

Ethics of Gender and Sexuality

First Women of Creation, Interpretations and Appropriations

When contemplating connections between the Hebrew Bible and attitudes to women, gender, and sexuality as well as the ways in which female and male identities have been variously shaped and culturally situated, we must begin with Genesis 1–3. The tales of creation found in these first chapters of the Bible have had a lengthy post-biblical history and an enormous influence not only upon ways in which many actual men and women have defined themselves or been defined by societies but also upon *realia* of the social structures in which many people live. These texts are so familiar and come to readers so pre-framed by certain views and expectations that we have to work hard to read them afresh. A close reading of gender in Genesis 1–3 is followed by a study of interpretations in early Judaism and then a sampling of modern and contemporary readings. Throughout we ask about possible implications for guiding moral action and advice concerning the goodly life. Where have these tales led with what implications and where might they lead in the future?

The Hebrew Bible begins with two accounts of creation in which human beings are prominent features of the cosmogonic order. Given the tremendous subsequent interest in these tales in post-biblical literature, it is surprising that the Hebrew Bible itself contains few allusions if any to these early accounts and none to first woman beyond Gen 4:1–2, 25, verses that allude to Eve's birthing Cain and Abel and then Seth. Ezek 28:11–17 offers an alternate paradise-lost tale preceded by a "rebellion of the gods" theme, in which Eden is imagined as a bejeweled magical place lost due to a hubristic human, the king of Tyre, but no woman figures in the story.

We begin by noting an absence. In the Mesopotamian creation account *Enuma Elish*, which essentially parallels the order of creation found in Genesis 1, a mother goddess Tiamat plays a critical role as primeval procreator, manifestation of chaos, and enemy of the new order established by the

god Marduk. The word *têhôm* in Gen 1:2 usually translated “deep” offers a faint linguistic echo of the ancient Near Eastern myth with an elimination of female leadership, power, and agency. Teresa Hornsby treats *têhôm* as “a queer form: masculine in form yet usually appearing as a female noun.”¹ She notes that the term can “gender shift,” for example, the feminine in Hab 3:10, and pointing to Ps 68:2, 15, and Gen 7:11 sees “MxTehom” as posing “a fluid challenge to the firmament and boundaries that the deity has established, and moreover, has the potential to dissolve them.”² In this way she seeks to “restore the noun status to *têhôm*” and its agency. While the argument applies convincingly to appearances of “the Deep” beyond Genesis 1, in the opening creation account she/he/they is put in their place fully under divine control, and to miss this is to miss part of the gendered message of the first creation account, its particular author’s orientation.

On the other hand, the description of the creation of human beings in Gen 1:27–28 holds complex and ambiguous implications for questions about embodied identity, gender, and sexuality and invites the sort of questions posed and theoretical frameworks explored by contemporary scholars of women, gender, and sexuality.

And God created humanity/the earthling in his image
 In the image of God he created it/him;
 male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)

The creation of humans at Gen 1:26–27 is not clearly imagined as the formation of one person, for example, the man, Adam, as older translations used to imply. Like the animals in their species or kinds or the “creeping creatures” in their species or kinds (1:25), the human has its kinds, and here the emphasis is on maleness and femaleness, however we understand these distinctions in terms of gender or sexuality and the complex nuances, which modern scholarship underscores, that attach to the categories of male and female. The creator deity’s identification with this human being is also complex as to meaning and message.

Pictured conversing with the members of the divine council, the deity suggests as a climax to the cosmogonic process that an earthling *’ādām*, from the root meaning “earth,” be made “in our image and likeness” so that the species can rule over the previously created environment and its living beings (Gen 1:26). Then following the ambiguous language in 1:27 translated above, with its singular and plural object pronouns, its reference to male and female,

and again an emphasis on the human as reflecting the divine image, comes a blessing echoing the blessing upon the non-human animals in verse 22. They, the earthlings now understood in the plural or dual, are to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and play the rulership role mentioned also in verse 26. Where does the language and imagery lead as we explore the gendered and sexual identity of human beings and indeed the gender and sexuality of God?

Ambiguous in similar ways is the variant at Gen 5:1–2, the first verses of an ancient genealogy of humankind.

This is the register of the generations of Adam (humankind):
 in the day that create did God Adam (humankind),
 in the likeness of God he made it.
 Male and female he created them,
 and he blessed them
 and he called their name Adam,
 in the day of their creation.

The pronoun is singular in the first full sentence as translated above, but plural in the second. Again the reader is led to ask about the gender of the divine “likeness,” and about the variation in and ambiguities surrounding the pronouns.

It is generally acknowledged by scholars that the first creation account seems to place male and female on an equal plane, leading to contrasts with the account in Genesis 2–3, which we will explore next. In Genesis 1 they are created simultaneously; they are both supposed to rule and to populate the earth. The emphasis on procreation suggests some kind of sexual interaction that makes increase of the species possible, but the procreative activity of humans is not presented as a comment on relative status for the male or the female. What aspects of their identities, however, might be implicit in the pronouns, in the references to male and female, and in the notion of being created in the divine image? Does the divinity encompass traits of maleness and femaleness, whatever that might mean physically, culturally, or metaphysically? Does the reference to a creation of the *’ādām* as him/it/them suggest a non-binary status that is male, female, neither, and both? Such a concept of the deity and of the earthling offers a wide-ranging, ambiguous set of possibilities for gender and sexual identity.³

With his study of Ezekiel 1, Rabbinic scholar Howard Eilberg-Schwartz moved in this interpretative direction regarding Yhwh and gender. The

prophet sees a seeming anthropomorphized manifestation of the deity “a likeness (*dēmūt*) like the appearance of *ādām* (a human being or earthling)” (Ezek 1:26). Significantly, via a manifestation of fire and a mysterious shimmering mineral substance (*hašmal*), our eyes are led upward from the appearance of this being’s loins and downward from the appearance of the loins. Eilberg-Schwartz emphasizes that we do not see the physical or biological marker of God’s gender in Ezekiel’s imagining of a divine but human-like visionary manifestation.⁴ Could we refer to the being via the pronoun “them”? The pronoun “them” found in the final phrase of Gen 1:27 is vocabulary to which twenty-first-century people are becoming accustomed in reference to non-binary and trans people, those who do not fully identify as male or female or whose physical bodies at birth reflect biological men and women but whose sense of self does not conform with these biological categories.

