

BURIED TALENTS CHAPTER IV THE GENESIS ACCOUNTS

The most important scriptures dealing with the role of women are found in Genesis. In a number of places, Paul refers to the Creation accounts as the basis for his teachings regarding women (see 1 Cor. 11:8-9; 1 Cor 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:13-14). Other times he refers simply to the “Law,” but we understand that Jews refer to the first five books of the Old Testament as the Law—not just the Law of Moses (found primarily in Leviticus and Deuteronomy). In fact, there is nothing in the Law of Moses commanding that women be subject or even submissive to men. Therefore, we take it that Paul is referring to the Creation accounts.

Because of this, the key to finding the truth of the matter is Genesis 1-3. We must first look to Genesis and find out what God’s plan for men and women really is. Only then can we look to Paul’s references to these accounts and determine the point that Paul was intending to make. And we must interpret the New Testament to be consistent with the Old Testament. We don’t choose a position, find verses that seemingly support our position, argue that Genesis must say the same thing since these verses refer to it, and then ignore all that contradicts our view. Rather, we start at the very beginning. We read the Genesis accounts for the truths that are in them. And we rigorously apply those truths to every passage that deals with men and women. We will not find a contradiction, but we may find some surprises.

Genesis 1. Genesis 1 and 2 describe the world as it was before sin entered it. We study Genesis 1:26-28 first:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

This passage describes God’s final creative act, occurring on the sixth day. What does it tell us about men and women?

1. Both are created in God’s image.
2. Both have the rule over the Creation.
3. God made man male and female.
4. Man (that is, male and female) is to be fruitful.

So far as can be told from this passage, there is no distinction between men and women. The passage deals with the authority of man (male and female) to rule God’s Creation, but does not give the male authority to rule the female. Not only is the female not declared to be inferior to the male, both are declared to be made in God’s image.

Genesis 2 contains a more detailed account of the creation of woman.

(Gen. 2:16-25) And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.

So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Now, what does this teach us about males and females?

1. The male is incomplete and inadequate by himself. It is “not good” for him to be alone. Indeed, the only creation declared “not good” is Adam—until God’s creation of Eve to complete the creation of man.

2. Neither God Himself, who walked with Adam in the Garden, nor any of the animals were helpers suitable for Adam. The lesson is that man’s helper could neither be superior (God Himself) nor inferior (an animal), but rather must be flesh of his flesh.

3. God chose to make woman out of a rib. First, this teaches us that woman and man are the same flesh. God certainly could have made woman from scratch, just as he did man. But God chose to teach a lesson by making her from the identical material as Adam—Adam himself. The Jewish rabbis have taught since before the time of Christ that God’s choice of a rib is also significant. God did not make woman from Adam’s head, as though she were to rule over him, or from his feet, as though to be in subjection to him, but from his side, to be close to him. We frequently teach this lesson in our wedding ceremonies.

Moreover, the ideal of “one flesh” is eternal as well. In the case of Adam and Eve, it means that the two were of literally identical flesh. But for us, it must mean that the husband is required by God to recognize his wife as a part of himself. He must love her as though her body were his body. He cannot treat her as an inferior or as a part of his domain.

4. Adam called Eve “woman” because she “was taken out of man.” In the Hebrew, the words for “woman” and for “man”—“*adam*” and “*adamah*”—are very similar, and Adam’s choice indicates and emphasizes the similarity between man and woman. After Eve was made, Adam referred to her as *ishshah* (woman or wife) and to himself as *ish* (man or husband) (Gen. 2:23). Again, the similarity of the names indicates their unity and similarity. In fact, Eve wasn’t called “Eve” until after the Fall (Gen. 3:20), with the new dissimilarity of the names indicating the new barrier between husbands and wives.

5. God made man before woman. Some argue that woman is subordinate to man because Adam was made before Eve. But cows and birds were made before man, and yet man (male and female) is plainly given rule over all that was created before them (Gen. 1:26). Being made second does not in and of itself indicate subordination. Rather, the lesson is that the male was incomplete—not good—until the female completed the Creation. In other words, the Creation order is from incompleteness toward increasing completeness, and hardly from superior to inferior.

6. God made woman to be a suitable helper. This concept is far too important to be passed over lightly. Many within the paternalistic or hierarchalist schools of thought consider this verse the linchpin of their position. It is, they contend, God’s designation of Eve as a helper that makes women subordinate to men for all time.

What does “helper” really mean? The word translated “helper” is the Hebrew word *‘ezer*. Following are all the other occurrences of the word in the Old Testament:

(Exo. 18:4) [T]he other was named Eliezer, for he said, “My father’s God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.”

(Deut. 33:7) “And this he said about Judah: “Hear, O LORD, the cry of Judah; bring him to his people. With his own hands he defends his cause. Oh, be his help against his foes!”

