

That People Might Not Say There Are Two Deities:  
The Meaning of Gender in Modern and Biblical Tradition

Thesis submitted by:

Marc John Paul Barnes

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St Mary's University, London  
Institute of Theology and Liberal Arts  
Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society

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*For Maura, obviously.*

## Abstract

The biblical doctrine “male and female He created them” describes human nature as fundamentally differentiated and so resistant to any form of homogenous, univocal, political rule. Because of this, the biblical narrative concerning the human person in his/her sexual difference is a story of resistance to tyranny and, ultimately, to idolatry. To see sexual difference as it is described in the Scriptures (and as a fundamental attitude of those influenced by the Scriptures) it is necessary to distinguish this meaning from current, institutional definitions of gender and gender identity. These do not describe a substantively differentiated human being, but a metaphysically androgynous human being. The biblical narrative anticipates this presumption made by modern theories of gender, describing it as a key mechanism of tyranny and offering strategies for resistance.

## Introduction

A glance at many of our intellectual and popular discussions of gender, sexual difference, and the various identities annexed to these categories suggests that we occupy an age of destabilized gender, in which all fixed forms of sexual life have been rendered suspect, if not obliterated. The “traditional view,” that uncritical presumption that the human person is either male or female, man or woman, has never been so thoroughly undermined as in the tenets of queer theory, which boldly declares “male,” “female” – and indeed *any* identifications of the mind or appearances of the human body – as always already in conformity with the contingent purposes of political power. Within this horizon, the appearance of “men” and “women” can no longer be seen as anything besides a particular and contingent manner bodies are made to appear and minds made to identify.

Nevertheless, undermining the primacy of the male-female binary did not create an untroubled alternative to the tradition it rejected. The revelation that gender is an artifice of human power, established in and through the destruction of other, possible artifices, has inaugurated neither a world without gender nor a world in which a diversity of genders, identities, and expressions are enjoyed somehow “outside” of these contingent constructions of human power. Rather, as the assassination of a sovereign might inaugurate a war of contenders, liberation from the male-female binary has diversified possibilities of oppression even as it diversifies possibilities of identification. The revelation that the purported “truth” was really just “power” has relativized all other purported truths into positions of power, depriving anyone of an appeal to a common ground beyond alliances of position and power for the sake of mutual gain.

The cultural victory of what we will call the LGBT+ coalition over the presumed “naturalness” of cisgender heteronormativity has been achieved, but not without revealing a profound disunity within itself: lesbians for whom “female” describes an essential, knowable mode of bodily being find themselves at war with transgender persons (and assorted “allies”) for whom “female” is an essential, knowable mode of psychological being, obtaining without reference to a particular anatomical configuration. Transgender persons guided by a medical model of surgical transition find themselves in

uneasy alliance with a host of non-binary identities which assert that the “natural” male or female body is itself an artificial construct, and that striving to fit within it, far from troubling the historical supremacy of the male-female binary, structurally supports it. The liberal milieu, which has undoubtedly structured the development of this gender revolution, has warded off these contradictions by gathering them together in their mutual opposition to the heteronormative, male-female binary from which they depart, signified in the addition of each “opposed” identity into the acronym LGBT+—an elastic unity, indefinitely expansive. But a political unity predicated on a common enemy fails precisely to the degree it succeeds. That the LGBT+ coalition no longer appears to coalesce is a mark of its growing normalcy. Because queer theory reveals being “cisgender” as no more than one, contingently constructed appearance among many, opposition to its elevation to the status of a norm has no more urgency than opposition to the elevation of any other appearance to the same status. The artificial constructs of gay, lesbian and bisexual identities, freed from their subordination to a falsely elevated heterosexuality, are freed into a conflict of rival powers, opened up to criticism as so many more oppressive, colonizing positions; as, say, falsely universalizing object-choice as the “true” determinant of sexual identity. Likewise, the artificial constructs of agender or postgender identities, freed from their subordination to the male-female gender binary, are freed into that same conflict, threatening to appear as positions which erase and deny those who presume an experience of gender as fundamental to the construction of gender identity.

To declare a “crisis” within the postmodern project of liberation from the male-female binary would be excessive, but there is an obvious need to subject it to a fundamental critique. Within the first chapter of this work, I will analyse the attempt to maintain a non-exclusionary unity of gender identities in the face of the gradual relativization and loss of their common enemy. What sacrifices must be made in order to carve out descriptions of gender, gender identity, and sexual difference which include all of those who lay claim to them? I will also address what I take to be the best method of attaining this unity-in-difference, namely, the reduction of gender identity to a social category. Does it work? Can we include all possible gender identities within a singular conceptual framework, one which remains inclusive and egalitarian throughout?