The first account of the creation of humans in Genesis 1, reinforced by the summation and repetition in 5:2, thus offers interesting possibilities for modern appropriators as they contemplate the deity’s form and essence and their own embodied and envisioned persons, created in his image. This biblical imagining of the creation of humans provides not only an empowering model for women’s equality to men from a second-wave feminist perspective, for male and female in God’s image are created simultaneously, but also a more capaciously inclusive variety of imagery. We will explore what contemporary thinkers in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies make of this passage, but first we explore the Rabbinic treatment.

Rabbinic exegesis delights in grappling with rough edges in the biblical text, seeming contradictions in content from one passage to another or repetitions. The Rabbis take stock of and explain difficulties in language or spelling, the sort of problems a modern text critic would seek to deal with the better to understand the author’s intent. For them, the “author” is God, who does not contradict or repeat himself and who leaves these difficulties in the text and as kind of trail of breadcrumbs that leads the exegete to the truth or to many coexisting truths implicit in the divine word. And of course the Rabbis themselves offer varying interpretations, often disagreeing with one another as they reveal and contribute to the richness of the tradition, an ever-blossoming set of meanings and messages relevant to various socio-historical contexts and theological concerns.

A case study in Rabbinic gender ethics as it relates to Genesis 1:26–27 is provided by Genesis Rabbah, a commentary probably dating to the first half

of the fifth century. The commentary on Gen 1:26, found at Gen Rab 8:1, is in the form of a proem, a Rabbinic literary genre frequently employed in this midrashic collection. The composer begins his exegesis with a particular biblical text and juxtaposes it with another biblical text, often a verse from the Writings that do not initially appear to have relevance to the original text, in this case Ps 139:5. The interpreter builds the passage with reference to other verses and finally, with exegetical virtuosity, weaves his way back to the initial verse, in this case Gen 1:26, having widened and deepened the messages and meanings of his opening source.

Motivated perhaps by the very ambiguities in pronouns, questions about singular and plural, which have been noted above, Gen Rab 8:1 presents a series of biblical verses interpreted to emphasize the two-sidedness and mediating qualities of this first human being who is said to be double in many critical world-defining, physical, and metaphysical ways. The first human is said to belong to the present and the future, to be capable of inhabiting this world and the world to come, having capabilities to follow the good or the bad from a moral perspective. They are a world-spanner, a golem, stretching from one end of the world to the other. They are first and last in the creation process, and so on.⁵ Each of these images is rooted in midrashic treatments of biblical verses outside of Gen 1:26. For the present study, the Rabbis' inclusion of Gen 5:2 and 2:21 early in the proem, allows for a comment on gender, for the first human is male and female (Gen 5:2). Taking Gen 5:2 quite literally and no doubt drawing upon shared imagery and storytelling from the Greco-Roman world, dealing with an androgynous creation theme found in Plato's *Symposium* and the gnostic Hypostasis of the Archons,⁶ the Rabbis, in a midrash attributed to Rabbi Jeremiah b. Leazar, suggest that the first man is androgynous, employing a Hebrew transliteration of the Greek, both female and male, a bisexual being. Rabbi Shmuel interprets Gen 2:21 about the woman's creation from the rib of Adam via a play on the word *šela'* reading not "rib" but "side," citing Exod 26:20, which describes the second side *šela'* of the tabernacle. In this way, he harmonizes the two creations of the woman, one in Genesis 1 and the other in Genesis 2, and maintains imagery of double-ness, employing the Greek term *diphrosophon*, "double-faced," picturing the first human as a double-faced being whom the deity then split into two separate beings, each with their own body. Marianne Schleicher views R. Shmuel's interpretation as a kind of correction of the "non-differentiated" potential of the midrash attributed to R. Jeremiah. This approach not only limits the potential for further contemporary re-appropriation but also treats Gen Rab 8:1

in too fragmentary a way as Gwynn Kessler's efforts to "queer" the Rabbinic text demonstrate,⁷ which leads this analysis of Genesis 1 in the light of Gen Rab 8:1 to contemporary efforts at appropriation.

How have the creation of humankind in Genesis 1 and the interesting midrashim preserved in Gen Rab 8:1 been employed in modern reflections upon gender and sexual ethics in Judaism, and how do these treatments or appropriations affect attitudes to and perceptions of people's status and roles? Do second-wave feminist interests inform modern shaping of the sources, and how does more recent theoretical work in gender and sexuality informed by LGBTQ concerns, experience, and interests frame interpretations and applications of this fascinating thread of tradition? An example drawn from late twentieth-century American popular culture provides an entry point.

In the 1983 film "Yentl," Barbara Streisand adapts Y. B. Singer's short story and subsequent play, a story about a young Jewish woman in early twentieth-century Eastern Europe who dresses as a man in order to pursue her passion for study in a Yeshiva, normally very much a man's world. Scenes in both the story and the film can be interpreted to exude homoerotic nuances, while the plot as a whole partakes of the traditional narrative pattern of the person who cross-dresses, disguising himself or herself as female or male in clothing and culturally gendered demeanor, to achieve certain ends. Thus Yentl becomes Anshel. For our purposes, it is important to note that Streisand infuses the film with a feminist perspective. Women can study! Women need not just stay at home, bake bread, and bear children. Thanks no doubt to researchers, Yentl/Anshel and the film's male love interest Avigdor have a scholarly Rabbinic debate about the meaning of Gen 2:21. While Avigdor reads "rib," that the woman was created from man's rib and implicitly is thus a derivative person not entitled to all the prerogatives of men, Yentl/Anshel points to the midrashic interpretation we have been discussing and insists that, no, woman was a side of humanity, a half of the initial double-sided being, and therefore the male's equal.

Contemporary scholars within the theoretical framework of women, gender, and sexuality studies go beyond the 1980s feminism implicit in this piece of instructive popular culture and provide perspectives on Gen 1:26-28 and Gen Rab 8:1, which have strong implications for the ethics of gender and sexuality within Judaism, a perspective that some scholars steeped in traditional views have consistently rejected. A comparison between the work of twentieth-century scholar Paul Heger and that of contemporary scholar

Gwynn Kessler provides an interesting contrast and underscores the issues involved for Jewish ethics.