(Deut. 33:26) “There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you and on the clouds in his majesty.”

(Deut. 33:29) "Blessed are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD? He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword. Your enemies will cower before you, and you will trample down their high places."

(Psa. 20:2) May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion.

(Psa. 33:20) We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.

(Psa. 70:5) Yet I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer; O LORD, do not delay.

(Psa. 89:19) Once you spoke in a vision, to your faithful people you said: "I have bestowed strength on a warrior; I have exalted a young man from among the people.

(Psa. 115:9-11) O house of Israel, trust in the LORD—he is their help and shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD—he is their help and shield. You who fear him, trust in the LORD—he is their help and shield.

(Psa. 121:1-2) A song of ascents. I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

(Psa. 124:8) Our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

(Psa. 146:5) Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God,

(Isa. 30:5) [E]veryone will be put to shame because of a people useless to them, who bring neither help nor advantage, but only shame and disgrace."

(Ezek. 12:14) I will scatter to the winds all those around him—his staff and all his troops—and I will pursue them with drawn sword.

(Dan. 11:34) When they fall, they will receive a little help, and many who are not sincere will join them.

(Hosea 13:9) "You are destroyed, O Israel, because you are against me, against your helper."

In the vast majority of cases, *‘ezer* refers to God Himself. In a few cases, the enemies of God’s people are criticized as not being the helper that God is. Indeed, *‘ezer* is seen as a central element of God’s relationship with His people.

Obviously, God’s calling Eve *‘ezer* does not mean that Eve is subordinate to Adam or that women are subordinate to men. If that were so, then God’s inspiring Moses, David, and the prophets to call God *‘ezer* would mean that God is subordinate to Israel! Calling Eve “helper” certainly means that Eve was Adam’s complement. She completed what was lacking in Adam. But there is no basis in the scriptures to find subordination or a principle of male leadership in this word.

Perhaps our difficulty in interpreting *‘ezer* can be better seen by noticing how we use “helper” in English. We speak of “mother’s little helper,” a “plumber’s helper,” being a “good helper.” In current English, “helper” carries the connotation of a subordinate— even a child. Thus, if I were drowning, I’d call out, “Help!” But I wouldn’t refer to the person who rescued me as my “helper.” My rescuer truly helped me, but calling him “helper” would be too condescending—even belittling.

But these thoughts are utterly foreign to the Hebrew *‘ezer*. There is no condescension in the Hebrew word at all, so that “helper” (or “help meet,” as in the King James Version) is truly a clumsy translation. In other verses, *‘ezer* is used in the sense of “rescuer” or “liberator.” The word is also used in the sense of “one who fights alongside against a common foe.” “Comrade” or “ally” would come close to the sense in many contexts. Thus, the psalmist sings that God is Israel’s help, not a mere helper—but an ally so powerful that Israel must prevail.

When the United States' armed forces came to the rescue of Kuwait, we were there to help, but we were not mere helpers—the U.S. military was an ally, a comrade, and an overwhelming superior to any military capability that Kuwait could have mustered. This is the sense 'ezer used with respect to God and His relationship to His people.

Therefore, because Eve was unto Adam as God was unto Israel, 'ezer carries with it no notion that a "helper" is inferior or subordinate. An 'ezer is one who helps another, but not one who necessarily helps from a position of inferiority. After all, in Ezekiel the "helpers" were the king's staff—inferiors.

"Complement" is therefore a proper if not excellent translation. The *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* defines "complement" as

1. something that completes or makes perfect: A good wine is a complement to a good meal. ... 3. either of two parts or things needed to complete the whole; counterpart. ... To complement is to provide something felt to be lacking or needed; it is often applied to putting together two things, each of which supplies what is lacking in the other, to make a complete whole.

Clearly, a complement may be the more important or less important of the two parts of the whole under consideration. God was the complement of the Israelites, in that He won battles for them that they could not have won without Him, and yet the Israelites also had to fight. Just so, a general's aides may be considered his complement, as those whom he needs to perform his duties. Thus, the word connotes neither superiority nor inferiority. Accordingly, I will normally use "complement" when referring to Eve as Adam's helper or helpmeet.

Now 'ezer does have a deeper significance. God's declaring Eve as complement means that God gave Eve a special role in relationship to the man. She is to complete, finish, and make God's creation of man good. Clearly, therefore, a wife may not, consistent with her God-given role, belittle her husband or injure his reputation. Neither may she act as an independent agent, free of concerns for the impact of her behavior on her husband. She must act as part of a greater whole.

Genesis 3:1-24. The subordination of women did not begin in Genesis 2, but in Genesis 3.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.

After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree

Let's first look at the particular curses.