Within the second chapter, I will turn to the Jewish rabbinic and Christian patristic traditions of biblical interpretation in order to describe the biblical doctrine, “male and female He created them,” as the fundamental point of opposition which has served as the (negative) source of unity for our contemporary models of gender identity. The purpose of this chapter will be to unveil the doctrine’s complex connection with intellect, idolatry, law, and sacrifice, in order to understand how opposition to the doctrine appears from a biblical perspective.

Within the third chapter, I will argue that this doctrine is not merely a description of a natural fact, but a particular political theology. Belief in the doctrine is more than a passivity to that doctrine as “true.” It also creates a disposition to build and enforce a particular social order, the inner logic of which involves an intrinsically limited notion of sovereignty and the rejection of the idea that man can be like God. The biblical narrative is a valorisation of this peculiar version of sovereignty, and I will trace it in its connection with sexual difference. This biblical analysis culminates in the fourth chapter, in which I detail the biblical description and deconstruction of kingship in its major aspects, through a close reading of biblical texts dealing women, especially the books of Judith and Esther.

Within the fifth and final chapter, I will apply the insights of my previous biblical analysis back to the works of Judith Butler, placing the tenets of queer theory within the framework of salvation history in order to trouble the presumptions of the modern project of liberating gender from the male-female binary, asking, in effect: How will troubling the supposedly fixed forms of gender liberate us from oppression, if, by the same action, it liberates us from a means of resisting oppression? Can the Jewish and Christian traditions offer a theory of gender which, rather than being reduced to an enemy which stifles liberation, already is an effort of liberation?

This last chapter helps clarify the purpose of the whole work, which presents a challenge to Christian theology in its present form. Many theologians are currently at pains to articulate what we might casually call an LGBT+-friendly theology, in which our cultural rejection of an often violently enforced male-female binary is shown to be consonant with the Scriptures, tradition, and the Jewish and Christian spiritual and intellectual project as a whole. This is false: discarding the exclusive sense of the doctrine



“male and female he created them” undermines the entire edifice of Christian theology and replaces its politics of peace with a politics of violence.

## Chapter I: The meaning of sexual difference in liberal-institutional definitions

The purpose of this chapter may seem obscure. It begins an ostensibly theological investigation with a detailed analysis of our contemporary claims regarding gender identity. What does one have to do with the other? In short, this chapter justifies the *need* for a theological investigation. It shows (a) that the contradictions between our various definitions of gender and gender identity are irretractable and (b) that these definitions are basically pragmatic, made to attain results without reference to any transcendent truth, and that they thus lacking any source of judgment by which their contradictions might be resolved. This chapter is not a critique of contemporary definitions of gender “from the outside,” that is, from a metaphysical standpoint which finds the errant category into which we have placed “gender” or “identity,” exposes it, and offers the correct category in its stead. Though such a work would be valuable and, indeed, the only final answer the question of gender as such, this chapter critiques contemporary definitions of gender “from the inside,” showing how they fail to attain their pragmatic goals, and so fail in their entire purpose, and so stand in need of correction. “The first step,” as the recovery programs put it, “is to admit you have a problem.”

### 1. A problem of definitions

The Human Rights Campaign defines “gender identity” as “[o]ne’s innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither.”<sup>1</sup> This definition is indicative of a partial agreement among institutional definitions of the term. Citing the European Commission, The European Institute for Gender Equality states that gender identity is

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<sup>1</sup> “Glossary of Terms,” July 2016, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>.

“[e]ach person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth,”<sup>2</sup> while the United Nations Free and Equal Campaign defines gender identity as “a deeply felt and experienced sense of one’s own gender.”<sup>3</sup> These two definitions use one of the terms they purport to define – “gender.” The HRC’s definition is clearer, as it defines gender as “male, female, a blend of both or neither.” All three definitions equivocate on whether gender identity is a “concept,” “feeling,” “experience” or a “feeling of an experience,” but I take this to be a diversity of language rather than a diversity of claims, each struggling to articulate in English what American psychologist Charlotte Tate recently called the “felt-sense,”<sup>4</sup> and what we might generally call a “sense of self,” indicating that gender identity is (a) a psychological object, available to personal introspection rather than the inspection of others and (b) a modifier of the “self,” understood as the global whole indicated by the pronoun “I.” For the duration of my argument, I will refer to this composite definition as Gender Identity 1, or GI1.