Paul Heger (1924–2018) had a lengthy scholarly career spanning the second half of the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first. Heger's study *Women in the Bible, Qumran, and Early Rabbinic Literature* was published in 2014, and the introduction to this book reveals his orientation.

The status of women in contemporary society has lately become a matter of great interest in the context of women's desire to gain equal rights in Western and, increasingly, global society. Some writers and thinkers, feminist and otherwise, blame the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, as a significant factor in, if not the source of, women's historically disadvantaged status in Western societies. The narratives of the Creation and of the Fall were interpreted in both Jewish and Christian writings in ways highly detrimental to women. On the other hand, one must consider that these interpretations were at least partially portraying the real conditions in the societies of their period, and these writings should not be perceived as the primary instigators of these conditions; they should rather be considered as justifying the prevailing state of affairs regarding the status of women and supporting their continuation.⁸ [. . .] To impose modern views on ancient writers is inappropriate. Niditch's claim that the author of this midrash intended to address a tension between the sexes is untenable . . . such tension is a modern concept.⁹

This orientation, of course, misses the point or one of the points of contemporary efforts to reapply, re-oralize, and appropriate ancient texts as relevant to contemporary Jewish women's status and place within the tradition. But the venerable scholar also wore blinders about the Rabbis' own anxieties concerning maleness and femaleness. To be sure, a goal of the Rabbis is always to make sense of seeming doublets or contradictions or unclarities in the biblical text as Heger notes,¹⁰ but in the process, I would argue, that they also reveal what most concerns them. Jacob Neusner, Heger's creative contemporary, suggested that the Mishnah's Order of Women points to the framers' visceral reaction to woman as chaotic, anomalous, not the normal—which is to be male like themselves, and to the ways in which the legal tradition seeks to create order out of this gender problem.¹¹ I would argue that a similar anxiety is at play in Gen Rab 8:1 but in this piece of midrash it is resolved not by emphasizing differences and male control but by emphasizing a kind of

shared humanity that acknowledges but seeks to bridge gender difference. In a somewhat similar vein, Gwynn Kessler offers a thoughtful recent exegesis of Gen Rab 8:1 and the biblical verses it addresses that draws upon queer studies.

Like Marianne Schleicher, Kessler views the division of the androgyne and double-faced beings into two beings as emphasizing ultimately a gendered humanity, divided into male and female. She suggests that the image of the golem, however, offers non-binary possibilities, pointing indeed to the non-binary nature of the deity in whose image humanity is created.

In my reading, moreover, the image of God not only includes both male and female undivided, it also opens a space beyond binary gender constructions. As mentioned above, *adam* becomes divided into male and female, but the image of the *golem*, with its ability to embody and translate gender into some sort of “unfinished matter,” holds out the possibility of embracing—indeed sanctifying—gender as a process, a movement, unfolding and continuing. Unfinished matter does not imply imperfection; to the contrary, it connotes matter in process or becoming.

Focusing solely on the first two images of *adam* offered in *Gen. Rab.* 8.1, which are mired in the binary of female and male, ultimately obscures the third image of *adam*—and by implication also the image of God—that this tradition sets forth. Although the rabbis could not imagine an undivided humanity as the norm, they could very well envision their God as always and already One—by necessity undivided. Indeed, according to Exod 3:14, they could also imagine God as constantly becoming that which God will be: *Eh“yeh Asher Eh”yeh*.

Genesis Rabbah 8.1, with its multiple images of humanity and God, thus points to a space beyond the world of binary gender constructions. Continuing to focus on *adam*’s splitting into two—and only two— genders therefore limits both the image of God and humanity set forth in this passage. At first reading, this rabbinic tradition appears to naturalize a binary gender for humanity, but after its exaggerated cutting off of male and female—understood as an attempt to create order—it once again imagines *adam* undivided and, thus, like God.¹²

In this way Kessler explores within Judaism “a place beyond binary gender constructions.” Such a reading has implications not only for feminist readings of the tradition but also for more capacious applications to

non-binary identities within the framework of the tradition, and in contrast to Paul Heger's view, the tradition allows for such appropriation and reapplication.

The second account of creation in Genesis 2–3 has borne the brunt of sexist and misogynist interpretations and applications, as Paul Heger notes.¹³ Phyllis Trible's 1973 study attempts to turn the page on such interpretations in a twentieth-century feminist context, as we will discuss later. The post-biblical Rabbinic tradition of *Genesis Rabbah*, however, once again reveals interesting and perhaps unexpected ambivalences and openings. First we explore the biblical narrative itself and then move on to later appropriations and their implications for gender ethics.

The order of human beings' creation, male and female, has been one factor in subsequent appropriations of Genesis 2–3, in attitudes to gender and views of women's socio-structural place, for in contrast to the creation of Genesis 1, the woman is created subsequent to the man, each from the outset clearly differentiated as to gender. They are sound-alike counterparts, rooted in the word for man, *ʾiš* and *ʾiššā*: "from man was taken this one (the demonstrative in the feminine singular)" (Gen 2:23). Phyllis Trible's classic essay "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation"¹⁴ does indeed the best one can to depatriarchalize this creation account, working closely with the language and its elasticity, emphasizing the concept of a helpmate at 2:18, the woman as a partner or counterpart to the man, her place in the plot as the important "climax" to creation, and the positive nuances of being from a rib rather than from "dirt" as is the man.

Man and woman are portrayed as a socio-structural unit, but it is the man who leaves his mother and father to attach himself, literally "to cling to" her, so that they become one flesh, an allusion to the conjugal, foundational family bond. Indeed the companionship and compatibility of man and woman is implicit in God's words, which might be translated "It is not good for the man/the earthling to be by himself," as later Rabbinic interpretations emphasize.

The man's creation first in order, the fact that God first tries to find him a mate among all the creatures of the garden (perhaps to God, the immortal and divine, all animals are somewhat alike) finally creating woman from a piece of the man's body, and that the man is said to initiate the family unit have all contributed to gendered assessments of the female that treat her as secondary and derivative, beneath the man in a biblically derived gender ethics.