The curse of the serpent. First, God cursed the serpent. The "seed" of the woman is prophesied as bruising the head of the serpent. The use of "seed" here is very unusual. The ancients normally used "seed" to refer to the male element of reproduction, likening the sex act to the man planting seed in the woman. In fact, until only a few centuries ago, it was believed that babies were contained in the sperm. If a baby was born looking like its mother, the resemblance was considered to be because the baby's development was affected by the mother's characteristics while in the womb. The ancients never spoke of a woman's seed.

Thus, most commentators take this use as the first prophecy of the Messiah and His virgin birth. Jesus bruised the head of the serpent by delivering a truly severe blow to Satan's kingdom. But the serpent bruised Jesus' heel by being a constant opponent and, thus far, preventing the Kingdom of Heaven from including the entire Creation.

The curse of Eve. The curse and prophecy as to the serpent are followed by a curse on Eve. God tells her that her pain in childbearing will greatly increase. The significance of this cannot be understated. Until very recently, there was a very high death rate in childbearing. The pain of childbearing before modern antibiotics, sanitation, Cesarean sections, and such was many times greater than it is now.

God next curses the woman by causing her husband to rule over her. Notice these things:

1. This was a change. If Adam already had the rule over Eve, then why did God say He was doing this to her because of her sin? Thus, nothing in Genesis 1 or 2 can support an argument for male rule.
2. God states that *husbands* rule over *wives*—under His curse. He does not curse all women with being under the rule of all men.

3. God also states that the wife's desire will be for her husband. This curse has been interpreted many different ways.

a. Some suggest that this refers to sexual desire, the idea being that the woman cannot avoid the pain of childbearing due to her sexual desires. But this makes sexual desire by a wife for a husband a curse, which is clearly not God's plan. Moreover, Adam and Eve were commanded on the Sixth Day to be fruitful and multiply. Sex was a part of the plan from the beginning and is not a result of sin.

b. Others suggest that wives are cursed with wanting to do their husband's will. But this suggestion fails for lack of evidence.

c. A third group suggests an interpretation based on the close similarity of the language of the curse to Genesis 4:7:

"If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

In the King James Version, this verse says that "unto thee shall be [sin's] desire, and thou shalt rule over him." The NIV translators have paraphrased this passage to interpret "unto thee shall be his desire" to mean "it desires to have you." Thus, in Genesis 3, the virtually identical phrasing, only a few verses away, must mean that woman's desire for her husband is her desire to rule her husband. God is saying that although the wife may want to rule her husband, under His curse, the husband will rule the wife.

A result of Adam's and Eve's sin is strife in marriage. Both husbands and wives will want to be in charge, but in the ordinary case, the husband will succeed in ruling over his wife. And certainly the last several thousand years have proven this to be very true indeed.

The curse of Adam. God next curses Adam for his sin. Adam will be required to earn a living by the sweat of his brow, and the ground will produce thistles and thorns.

The curse of mankind. Finally, God makes man mortal. We all die because of the sin of Adam and Eve.

The meaning of the curses. Genesis 3 is known to students of the Bible as the Fall of Man. It is the account of the first sin and marks the beginning of the separation of man from God. It is exactly this separation that Jesus died to cure. Jesus came to earth to undo the curse. Man sinned, both male and female, and therefore death came into the world. Paul explains this in Romans:

(Rom. 5:12-18) Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned—for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. ... For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.

But the Fall of Man affected much more than our own mortality and our relationship with God. The entire Creation was corrupted by man's sin.

(Rom. 8:20-23) For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

We see, therefore, that the curses pronounced in Genesis 3 are only examples of the complete corruption of the Creation. Everything decays. Nothing is permanent. All that is living will die. This corruption affects our marriages, our work, our childbearing, our relationships with God, and everything made.

(Eph. 4:22-24) You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

(1 Pet. 1:22-23) Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

(2 Pet. 1:4) Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

The underlined word in each quoted passage is from the same Greek root as “decay” found in Romans 8:22. Because of sin, Paul says in Romans that we are in bondage to decay (or corruption, or perishability). He then says in Ephesians that we had been corrupt before our salvation, but our new self is to be like God (that is, not corrupted by sin). Peter tells us in 1 Peter that by being saved we have relinquished our perishable, fleshly nature (that is, our corrupted nature) and replaced it with an imperishable nature. In 2 Peter he tells us that God gives each of us a part of his divine nature (the Holy Spirit, immortality) that allows us to escape the corruption of the world. But we know from Romans and 1 Corinthians that the corruption of the world came from the curse in Genesis 3, which followed the entry of sin into the world. Thus, we are instructed to *escape* these curses, not to impose them on one another!

We are all going to keep sinning, but sinning is still sinning, and we are bound to our Lord to try to stop and to rid ourselves of sin so far as it is within our abilities.