Gender identity is taken as a key component in the equation that determines a person’s categorization into a gender category. For instance, the HRC describes “cisgender” as “a term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.”<sup>5</sup> This inclusion of gender identity into the formula for determining gender has been taken up at a popular level: Merriam-Webster defines the cisgender person as “a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth.”<sup>6</sup> The gender category (G), by which a person is qualified as belonging to a gender, is established as a result of an alignment between gender identity (GI) and sex assignment at birth (SAB), an equation which we might express by the formula:  $G=SSA$  if and only if  $SSA=GI$ , which we will call the Gender Categorization Formula 1 (GCF1). One is female (G) according

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<sup>2</sup> This definition originally comes from the International Human Rights Law in relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, adopted by a group of 29 human rights experts in November 2006 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, “Gender Equality Glossary and Thesaurus - Gender Identity” by the European Institute for Gender Equality. <https://eige.europa.eu/rdc/thesaurus/terms/1179?lang=en>

<sup>3</sup> ““Definitions” from” UN Free & Equal. [www.unfe.org/definitions/](http://www.unfe.org/definitions/).

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Chuck Tate, “Considering Lesbian Identity from a Social–Psychological Perspective: Two Different Models of ‘Being a Lesbian’” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 16.1(2012): 17–29.

<sup>5</sup> ““Glossary of Terms.”” Human Rights Campaign.

<sup>6</sup> Merriam-Webster. This definition is consistent with all other known political and governmental sources.

to one's assignment to the category of female by one's parents (SSA) as long as this sex assignment is aligned with one's sense of self as belonging to the category "female" (GI).

Governments and liberal institutions around the world have adopted and deployed GII and GCF1 as methods of de-hierarchizing gender. The gender identity schema allows people to speak of gender without giving priority to any one single group of people, most obviously "cisgender" or "non-transgender" males and females, who are no longer defined as a "natural" or "proper" articulation of the naturally gendered human person, but who occupy one possible position among many, in which gender identity matches the sex assigned at birth.<sup>7</sup> The priority of man and woman, re-articulated as the cisgender male and cisgender female, is stripped of any ontological garb, and described as a merely numerical, historical and culturally contingent priority: It just so happens that there are many more cisgender people than, say, transgender people, and the fact that this group receives the usual privileges of a majority is as much an accident of history as the fact that cisgender males receive greater privileges than cisgender females.

At the same time, the definition of "gender identity" gives minority groups an objectivity that protects them from being invaded by people seeking to gain benefits by arbitrarily "claiming" an identity that they do not, in fact, feel. GII is included in the separate definitions of each gender category. For example, a trans woman is defined as those "people who were assigned male at birth but *identify* and live as women."<sup>8</sup> One must "identify as woman," over and against one's sex assignment at birth, in order to validly be included in the category "trans woman." This saves the gender category from the cynicism of cisgender males who would claim to belong to the gender category "transgender" for some perceived benefit, without any deeply felt internal sense of being female, that is, without a female gender identity. The same can be said for each and every gender category: Gender identity, that objective felt-sense, saves each minority group from the meaninglessness and indefiniteness which would allow *anyone* to identify as genderqueer, nonbinary, gender nonconforming—or anything else.

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<sup>7</sup> "GLAAD Media Reference Guide –Transgender" from *GLAAD*. April 19, 2017. <https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>.

<sup>8</sup> "Glossary – Trans Man" from Transgender Europe. <https://tgeu.org/glossary/>

Finally, the deployment of “gender identity” is a universal one. As Charlotte Tate points out, “the felt-sense of being female is shared by all those who categorize themselves as female,”<sup>9</sup> and this principle can be broadened to include all gender categories, in which everyone who claims to belong to a gender category has an internal sense of self as that gender. Even positions that might be described as a wholesale rejection of gender categorization are included in GI1, i.e., even a person who is neither male nor female has the felt sense of being “neither,” as explicitly articulated in the HRC definition. There is no one “outside” of GI1. This universality allows governments to deploy gender identity as a method of categorization unequivocally and without bias.