The story of man, woman, and the snake in Genesis 3 has contributed further to this view of woman as man's inferior. The tale in Genesis 3 begins at 2:17 with the prohibition not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. From the perspective of traditional narrative patterns, such prohibitions signal that they will certainly be disobeyed or broken, leading to a change in direction in the plot, a change in status or situation for the protagonists. The snake's role as trickster parallels those of Loki or Prometheus, who defy the great gods, who then exact revenge. In this case, an ideal reality is pictured where food is provided, socio-structural roles are not explicit, a certain lack of hierarchy is assumed among living beings, and death itself is not explicitly inevitable. This period is encapsulated in the image of man and woman being naked and not ashamed at the end of Genesis 2.

I have written about the myriad versions of cosmogonic tales that see the breaking of a prohibition as the route to reality as its storytellers experience it, a reality that of course always includes death and often features of social structure with explicit roles for certain groups.¹⁵ Others emphasize the more personal rite of passage that each human undergoes from childhood to adulthood as related to the image of nakedness. The child feels no self-conscious shame, but as he or she matures becomes aware of personal differences and the need for clothing, which does mark cultural identity, including gender identity.¹⁶

Phyllis Tribble and others have found the accusation leveled against the woman in post-biblical tradition that she is uniquely responsible for bringing sin and death into the world to be a misreading of the story, as is the view that this role marks her as inferior to the man, morally or cognitively. A close reading of Genesis 3 portrays her as a curious seeker of knowledge, for the fruit is *neḥmad lēhaškil*, "desirable for perception." The term *lēhaškil* evokes meaning of making wise and seeing, and thus parallels the previous phrase about the tree's being desirable to the eyes while underscoring the woman's curiosity, her desire for wisdom. The man on the other hand is utterly passive. She gives to him and he eats (3:6). The actual biblical text contrasts with the frequently expressed imagery of European art depicting Adam as trying to stop the woman, being an unwilling participant, highly upset about what is transpiring in the garden!¹⁷ A more sympathetic reading of Genesis 2–3 that does not place all the blame on the woman and that might be read to portray her as intelligent and curious only emerges with vigor in the twentieth century.

The aftermath as always in such cosmogonic myths about the coming of reality results in a reduction in status, a lessening of carefree happiness, in short

reality. The view of the woman emerges most saliently at Gen 3:16, a verse that has been a subsequent source of female subjugation, although in the context of Genesis 2–3 it is simply describing reality. That reality does involve a clear role of woman as one who gives birth with pain, who experiences sexual desire for her mate, and who is “ruled over” by him. Carol Meyers offers a new translation and understanding of this verse that broadens the concept of birth with pain and that lessens the nature of male political control.

With sensitivity to the medical and ecological realities experienced by ancient Israelites, Meyers points to the high rate of infant and maternal mortality and to the general difficulty of life and daily survival in this agrarian world, plagued by illness, physical toil, drought, and famine. The language usually translated pain *‘eṣeb*/*‘iṣṣābôn* also means “sorrow” and “toil” (as in the words to the man about his need to toil in order to bring forth food in 3:17) so that Meyers suggests the verse refers not merely to labor pains but to sorrow at the loss of so many babies and the hard daily work-lives of women. Such a reading deepens the verse beyond the usual understanding of an etiology for the birthing process itself. She reads the increase of the woman’s *‘eṣeb* and literally her being pregnant (rooted in the word *hrh*), as a comment on the frequency of pregnancy in a world without reliable birth control and with the need for as many live births as possible in order to do the people-intensive work in the fields. This interpretive reading, which is also an appropriation, is sympathetic to the physical realities faced by women in the ancient world and points deeply to the realities that women face in a post-Eden world.¹⁸

Meyers also offers a translation of the subsequent divine comment on women’s new status, one that perhaps seeks to liberate women from the insistence on gender hierarchy that readers sometimes derive from this tale. Here we are less convinced of her reading. Meyers suggests that the message about the woman’s desire for her husband and his ruling over her both have to do with sex. The woman may hesitate to take on the life-threatening role of child-bearer but she must accede to the man’s wishes and will do so not only because of her own sexual desire but also because in this context he rules over her.¹⁹ Such a reading may seem to circumscribe male political power, relegating it only to one area of married life, but as Kate Millett has noted, sex is politics, and if there is control over a woman’s sexuality, there is an uneven balance in all sorts of power, agency, and autonomy.²⁰ It is difficult to liberate Genesis 3, for the text describes the everyday social reality lived by Israelite men and women, but the interpretive process of post-biblical Rabbinic Judaism, while in many ways even more critical of the woman and

justifying of women's subjugation on various levels, on the other hand admits of some fascinating nuance that might be interpreted further in exploring the ethics of gender.

Genesis Rabbah offers a varied array of interpretations of the creation of the woman and her eating from the forbidden tree in Genesis 2–3. Some of the midrashim are primarily concerned with explaining biblical inconsistencies or problems. In this case a basic question is, why need a woman be created again if she was already formed with the man in Genesis 1.²¹ Other interpretations do make value judgments about this woman and her actions, but not all the midrashim are the same in tone, meaning, and message as they relate to questions of gender and sexuality. While some of the midrashim portray the woman in positive ways, some are veritably Pauline in their condemnation of the woman as the source of evil and death, a biblical character whose traits are retained by all women. Other midrashim are more neutral, apologetic, patronizing, or quite humorous, shaping the portrayal of woman in fanciful interpretations that lessen the first woman's culpability and lighten women's inherited moral burden. We will explore salient examples that provide opportunities for various contemporary applications in areas of gender ethics.

A first case study is offered by Gen Rab 17:1, 2 midrashim on Gen 2:18 where God declares that it is not good for man to be by himself. And as we know, the most appropriate companion is the woman created from the man himself. Gen Rab 17:1 superimposes the notion of Ten Commandments upon the creation account in Genesis 1. Thus "Let there be light," a divine order, is one of the ten, "Let there be a firmament" another, but "in the beginning of God's creating" also qualifies as one of the ten, as does "And the spirit of God . . ." The concept of commandment thus does not require some sort of imperative. R. Menachem b. R. Jose however excludes "And the spirit . . ." and includes Gen 2:18, "It is not good for man to be by himself," thus emphasizing that the creation of the man's partner is part of the very creation of the cosmos, the divine order or structure implicit in the ten. While R. Jacob b. R. Kirshai disagrees, it is significant that one interpretative tradition sees the woman's creation as fundamental to the very order of the universe.