1 Cor. 15:21-26) For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

We see in 1 Corinthians that death, which came through Adam, is Christ’s enemy and will be the last enemy destroyed. Moreover, we see that Paul describes the corruption of Creation as the enemy of God.

Therefore, we must understand that the curses pronounced in Genesis 3 are curses and not commands—far from it. They are evidence of the decay and corruption produced by sin and the frustration Creation has been subjected to while awaiting the end of time. How then can we command our women members to obey a “command” that is not a command but a description of the consequence of sin?

This argument will surely be hard for many readers to accept, but it becomes much clearer when we consider the other curses. The man is cursed to work by the sweat of his brow. Does this mean that air conditioning is a sin, because it is contrary to God’s eternal design? Are anti-perspirants wrong? Is it wrong to use herbicides and preemergents to prevent the growth of weeds? Didn’t God intend that we work the fields by hand to rid them of weeds? Must all men work in the fields? Is office work a sin?

Is it a sin to use anesthesia to relieve the pain of childbearing? Or is that also part of God’s eternal plan? For that matter, why should we resist any of the world’s corruption? God corrupted it, who are we to oppose it?

I read with horror the description of the fate of Eufame MacLayne Eufame was a woman living in 16th century Scotland, pregnant with twins. Her labor was complicated and very painful, and during it she requested painkilling herbs to help her deliver her babies. Births had high mortality rates in those days, but Eufame and her twins were able to come out of it alive. Unfortunately, word got out that Eufame had used painkillers. Painkillers were forbidden, said

the church leaders, for it was God's law that women suffer in childbirth. Therefore, the babies were taken from this new mother, and she was tied to a stake and burned.

(Jo-Ann Tsang (1996), <http://falcon.cc.ukans.edu/~luthien/fem/fem8.html>, quoting Gundry, P. (1986) "Why We're Here" in A. Mickelson, editor, *Women, Authority, and the Bible*.)

Another version of this and similar events, related in the context of a discussion of the impact of Christianity on modern medicine, appears in Lynn Winters, *Our Judaic-Christian Heritage, An Inquiry into the Ideas and Forces that Link the Thought of Our Time with Our Religious Past*, <http://www.mac-2001.com/philos/crit/DOCTOR.TXT>.

During all this time, there was no tradition of using painkiller to relieve the pain of women going through labor. (Opium can halt the progression of labor, although alcohol does not). Women midwives could be accused of witchcraft if they employed such drugs. One such case occurred in 1591, when a woman of high social standing, Eufame Macalyane, asked Agnes Sampson to help relieve her pain during the births of her two sons. Agnes Sampson was later arrested and tried before King James for this heresy. She was condemned as a witch and burned alive at the Castle Hill of Edinburgh.

It was not until 1846, that ether was successfully administered as an anesthetic during an operation. In 1847, Dr. James Y. Simpson, professor of obstetrics at the University of Glasgow successfully used chloroform to relieve the suffering of a woman patient in childbirth. After he published a report on his success, he was denounced because the pain of childbirth was claimed by many to go against God's plan for mankind-- ie that women "deserved" to suffer due to Eve's crime in the Garden of Eden.

...

One clergyman for example argued: "chloroform is a decoy of Satan, apparently offering itself to bless women; but in the end it will harden society and rob God of the deep earnest cries which arise in time of trouble for help." (Haggard, Ibid, p 108)

...

In 1853, when Queen Victoria, announced she wanted to use chloroform during the delivery of her seventh child, Prince Leopold, the Archbishop of Canterbury warned her that this was unbiblical—and reminded her of the verse, "In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children!"

We are quite properly repelled at the thought of punishing a laboring woman for taking painkillers. We instinctively know that pain in childbirth is a curse, not a command, and a curse that we are free to overcome. But we can't consistently reject the views of the 16th Century English church and at the same time insist that Genesis 3:16 commands husbands to rule over their wives.

Adam and Eve corrupted the world, not God, and we are God's children charged with working to undo the curse. We do this by bringing others to Jesus to escape the curse of death, by alleviating suffering, by struggling against the corruption of this world any way we can—and this certainly includes doing so within our marriages. We are compelled as Christians to work to rid our marriages of sin, including the quest for dominion over our spouse, and to rid our churches of sin as well.

At this point, many readers will wonder how this interpretation of Genesis can be reconciled with New Testament passages on the role of women. We will be getting to these other passages, and we certainly don't believe that Paul or any other Bible author contradicts the lessons of Genesis 1, 2, and 3. But the meaning of the curses pronounced in Genesis 3 is plain. They simply are not commands, and should not be taught as commands. If the curse of a husband's dominion over his wife is a command, then so are the other curses, and we should deny our wives painkillers in childbirth. We can't have it both ways. Because Genesis 3 is a curse on Creation when we study the Fall of Man, it is a curse when we study the role of women.