The following investigation does not aim to discover the truth of the ontological claims of GI1 and its place within the establishment of a person’s belonging to a gender category. Rather, it will investigate the degree to which the deployment of GI1 and GCF1 successfully fulfils the goals of liberal institutions like the EU and the UN. I will ask: Does this definition exclude any legitimate claim of gender-identity? Does this definition create or maintain a hierarchical ordering of the various gender categories that it defines? Does this definition involve any logical contradiction? Can this definition be applied to all human beings? If these definitions and formulae cannot be applied equally, universally, reasonably, and for the good of all, I will attempt to improve them and, by developing them towards an ideal definition, reveal the structure of the gender identity model.

## 2. Querying gender identity

The question can be put simply: Does everyone have an internal sense of self as being “male, female, both or neither?” The answer depends on what one means by “internal sense.” It cannot mean an active, conscious, felt sense, in the same way that a mother weeping over her suffering child mother could be said to have an internal sense of sorrow. To argue in this manner would lead to the absurd conclusion that while one is

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<sup>9</sup> Tate, “Considering Lesbian Identity from a Social – Psychological Perspective”, 27.

sleeping, one has no gender identity by virtue of having no active, internal sense—one would lose whatever rights, privileges or protections one had while awake. Were one to injure or malign a person, while they were unconscious, for being transgender, it could not properly be called a hate crime or hate speech, as the injured party had no internal sense of gender, and thus could lay no claim to fitting the definition “transgender”—namely, a person whose gender identity does not match their sex assigned at birth.

But if the “internal sense” is not an actively conscious one, what is it? To arbitrarily consign it to the subconscious would lead to equal absurdities, at least according to most Freudian models in which the objects of the subconscious are repressed, forcing us to argue that gender identity is the *repressed* sense of self as male, female, both or neither, brought to light by psychotherapy. We may be tempted to overcome the problem by arguing that one’s “internal sense of one’s gender” is a memory. In this case, a person has, at some point, the internal sense of self as “male, female, both or neither,” and gender identity is the memory of this event and the many other “gender-recognition” events like it. Just as a person may be said to have a memory of their childhood, even when they are not actively “bringing it to mind,” so too a person could be said to have an internal sense of gender, understood as a memory of a gender-recognition event, even when they have not actively brought this event to mind. But if gender identity is a memory of gender-recognition, we will run into the same problems as simply calling it an internal sense. If, for instance, a person assigned as “female” at birth recognizes his gender as male, and subsequently develops amnesia, Alzheimer’s, or otherwise suffers some trauma that strips him of his memory, we would be forced to argue that such a person could not be called a “trans man,” even though he identified as trans throughout his life—he has no memory of his gender-recognition event, and thus cannot be said to have a gender identity, and thus cannot be said to be a trans man, understood as a man whose gender identity “male” does not correspond with his sex assignment as “female” at birth.

If the felt-sense is neither active, unconscious, or a memory, perhaps it is an event—the event of gender-recognition itself. Here, we would have to argue that recognizing oneself as female, once, persists as one’s gender identity, whether or not one remembers or actively “brings to mind” this moment of recognition—stretching what is usually

meant by a felt-sense. This would solve the issue of memory-loss, but only by reintroducing old problems. If one recognizes oneself as “female,” and subsequently recognizes oneself as “male,” which event would constitute one’s gender identity? Usually, we would argue that whichever gender-recognition event a person *uses* in order to categorize as this or that gender is their true gender identity. But the use of a past event to categorize oneself implies that the past is remembered or otherwise actively brought to mind.

We might argue along Aristotelian and Thomistic lines: the internal sense exists, not as an active sense, subconscious object, memory, or persistent event, but as a mental habit, defined as a disposition towards the performance of particular mental acts, in this case:

**GI2:** a mental disposition by which one senses oneself as “male, female, both or neither.”

The habit, as an interior disposition, is not known or felt in itself, but is deduced as really existing as a result of the constancy and consistency of the mental acts which bear its particular stamp, such that, from a multitude of consistently courageous acts, we may reasonably deduce that a person possesses the interior disposition of courage.<sup>10</sup> Whenever the internal sense of gender is active, the constancy of these acts of internal sense give evidence of a stable, mental disposition from which these acts flow. Thus, injuring the unconscious transgender man for being transgender could be categorized as a hate-crime on the basis of his stable mental disposition to sense himself as male whenever he does, in fact, sense himself.