Gen Rab 18:2 also eschews some of the frankly misogynistic midrashim we will explore in a moment but in its positive view of woman is basically heteronormative. Through a series of word associations, the method of *gezerah shavah*, the woman is associated with good, joy, help blessing, and atonement—all for the benefit of the man's household. It is of note that in true

Freudian style the home or house (in Lev 16:11; Deut 14:26; and Ezek 44:30) is associated with the woman so that texts that refer to the man's house refer to his wife. This is perhaps to domesticate the woman. On the other hand she is identified with peace via a play on 1 Sam 25:6, with life itself via association with Qoh 9:9. R Hiyya b. Gomdi declares that the man is incomplete without the woman via reference to Gen 5:2, and an anonymous midrash—"some say"—draws upon Gen 9:6 to declare that the very image of God is impaired if a man is alone. This citation is followed by quotation of the divine command or blessing to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 9:7) suggesting perhaps that in creating other human beings, people follow in God's footsteps. Heterosexual sexuality may thus be reified, but the divinity is also to some extent sexualized or at least imagined to be a procreator, leading to some of the interesting sort of ambivalence about God's body and sexuality mentioned above in relation to Gen Rab 8:1.

Gen Rab 17:3 includes two variants of a midrash on Gen 2:18 in which God seeks a helpmate for or counterpart to the man. The midrashist reads the preposition *neged*, "opposite" or even "parallel" to mean "against" in order to suggest that the woman can be a counterpart, "a help" like the wife of R. Joshua b. Nehemiah, an apparent paragon of the female marriage partner, or a kind of enemy, against her husband's best interests like the wife of R. Jose the Galilean. Two variants of an illustrative tale follow, in longer and shorter versions, that portray the wife of the latter as an archetypal shrew who is appropriately punished, a sort of legend that is the stock in trade of patriarchal misogyny. Even more negative is a portion of Gen Rab 17:8 that offers visceral interpretations about the meat-like nature of the female body, based in the imagery of woman being taken from a body part of man at Gen 2:22. From a discussion of the birthing of females and males, the midrash moves on to drawing essential differences between men and women, either in personality traits or in roles assigned by custom and tradition, and in each case the female bears the burden of eating from the forbidden tree. Thus a man can go about bareheaded, whereas a woman covers her head because she is like one who has committed a transgression (both verb and noun from the root *br* literally meaning "to cross") and who is embarrassed in front of people. In an application and interpretation of Job 21:33, a reason is given for women to lead the funeral procession, "to walk first near the corpse"—namely that the first woman was the cause of (literally "dragged along") death to the world. Continuing in this vein, the midrash takes the three ritual activities associated with women, the precept of menstrual purity, separating

the dough or challah (a special offering that traces back to the days when the temple stood), and the lighting of the Sabbath candles, and associates them with her having shed the blood of man, corrupting Adam who was the challah (a special offering, in the sense of a gift to the world; see Gen Rab 14:1), and extinguishing his soul, respectively! It is ironic that the activities to which some have pointed as examples of women's lively and personally meaningful home-based religion are here re-contextualized to see these activities not as positive markers of female participation in Jewish ritual but as reminders of the deadly transgression of the first woman for which all subsequent females must pay.

Similarly a midrash on *wayyiben*, "and he built" (Gen Rab 18:2 concerning Gen 2:22), explores why God chooses to build the woman from the rib body part as opposed to others, for example, the head of Adam lest she be full of herself or too proud, or the eye lest she be one who always is looking or blinking (a term for which given the present context Jastrow²² suggests connoted "coquette"), or the ear lest she be an eavesdropper or the mouth lest she be too talkative or the heart lest she be jealous or the hand lest she be a thief (one who touches everything) or the foot lest she be a runner or run-about. Rather he builds her from a place that is "hidden" or "reserved" in the sense of chaste. And yet, the midrash states, all women end up being precisely those negative traits despite the divine care in selection of which body part from which to create her. What follows are a series of biblical texts portraying women, in particular the sainted matriarchs as exemplars of such negative traits. Sarah eavesdrops (Gen 18:10), Rachel is jealous of Leah (Gen 30:1), Rachel steals the teraphim (Gen 31:19), and Dinah implicitly puts herself at risk for rape by gadding about (Gen 34:1). None of the biblical texts as contextualized contain the simplistic negative nuances imputed to them by the Rabbis, and so as in the previous midrash that pictures women's religion as tainted by the woman's actions in Genesis 3, the Rabbis here appear to rob Jewish women of positive biblical female models with whom to identify.

Finally we call attention to Gen Rab 20:11, where various meanings of the triliteral root *hwh* and the sound-alike term for the verb to live *hyh* and the related noun *hayyim* allow for a midrash on the first woman's name, a negative interpretation. In Genesis the man names her *hawwâ* because she is the mother of all life, surely a positive connotation. The Rabbis, however, interpret that the Lord gave Eve to the man to be a source of support (*leḥîyûtô*) and she advised him like the serpent (*keḥîwyâ*). In another word-play the first man showed (*hiwwâ*) her how many generations she had destroyed. R. Aha

said, “The serpent was your serpent, but you were the serpent of Man.” Like the previous midrash offering an etiology for aspects of women’s religion, one that seeks to rob the tradition of positive portrayals of women’s role in Judaism, Gen Rab 20:11 purposely turns a positive view of woman, as preeminent giver of life, into a negative view. These threads in the tradition are in the employ of a gender ethic that from a particular male-dominated perspective puts women in a subordinate place that they are said to deserve.

