side' or slope of a hill. The Septuagint reinforces this understanding, translating about half these occurrences, including our two here in Gen 2:21-22, as *pleuron/pleura*, 'side.' Considering also that the man would recognize the woman not only as 'bone of my bones,' but also as 'flesh of my flesh' (v 23), we should conclude that 'side' is a better rendering here, as well. God took a sizeable portion of bone, flesh, and perhaps other bodily tissue, from the upper thoracic region of the one human, to make another human. It even may be that we should visualize God dividing the one human into two more or less equal parts. The meaning of the noun would admit of that understanding, and we cannot stress too much that the creation of the human species, the *adam*, was completed *only* with this final step. While still alone, the *adam* truly was *adam*, human, but it was not the completed human species God still was creating. This final step would complete both the man and the woman, individually, as *adam*/human, but it would finish, as well, the creation of the species God named *adam*/human (cf. Gen 5:2).

We probably ought not to think of the single *adam*, before God performed this 'surgery,' as 'male, masculine, man.' Neither is it necessary to think of this solitary human as an androgyne or hermaphrodite, a single individual combining the visible physical characteristics of man and woman in one body - though many, both ancient and modern, have taken this approach. Better is to remind ourselves once again that as long as only one *adam* existed, God's

creation of the *species* named *adam* remained incomplete. The text simply does not address the issue of human gender before creation of the woman. If we would be prudent, we probably ought not to, either. At a minimum, we ought to refrain from labeling speculation on the matter as 'biblical fact.'

We may translate the end of verse 21 either, 'and [God] closed up the flesh in its place,' or, 'and the flesh closed up in its place.' Given that God still was very much the active Agent in this final creative act, the first understanding is preferable. Strictly speaking, this detail is unnecessary; the reader would assume it, even had it not been stated. But including it draws attention to God's tender concern for the individual left sleeping following this drastic 'surgery.' God did not leave his body to suffer, even unconsciously, but made him whole again at once, before turning to the climactic creative act. Now we may refer to this one as 'him' and 'man.'

Verse 22 reads, literally, 'Then *Yahweh Elohim* built the side which he had taken from the *adam* into a woman, and brought her to the *adam*.' First, we should note that continued use of *adam* for the one who now clearly also was 'man' does not deny identification and status as *adam* to the woman. It merely affirms for the reader/hearer that the first *adam* still was *adam*, though now there were two of the *adam*, and the first now also was 'man.' The occurrences of *adam* in Genesis 1:26-28 and in this narrative of 2:18-24 should be enough to convince us that *adam* means 'humankind' or 'human being,' depending on whether it is used as a collective or a singular noun. As an added emphasis, we have Genesis 5:2, 'Male and female [God] created them, and he blessed them, and he called their name *adam* in the day of their creation.' In a formal naming, God named *both* of them, male and female, *adam*. God's Hebrew name for the human race - male and female, individually and collectively - is *adam*. That being so, we, as professed followers of God and of God's instruction, should be careful to use the name in God's ways and for God's purposes, with all that implies.

The verb 'built' here indicates the same attentive, loving care in fashioning this second, female *adam* as God had exercised in forming the first. That the author intended this emphasis is clear from the parallel structure of the two statements of God's forming and building:

verse 7: And formed /Yahweh Elohim /the adam /[of] dust /from the ground.

verse 22: And built /Yahweh Elohim /the-side /from the adam/into a woman.

The only variation in the order of the two sentences is that 'into a woman' occurs last in the second sentence, probably for climactic emphasis. The man was formed from the ground; the woman was formed from the man. Neither could claim the supposed independence of self-generation, though their later rebellion would have tempted them to make that claim, had it been possible. All humans are of the same species, because of our common origin in the one flesh become two, and then become one again in each of us, through the act of procreation.