Defining gender identity as a habit solves the problems of active consciousness, but only by introducing new problems concerning deduction. If a courageous person, deduced as courageous by the consistency of his courageous acts, commits an act of cowardice, should we deduce that he is cowardly? No, a disposition established by

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. STh., I-II q.49 a.3 ad 1: “Habit is an act, in so far as it is a quality: and in this respect it can be a principle of operation. It is, however, in a state of potentiality in respect to operation. Wherefore habit is called first act, and operation, second act; as it is explained in *De Anima* ii.”

repeated action is not corrupted by a single contrary action, but by repeated contrary actions. A discerning man may believe a falsehood, acting against his intellectual disposition of discernment, without thereby obliterating the stability of his mental habit of discernment. We would be inclined to say, in such cases, that the person “acted against his own nature,” indicating that his “nature” or “disposition” remains.<sup>11</sup> But were the courageous man to continuously perform cowardly acts, and were the discerning man to continually believe falsehoods, we would eventually suspect a corruption of their interior disposition. Whereas, in the case of the first offense, we would argue that the underlying disposition towards courageous acts remains, by the case of the nineteenth or twentieth act, we would reassess our deductive reasoning and consider the man as quite changed—prone, now, to cowardly acts rather than courageous ones.

Do these principles apply to the question of gender identity? Say, for instance, that for twenty years a cisgender female has consistent “internal senses of being female” from which she and others deduced the stable, interior disposition described as a female gender identity, but, for 48 hours, her actual acts of internal sense are of herself as male (arguably, *his* actual acts of internal sense are of *himself* as male). How would she, or others, determine her gender identity, understood as a mental habit on the basis of which one internally senses oneself as male, female, both or neither? If she were to take a life-time approach on the basis of the consistency of her acts of internal sense across the entire course of her life, she would have to argue that 48 hours of sensing herself as male hardly outweighs twenty years of internally sensing herself as female. She could not reasonably deduce the existence of a stable mental state which we would call a male gender identity. But this approach would deny the validity of a person’s gender identity until it proved itself—that is, until the person could deduce that her mental disposition was, on the whole and in fact, orientated towards actual acts of internally sensing the self as male.

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<sup>11</sup> Obviously, any act against a habit lessens that habit, as Aquinas says, repeated acts cause a habit to grow. If, however, the act falls short of the intensity of the habit, such an act does not dispose to an increase of that habit, but rather to a lessening thereof.” [STh., I-II.q. 52 a. 3] Ultimately, a habit may be completely corrupted, “though with difficulty,” for that which is established on the basis of repeated acts is corrupted by repeated acts. This not true of every kind of habit, because not every habit is caused by repeated action: “Such are the habits of the first principles, both speculative and practical, which cannot be corrupted by any forgetfulness or deception whatever” [q. 53 a. 1]

This resurrects one aspect of the medical model of transsexualism, which argued that one must prove the stability of one's gender identity by "passing" as male or female for a certain period of time before it was clarified, both to oneself, the medical professional, and the State, that one's internal sense of gender represented a real and stable mental disposition, rather than a particular act that threatened a disposition towards opposite acts of internal sense.<sup>12</sup> Both the medical model and the broader description of gender identity as a mental habit seem to suffer from an assumption about the quality of the act of internally sensing one's gender—that it does not bear with it any kind of phenomenological certainty but merely stands numerically opposed towards a greater number of past acts of internal sensing.

What is applicable to theories of moral virtues may not be applicable to theories of gender identity. Instead, we might understand gender identity as

**GI3:** "a mental disposition by which one internally senses the self as male, female, both, or neither *and senses that this disposition is stable.*"

After all, in other mental dispositions, the sense of stability of the disposition is phenomenologically given in its act. For instance, if I were to solve a difficult mathematical problem, I would experience my actual acts of mathematical figuring in their relation to an underlying disposition of mathematical reasoning which is either present, absent, weak, or firmly established. I might feel that I am solving it by fluke, as a result of practice, by a natural aptitude, with great difficulty, and so forth. Since the act itself gives phenomenological evidence of the stability of the disposition from which it flows, I do not need to compare it to the multitude of similar acts performed over time. So too with gender identity: We need not look to a lifetime of internal sensing, but to the phenomenological givenness of the stability of the mental disposition in the actual act of internally sensing oneself as male, female, both, or neither. This would conform with

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Jemima Repo, *The Biopolitics of Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).



many narratives of transgender becoming, in which individuals describe their felt sense of self as male or female as strong and persistent, despite occurring later in life.<sup>13</sup>

What, then, are we to make of the category of “both,” as expressed in gender categories such as bigender, genderfluid, or two-spirit? The bigender person (the person experiencing “alternating gender incongruity”<sup>14</sup>) may have an internal sense of self as male one day, and female the next. This would indicate that, in sensing himself as male on one day, he does not sense this as a stable disposition. By GI3, this means that (s)he does *not* have the gender identity “male” on one day, or “female” the next, because neither of these dispositions are sensed as stable.