A third set of texts from *Genesis Rabbah* reflecting on Genesis 2–3 is more complicated and interesting. They treat the first woman neither positively (albeit often within the contours of an androcentric and heteronormative worldview) nor negatively, interpreting the creation story in thoroughly and irretrievably misogynistic ways. Gen Rab 17:7 is framed in a favorite Rabbinic typology, a conversation between a Roman pagan and a Rabbi in which the former seems to be making an effort to criticize the biblical tradition or Judaism for some weakness or illogicality. The literary type suggests that the pagan seems to be familiar with the biblical narrative. Such frameworks, however fictional the details, testify to assumptions about the religious and cultural transit²³ between populations in the Roman world, the ways in which members of each group are portrayed as familiar with the intellectual traditions of their neighbors. In this case the exchange deals with the second creation of woman. A Roman matron asks why the woman was created by a theft, that is, by taking a rib from the man. Rabbi Jose responds by comparing the scene to an exchange, depositing an ounce of silver in secret, only to return a *litra* (12 ounces) of silver publicly. Thus the woman is a worthwhile creation. The matron asks why in secret and the Rabbi then deals with the knotty recurring problem of the two creations. The first newly created woman was brought to him, “full of discharge and blood.” The man is repelled and rejects her so that the deity creates her a second time. The Roman matron responds essentially that she can identify, as in her youth it had been arranged for her to marry her mother’s brother, but because she grew up with him, she was “unbecoming” or “repulsive” in his eyes, and he married another woman, “and she was not as handsome as I.”

This little vignette is particularly interesting from perspectives of women, gender, and sexuality. First, there is an imagined conversation between an intelligent female interlocutor and a Rabbi, and their repartee suggests respect and mutuality. Second the content emphasizes the physicality of the human creation process. The images of discharge and blood suggest the condition of the newborn as in Ezek 16:6 but also of the menstruant or post-partum

woman. The association between women and blood/discharge points to a particular Rabbinic anxiety, men's views of the bodies of women as other, dangerous, and unclean, a concern of the Niddah regulations, discussed so well by Jacob Neusner.²⁴ Third, attention is paid in the matron's response to the appeal of the less familiar, the somewhat mysterious, a comment on sexual attraction itself. In this way, the imagined exchange highlights the complexity of its authors' views of women, gender, and sexuality, which are neither simply misogynist nor completely comfortable, especially as regarding the bodies of women.

Gen Rab 20:6 (end) and 20:7 are also relevant to a discussion of these more complexly layered attitudes to gender and sexuality. The punishment meted out to the woman as discussed above has been variously translated and appropriated, often to the detriment of women, a means of putting females in their place as the cursed gender, blamed for death. These two examples deal with Gen 3:16 somewhat differently and indeed have the effect of softening the words of God. The closing midrash of Gen Rab 20:6 elaborates on terms for the woman's "pain," "sorrow" (root *šb*), and "pregnancy" (root *hrh*) to read that the woman will have pain, trouble, or grief in conception, in pregnancy, because of miscarriage,²⁵ and in birthing. These elaborations upon Gen 3:16 further emphasize the woman's pain with suggestions that sex itself is painful the first time, and that many children will die in childbirth. The reference to "children," however, is interpreted to be the trouble of raising children, ending with a proverb: "It is easier for a person to raise 'a legion' of olives in the Galilee than to bring up one child in the land of Israel!" Surely this is a sentiment shared by all parents, male and female, and places a humorous spin on the message of Gen 3:16.

Similarly, the line about a woman's desire being for her husband leads in Gen Rab 20:7 to a series of verses employing the word *těšûqâ* "desire," about the appeal of the evil inclination to Cain and his ilk (Gen 4:7), the desire of rain for the earth (Ps 55:10), and the desire of the Holy One for Israel (Song 7:11). The midrash ends on a series of sound plays that emphasize that although human beings are weak (*taššîm*) they hope for God's salvation (*těšû'âtô*) and declare God's unity in prayer twice a day in the Shema. This midrash leads away from the biblical message about men ruling over their wives, although the latter have desire for them. Instead is an emphasis on the ongoing and deep relationship Israel shares with God. The allusion to the Song of Songs serves as a reminder of the abiding love between the people and its deity, reinforced by Israel's prayer life. In this way Israel's identity is

seen to embrace the feminine, and the hierarchy between men and women established by Gen 3:16 is to some extent set aside.

A final example of the softening of the misogynistic potential of the second creation account is offered by Gen Rab 19:10, a piece that reflects a traditional tale morphology in which the breaking of a prohibition leads to some loss or change, the very pattern exhibited by the Eden account itself with the role of woman as protagonist. It is found in versions of the story of Pandora, and in an international fund of stories that often explain why reality with its death and hard work became a part of human existence.²⁶

The midrash deals with God's words to the man, "Who told you were naked?"—that is, with the "jig is up" moment. It is an important reminder here that the man is treated as guilty and the first accusatory interaction is between the deity and him. Of course, the Rabbis' illustrative story here features the woman as rule breaker and yet with a surprisingly light touch. A neighbor comes to borrow vinegar from the wife of a snake charmer and asks how the husband treats her. The latter responds that "it's all good," except that there is one cask forbidden to her as her husband has warned her that it is full of snakes and scorpions. The neighbor says that it contains jewels that he is saving for his next wife. The wife cannot resist, reaches into the cask, and is bitten. When the husband returns and hears her screams of pain, he says, "Did you touch the very jug" (that he said not to touch)? Similarly the Holy One, Blessed Be He, asks the first man, "Did you eat of the tree . . . ?" In this way, the first man is equated with the woman, no one dies, and the Rabbis dip into an international fund of folklore that points to human beings' curiosity, the difficulty of resisting what has been expressly forbidden especially by a parent or other authority figure. Implicitly, the midrash may be asking if the deity is not somewhat responsible for what transpires. At the very least, such a course of events seems inevitable given human nature, and the outcome in Genesis 3 is not utter disaster, but life and death as we know them in everyday reality. It is not insignificant that the breaker of boundaries is a woman, a wife, and yet the observations implicit in the midrash seem to transcend gender and emphasize the nature of human beings.

This effort to understand Rabbinic views in their socio-cultural and gendered contexts, in fact, allows for the formation of positions in gender ethics, rooted in Judaism, from a critical stance. The attitudes found in the classical tradition of the Rabbis need not inform contemporary gender ethics but allow a participant in contemporary forms of the tradition to locate what is lasting and newly applicable and what best remain in the past, an object of

study. This sort of understanding allows for alternate appropriations, and we might argue that some of the Rabbinic traditions have contemporary relevance in formulating aspects of gender ethics.