God brought each the gift of the other, the gift of human companionship and physical intimacy, for the sake of which God created us male and female. Even God's pleasure in giving humans these gifts shows through in the literary understatement, '[God] brought her to the man.' To convey the emphasis of the Hebrew text, we translate the man's exclamation (v 23): 'This one, finally, is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh! As for this one, she shall be called woman, for from man was taken this one.'

An important note here is that the feminine singular demonstrative pronoun *zot*, 'this one,' occurs three times: once at the beginning and once at the end of this two-line poem, and once at the beginning of the second line, i.e., in the middle of the poem. All three times, it refers to the woman. In a single syllable poetically employed, the man declared his exuberance and joy that God now had ended the search for an equal partner, the partner the man had not found through all the thought-intensive process of naming the other creatures. 'This one' was the 'power/strength like [him], corresponding to [him], of the same kind or species, equal to him,' whom God had promised (v 18).

Hebraists long have known that *ish* (man) and *ishshah* (woman) are from different roots. Still, they sound related; the folk etymology reflected here is not out of bounds. It is important, too, that the man's statement was *not* a formal naming of the woman. The common noun *shem* (name), necessary in and for a formal naming, does not occur here. Also, *ishshah* is not the proper name of this one woman; rather, it is a common noun, denoting every woman.

The man did not yet assume the authority to name the woman; in this verse, he did *not* name her.

Leaving and Cleaving (*Azab ve-Davaq*)

Verse 24 is not the man's statement; it is the narrator's (or a later copyist's) editorial comment, 'For this reason, a man shall abandon his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.' The first words, 'for this reason,' reflect the man's exclamation of discovery that the woman was 'bone of [his] bones, and flesh of [his] flesh' (v 23), that she was human, just as he was. When a man and a woman decide to marry, their marriage becomes the most important fact of their new life together *for this reason*. The physical and social union of a man and a woman, a woman and a man, is God's intention from the beginning of creation. When agreed to and undertaken, it is to supersede all previous, and all other, relationships.

In ancient Israel, a son usually lived as a subordinate member of his father's household, under his authority, until his father died. When a son married, his wife also became part of his father's household, under the authority of his mother. 'Abandon' (*azab*) is a very strong verb, in Hebrew as well as in English. Later, the prophets used it when they charged Israel and Judah with unfaithfulness to God; they 'abandoned' Yahweh for the worship of other gods (Jer 1:16; Hos 4:10). This text calls on men to leave their parents' authority in every way, and to establish their own households with their own wives.

'Cleave' (*dabaq*) also is a very forceful verb. In the context of a rebellion by the northern tribes, the men of Judah continued to 'cleave' to David their king (2 Sam 20:2), even at risk of their lives; Deut 11:22 includes an exhortation for Israel to 'cleave' to Yahweh. Given the overwhelming pressures of ancient Near Eastern culture for a son to cleave to his *father* until his father's death, this call for a man to cleave to his *wife*, instead, was amazingly countercultural. (In much of the world, it is countercultural, still.) Given the strong covenantal associations of these two verbs in later passages - 'abandon' referring to covenant unfaithfulness, and 'cleave,' to covenant faithfulness, the editor here was emphasizing the covenantal aspect of marriage, expecting and rewarding the absolute loyalty (faithfulness) of each to the other.

The first meaning of the phrase, 'one flesh,' is the obvious one. When a man and a woman come together in sexual union, they are 'one flesh' in a very real sense, even if only for the moment. Other meanings also are important, however. Each time it happens, the conjugal union is a reminder that man and woman have a common origin in the single *adam*. The sexual union is important, in and of itself, but it also lays a foundation for, and symbolizes, the many other profound and complex ways a woman and a man become a unit over a lifetime together, even while remaining at the same time two individuals. 'One flesh' is another way of emphasizing the equality between the genders God intended from the beginning of our creation. Finally, two individual parents become, in another sense entirely, 'one flesh' as they produce children with essentially an equal gifting of genetic heritage from each of them.

The nakedness of Eden's new denizens (v 25) is a link to Genesis 3, to which we shall turn in the third installment of this series.