One might argue that what is sensed as stable is precisely that (s)he is bigender. But this would conflate gender identity with the gender category (G) that it leads to. That is, we would be arguing that a bigender person’s *gender identity* is bigender, namely, that (s)he “has a mental disposition by which (s)he internally senses the self as bigender.” But the bigender person never senses the self as bigender—only as male, then as female. This leads us to the rather odd conclusion that there can be no bigender people. For, if one is bigender insofar as one has the gender identity of male, then as female, then one has “neither” as their gender identity, because gender identity is a mental disposition which has stability as a necessary condition, and to experience oneself as alternatively male and female is to experience *neither* sense of self as stable. The bigender person, by definition, cannot reasonably deduce, from his actual senses of self, the existence of a stable, mental disposition rather than a passing act. To be both genders, in this regard, is really to be neither.

This leads us to a bind. Either we scrap the condition of stability, and thus include every fleeting felt-sense of self as male, female, both or neither in the category of gender identity, or we keep the condition of stability, and argue that the bigender person’s claim to experience “both” is in fact an experience of “neither,” and thus, insofar as they do lay claim to an experience of “both,” bigender persons must be said to be wrong. The trouble with excluding bigender persons from GI1 is that it would undo the liberal-institutional

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Justin Tanis, *This is My Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians, Theology & Sexuality*, (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 2016), 279–281.

<sup>14</sup> L. Case and V. Ramachandran, “Alternating Gender Incongruity: A New Neuropsychiatric Syndrome Providing Insight into the Dynamic Plasticity of brain-sex” in *Medical Hypotheses* 78.5 (2012): 626–631.

claim to the universality of the gender identity model. The trouble with scrapping the condition of stability is that it wars against the experiences of many transgender persons. Imagine, for instance, the person who is raised, for eighteen years, as a male, and thus develops a mental disposition by which he has a deeply felt sense of self as male. He then begins to develop another sense of himself as female, sensing the stability of this internal sense over and against his past sense of self as male. He transitions, undergoes sex-reassignment surgery, changes his proper noun and pronoun, and lives as “she” for the next twenty years. This trans woman may have, in certain scenarios, a felt sense of self as male—through re-lapses, memories, dreams, habitual modes of thinking, or any other psychosocial residue from her eighteen years of internally sensing herself as male. It is only by including some notion of the stability of a mental disposition over the fleetingness of a momentary act of internal sense that this transgender woman is not subject to absurdities, the most obvious of these being the fact that, without a stability clause, she would be defined as a cisgender male for the duration of her “felt sense of being male,” i.e. as “a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth.”<sup>15</sup> Then the absurdity that lead us to alter GI1 would be reappear—our transgender woman would lose whatever protections and benefits she had for as long as she has a felt-sense of herself as what she once was.

We may attempt to break this bind by arguing that to have the internal sense of self as “both” is not reducible to a sense of oneself now as male, now as female, and a memory-based recognition of this fact. Rather, what one senses is described as a “a blending...of gender states”<sup>16</sup>—both simultaneously. The HRC definition seems to anticipate this problem by arguing that one can hold an innermost concept of self as “male, female, *a blend of both*, or neither.” If this is the case, it could be argued that one senses oneself as “both,” and senses this as a stable mental disposition; that one’s gender identity is “both,” and this leads one to categorize oneself as “bigender.”

But to sense oneself as a blend of male and female relies on a physical analogy that does not hold in the case of the mental habits we are discussing. A physical blend

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<sup>15</sup> “Cisgender.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cisgender>. Accessed 3 May. 2021. This definition is consistent with all other known political and governmental sources.

<sup>16</sup> Case and Ramachandran, “Alternating Gender Incongruity”.

presupposes the prior existence of the items blended—items which are destroyed in their individuality to produce “the blend.” If a mental habit by which one senses oneself as male and a mental habit by which one senses oneself as female are destroyed in order to produce the blend that one experiences, then the sense of oneself as a blend of male and female is identical to a sense of one’s self as *neither*. To put it another way, if a bigender person cannot say that he senses himself as male, in an experience whole, distinct and entire, but only that he discerns some semblance of maleness drifting in his primary experience of bothness, then it cannot be said that he has the gender identity of “male”—and thus it cannot be said that he experiences himself as both male and female. Whether he is “both” (in this sense) or “neither”, his gender identity is “neither,” as it must be said that one who experiences oneself as a blend does not experience himself as male, and does not experience himself as female.