Gwynn Kessler finds in the link between Genesis 1 and Gen Rab 8:1 an opening in the tradition to the inclusion of non-binary persons, an opportunity to consider the implications of such a view of human creation and forms of identity within Judaism and to contemplate a capacious ethics of gender and sexuality. The set of passages in Genesis Rabbah that grapple in innovative ways with Genesis 2–3 also offers creative openings when we think about values, about ways in which human beings might relate to one another and to God in loving and positive ways, and about a definition of being human that in some ways transcends gender.

One example of this “third path,” neither condescendingly positive nor negative regarding woman’s role in eating from the forbidden tree, is found in the interpretation of God’s description of the woman’s punishment for listening to the snake and eating from the tree. The Rabbi at Gen Rab 20:6 defines “pain” or “sorrow” in bringing forth children (Gen 3:16) somewhat humorously as referring to the difficulty of raising children, a sentiment with which all parents can identify. Such an interpretation deflects blame from women but also serves to emphasize the challenges all human beings face in parenting. Similarly, the conversation between the Roman matron and R. Jose (Gen Rab 17:7) might be seen as the realization that human intimacy, the nature of socio-sexual relationships, is fraught, easily affected by excessive platonic familiarity or a perception of desirable mystery. This view of human sexuality is relevant to the sexuality of all people.

The midrash at Gen Rab 20:7 plays upon the word for desire *těšûqâ* and, as noted above, through a series of associations of biblical verses that employ this term and sound-alike words the Rabbis associate Gen 3:16 with God’s desire for Israel in Song of Songs 7:11 and from there to the ways in which liturgy links Israel and God with the former’s request for salvation and their declaration of the deity’s oneness. An important thread in post-biblical Jewish thought interprets the Song of Songs as being about the love shared by God and Israel. One is reminded of Phyllis Trible’s appropriation linking Eden with the Song, seeing the latter as a kind of return to paradise, the reversal of the state of disobedience to God and discordant relationships between men and women. The Song for her offers an image of ideal relations between men and women lost, in her view, in the biblical account of Eden in Gen 2–3. In the Rabbinic tradition, God is the male voice and Israel the

female voice. In the midrash preserved in Gen Rab 20:7, however, the community as a whole is emphasized, its prayer life, its admission of weakness, perhaps moral weakness, but its hope that God's desire, his love, is nevertheless continually directed toward Israel, men and women, the people as a whole. Again a larger view of the group is drawn from the punishment directed toward the woman in Genesis, and what emerges is a transformative, humanistic, positive image.

Finally, the folktale about the snake-charmer also seems to transcend gender, for the biblical text interpreted has the deity asking the man, "Who told you that you were naked?" Although the curious figure is female, the snake-charmer's wife, once again the implications about human foibles, curiosity, and missteps transcend gender. This humanistic midrash once again discusses human nature and perhaps God's miscalculation rather than drawing a sharp divide between characteristics of man and woman while emphasizing the latter's responsibility for the problems of human existence.

Taken as a whole, this set of midrashim puts the emphasis on shared humanity, with attention to the nature of sexual attraction, the difficulty of parenting, the innate curiosity of human beings, and the bond between God and Israel. We are all in this together, and the self-understanding implicit in these midrashim allows for attitudes to gender and sexuality that are without blame or rigid definitions.

Having traced a trajectory from Genesis 2–3 through relevant midrashim found in Genesis Rabbah, we are now ready to explore how Rabbinic reflections upon Genesis 2–3 and Genesis 2–3 itself have been received, reflected upon, and applied to life experience by twentieth- and twenty-first-century thinkers who find within this rich layer of exegesis implications for female agency, gender roles and identities, and attitudes to sexuality and to other matters under the rubric of the ethics of gender and sexuality. What might these traditions that deal with Genesis 2–3 contribute to modern and contemporary views of the good and the appropriate as they pertain to gender and sexuality? As we have seen, the ancient material is complex, ambiguous, and often self-contradictory in message and meaning, reflecting those who produced these classical texts. The Rabbis, all men, do argue about gender, women's proper roles, the archetypal characteristics of men and women, the nature of relationships between men and women, and about what constitutes maleness and femaleness.²⁷ The possibilities for post-Rabbinic appropriation are equally complex and variegated. We explored the way G. Kessler "queers" the account in Genesis 1 with reference to Gen Rab 8:1. What of treatments of Gen 2–3?

Ways of approaching and applying Genesis 2–3 and Rabbinic interpretations are varied. Some find ethical value in utterly rejecting the models for behavior they insist are unavoidable in patriarchally generated texts such as Gen 2–3 and the Rabbinic treatments of them. The ancient texts on the creation of women are models of how not to act ethically. Other treatments are in the category of appropriation; that is, thinkers seek to reuse and apply the ancient texts, to find them meaningful and relevant to current ethical challenges, albeit with allowance for then and now, the need to interpret and use them for the good. A third option is to accept biblical and biblically rooted Rabbinic models in a somewhat literalist way, insisting that the models offered are of positive ethical value to contemporary men and women.²⁸ A fourth is to read the ancient texts with “structured empathy” to borrow a phrase from scholar of comparative religion Ninian Smart.²⁹ That is, one reads empathetically, understanding of the original messages and meanings that the ancient writers might have sought to convey and emphasize, but one does so objectively and critically, realizing that their worldviews are not ours and that we may not seek literally to be governed by their attitudes, in this case to gender and sexuality. We will explore examples of each of these approaches as they relate to gender ethics.

Rejectionism

Esther Fuch’s work strongly rejects viewing Gen 2–3 as a model for contemporary gender ethics, seeing it as rooted in an oppressive and power-preserving patriarchy. She interprets the creation account as already subordinating the woman to the man. The woman is portrayed in Fuch’s view as deceptive and disobedient and as “penalized with a greater degree of subordination to her husband (Gen 3:16). By ascribing moral inferiority to the first woman, the story of Genesis seeks to justify her social inferiority, and to promote the ideology that supports man’s supremacy over woman.”³⁰ Fuchs thus reads the biblical text and its reception as a model of non-ethical behavior.