If, on the other hand, one claims that by “both” one does not indicate a blend that destroys its constituent parts, but retains two, independent mental dispositions, then these two gender identities are either (a) temporally disparate, and thus one’s gender identity of “both” is, in actual fact, “neither male nor female” as we have established above or (b) temporally simultaneous. How could we argue for a temporal simultaneity that is not a stable whole established via the destruction of its parts?

It would be difficult to argue that one senses oneself as both male and female, whole, complete and simultaneously, where the object of one’s sensing is absolutely identical—the self. This would break with the principle of noncontradiction whereby a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect. Nor would this principle be adjudicated by a constructionist claim that the self has no *being* of gender, only an *appearance*, as, by necessity, a thing cannot appear to be and not appear to be at the same time and in the same respect. Insofar as it is something different to sense that oneself is female than to sense that one’s self is male, the only way one could lay claim to “both” without ending up laying claim to “neither” is to argue that the object of the deeply felt internal sense is taken in two different respects. One could argue, for instance, that one feels oneself as aesthetically female but ethically male; that one’s *psyche* is female but one’s spirit is male; that one’s primarily sexless person is inhabited and informed by two distinct spirits, male and female; that one’s lived-body experience is male but one’s

experience before others is female; that one's being-for-itself is male but one's being-for-others is female; that one senses oneself as biologically male but spiritually female, and so on.<sup>17</sup>

Taking the self in two senses, as is already apparent in these examples, saves the temporally simultaneous bigender category from self-annihilating contradiction, but it does so at the cost of another ambiguity. Our current definition of gender identity is “a mental disposition by which one internally senses the self, etc.” but, according to the logic of non-contradictory bigenderism, one does not unequivocally “sense the self.” One senses the self “in some respect,” whether by sensing a part of the self, or sensing the whole self under a certain aspect, i.e. through two different manners of sensing. If this is to be included as a gender identity, then GI3, and ultimately, the governmental definitions currently being deployed by Western governments, need to be changed.

The first possibility, that a bigender man might sense in two different manners, is already allowed for in the phrase “one internally senses,” which does not define the number of times which one senses, or the number of manners in which one senses. The object of sense needs a further discriminating clause, because “the self” is a grammatical unit, implying that one's sense is unitary, which cannot be true in the case of bigenderism.

**GI4:** “a mental disposition by which one internally senses the self as male, female, neither, *or by which one internally senses the self in some respect as male and in some other respect as female*, and senses that this disposition is stable.”

GI4 allows for a reasonable bigenderism and, according to some definitions, genderfluidity<sup>18</sup>. But it leads to a problem of voluntarism. By including “in some

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<sup>17</sup> Max Scheler, in his *Formalism and Ethics* argues convincingly for the fact that a person can feel two things at once, and he shows this precisely on this basis—that the value-objects towards which feeling can be orientated are distinct. See Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Kate Bornstein's classic definition would run into the same problem and could thus use GI4's solution: “Gender fluidity is the ability to freely and knowingly become one or many of a limitless number of

respects,” it opens itself to the possibility that an otherwise cisgender male may have the gender identity of female because he “senses the self in some respect as female,” where the respect with which he senses himself as female is in respect to, say, his being (mis)identified as female in the summer of 1994 or by virtue of a penchant for owning a small, rather than a large, dog. That is to say, if it is no longer a requirement that one sense the self in a single, unitary, and global respect, what is to prevent anyone from claiming access to any gender category on the basis of a sense of the self that we would prudentially consider to be trivial? An otherwise cisgender female could claim the gender identity of “both,” and thus the gender category of genderfluid, and thus access to a queer space, by sensing herself as female in every respect except a trivial one. Would we not be forced, by the logic of GI4, to admit that this cisgender female is, in fact, bigender or genderfluid? Or, more painfully, would we not be in a position of contradicting the transgender woman who claims to have the gender identity as female if, in some miniscule respect, she retains a sense of herself as male, sensing herself in respect of her lived-body experience as male, despite efforts to sense herself as female in this regard? Could we not say, “you do not, in fact, internally sense yourself as female, because, in some respect, you internally sense yourself as male, and thus you are not a transgender woman in the strict sense, but bigender.”

These problems can be resolved by adding a non-triviality clause to our working definition:

**GI5:** “a mental disposition by which one internally senses the self, *in a non-trivial manner*, as male, female, neither, or by which one internally senses the self in some respect as male and in some other respect as female, and senses that this disposition is stable.”