Appropriation

Earlier, we included some of Phyllis Trible’s insights about the possibilities for non-sexist and non-misogynist readings of Genesis 2–3, ones she would

argue are implicit in the very language of the ancient text, perhaps understood by its early receivers in some of the ways suggested by myself, Tribble, and others. Women listening to the story of Eden might wink at one another about the woman's independence and the man's passivity, for example. They might sigh at the difficult realities all humans face, and then carry on wistfully. They would recognize their daily lives in the reality that follows Eden with hard work, difficult birthing, and social hierarchy. Some of Tribble's acts of "depatriarchalizing" the ancient story preserved in Genesis go further, however, pushing and pulling the text with the stated motivation of being able to embrace it and apply it as a Christian, with the avowed desire to believe that "the Biblical God is not on the side of patriarchy."³¹ Her reading is part of "the pilgrimage of faith."³² With her work we see an effort to generate a positive ethics of gender from a way of reading the texts of the Hebrew Bible. She seeks as she notes "freedom through the appropriation of Biblical symbols."³³ This sort of appropriation in which one finds current ethically applicable value in the ancient texts pertaining to women, gender, and sexuality is one way to read. Appropriation often combines with creative adaptation, a new kind of midrash. For Jewish thinkers, the process of appropriation may also include reading the tradition through the eyes of classical Rabbinic writers such as those cited in *Genesis Rabbah* and discussed earlier.

An example of the way Phyllis Tribble transitions to a more midrashic than modern exegetical reading is the distinction she draws between "naming" and "calling," disagreeing with those who interpret Gen 2:23 as an indication of the man's authority and status over the woman as he gives her a name, "woman." Because the word "call" is used and not the word "name," Tribble is able to read this text as neutral and thereby to depatriarchalize it. Thus she says there is no dominant "naming" motif in the story, and neither man nor woman "has authority over the other."³⁴ This is nice close reading to be sure, but as in midrashic literature, the desired outcome of the reading seems to precede the interpretation. Such reading is within the purview of appropriation.

Another example of appropriation is offered by theologian Judith Plaskow, who produced a fanciful midrash in the 1970s that like classical Rabbinic sources grapples with the biblical preservation of two creation accounts in the first three chapters of Genesis, in particular with the seeming creation and re-creation of the woman.³⁵ Like the Rabbis, Plaskow allows these doublets in content to be meaningfully significant. She also draws upon ancient traditions mentioned in the Talmud and more fully articulated in Jewish

medieval literature about a demonic female character Lilith, a mythological figure probably rooted in Levantine myth and associated with the dangers of childbirth and survival for newborn infants. Plaskow's story employs a Jewish medieval tradition that associates Lilith with the first woman created in Genesis 1 and tells a tale of competition over status between the two first humans.³⁶ Placing this tale in a feminist framework, Plaskow suggests that the first woman did not please Adam because she was too assertive or "uppity." Adam asks for a replacement, and God throws Lilith out of the garden and gives him Eve, the woman of Genesis 2 who is initially more compliant. The tale ends, however, with Eve discovering Lilith, escaping the garden, and forming a pact of sisterhood with the first woman. This feminist fantasy beautifully expresses the emotions, hopes, and goals of Jewish feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s and is an exercise in myth-making that both reflects and shapes attitudes to gender ethics, a view that emphasizes women's agency, shared aspirations, and challenges within Judaism.

Acceptance

Another set of writers find in the Hebrew Bible a positive ethical message concerning gender in the ancient Israelite portrayals of women, models for behavior unfettered by heavy feminist critique or concerns that these models inevitably lead to the mistreatment and disempowering of women in contemporary settings. Tamar Frankiel, for example, sees within Orthodox readings of the Bible a "way of nourishing women in a way that goes beyond the belief that in adhering to the system they are fulfilling the will and word of God."³⁷ Amnon Shapira reads the "'pictures and voices' in biblical literature which may testify to women's position of equality." He emphasizes woman's creation in God's image and like a number of the treatments explored above emphasizes the importance of the phrase "male and female he created him/it/them" (Gen 1:27). He also considers it significant for female equality that the woman is created from the man in chapter 2, making them of a piece, and he draws upon the Rabbinic midrash discussed above concerning the play on words between rib and side. "Originally, man and woman were created as one organic whole."³⁸ Shapira suggests ultimately that "the major equality of the Bible is religious, that is the equality of the women as a person before God, like the equality of each person within the human race." He sees this "feminine" side of the Bible as an opportunity or basis for contemporary

spiritual renewal.³⁹ For example, he sees women as full participants in the covenant, taking issue with the implications of the title of Judith Plaskow's feminist study *There We Stood at Sinai*. He views leaders such as Deborah as evidence of women's political power rather than as exceptions to usual male-dominated leadership patterns and treats a number of the female tricksters in Hebrew Bible not as marginal people who have to use deception and disguise to achieve ends, but as exemplifying the "Bible's recognition" of "women's independence and initiative," of strength.⁴⁰

Structured Empathy

Judith Baskin critically assesses the tone and tenor of Rabbinic interpretations of Gen 2–3 and other biblical texts that relate to or are made to relate to treatments of and attitudes to women, gender, and sexuality. She writes, "The rabbinic sages deliberately constructed women as ancillary beings shaped on the rib of the primordial man to fulfill essential social and sexual functions in an androcentric society." Thus "woman's less desirable place in their society is 'rationalized' as 'divinely intended.'" They are "secondary . . . from the moment of their creation."⁴¹

Judith Baskin explores ways in which biblical texts as interpreted reveal that while women are "essential for human survival and for human completeness," they have the potential to "upset the cosmos" and are "a perpetual concern" to the men who shaped and preserved these traditions.⁴² She closely explores Rabbinic debates (e.g., b. Ketub. 8a) that reveal a "conviction" reinforced by some threads in the tradition that only men "share in the divine image in ways that women were not."⁴³

Baskin's work exemplifies the scholarly process of structured empathy, as she seeks to understand these texts within their socio-historical settings, alert to the ways they have been employed subsequently, and open to objective but sympathetic engagement, as we explore their relevance for ongoing issues in the ethics of gender and sexuality.