This formally solves the problem, but only by punting the question of what renders an internal sense non-trivial or, more alarmingly, who decides between trivial and non-trivial senses of self.

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genders, for any length of time, at any rate of change,” in her *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 129.

As this will be a constant question in our analysis of the viability of a definition of gender identity according to the prerequisites of liberalism, we will allow the term to serve as a placeholder until the question can be properly answered. It should be noted, however, that our definition, because of its stability clause, only invites this difficulty insofar as the senses of the self as male, female, both or neither are stable acts by which one could reasonably deduce the presence of a mental disposition.

### 3. The challenge of constructionism

The basic claim of gender constructionism is summed up in the cliché: “Gender is a social construct.” While the precise meaning of the proposition varies from author to author, we may distinguish between weak, medium and strong forms of constructionism. Within weak gender constructionism, gender is a natural fact about a human being (an essence). There are men and women, simply. The manner in which this gender is expressed is socially constructed. Weak constructionists would admit that gender is socially constructed to appear in this or that manner, but not that gender is a social construct. Most people seem to hold some element of weak constructionism. Even traditional religious groups who believe, not only that there are men and women as substantial, natural beings, but even argue that there is only one proper way of expressing oneself as or otherwise appearing as a man or woman; even these groups will not argue that men and women cannot construct the expression/appearance of maleness or femaleness in different and contingent manners—only that there is one way which the true fact of gender *ought* to be expressed.<sup>19</sup>

Medium gender constructionism claims that gender itself is a social construct, often emphasized in its distinction from weak constructionism by saying, “Gender is *just* a social construct.” The very fact that the human being appears as “male, female, both or neither” is not a result of a true fact about the human being, but of a cultural trope and a

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, Paul, in ordering women to wear veils within the churches, certainly argued that gender be constructed to appear in a certain manner by the Christian people (1 Corinthians 11:3-17).

social expectation that people both perform and anticipate.<sup>20</sup> However, medium constructionists often admit a non-constructed category of “sex,” as opposed to gender, by which they mean the sexual differentiation of much of biological life on genetic, cellular and organic levels, into binaries that can reasonably be described as male and female.

Strong gender constructionism holds that gender is a social construct—and so is sex. The meaning of our scientific observations of bodies does give us access to a natural fact of maleness or femaleness—it is only because we construct the notions of sexed and unsexed flesh that we see “male and female” genes, cells, and organs. Ultimately, strong constructionism argues far beyond the question of gender. The very existence of a human subject is described as a construction, though strong constructionists differ in their account of how this construction is performed.<sup>21</sup>

If the claims of either medium or strong constructionism are correct, then GI3, taken at face value, involves an ambiguity. One’s “concept of self as male” cannot mean “one’s concept of self as *being* male,” where the word “being” indicates a true fact about oneself. Rather, one simply *appears* as male, female, both or neither insofar as one is constructed to appear as “male, female, both or neither.” Gender has no essence. It is not a natural kind or category that a human being *is* in the same manner that he is human.

Indeed, to claim to have a “deeply felt and experienced sense of being male,” where one understands “being male” to indicate a real category of existence, would insult all those who claim to have a “deeply felt and experienced sense of being male” where one understands being male as “appearing as male according to a certain psychosocial and cultural interpretation of the human being,” and vice versa. The former implicitly claim that the latter do not have as deep of an experience (for it will never go as far as a

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<sup>20</sup> As a classic example of this view, see Lorber, Judith. “‘Night to His Day’: The Social Construction of Gender.” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, edited by Paula S. Rothenberg, 54–62. (New York, NY: Worth Publishers/Macmillan Learning, 2004). The author argues that genders “are not attached to a biological substratum” but does not presume that this differentiated biological substratum is itself a social construction.

<sup>21</sup> As a primary example of strong gender constructionism, I will consider the work of Judith Butler throughout, especially her book *Bodies That Matter*, in which she argues for the above view: “If gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this ‘sex’ except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that ‘sex’ becomes something like a fiction” [Judith Butler, “Introduction”, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 3.]

“nature” that is coterminous with the “I”) and the latter implicitly claim that the former are mistaken (for there is no natural state of “being male,” only a cultural trope, imposed on the body). Because our current definitions of gender identity do not clarify whether gender identity is “one’s innermost concept of self as being male, female, both or neither” or “one’s innermost concept of self as *appearing* male, female, both or neither,” our only recourse is to render one interpretation false, naive, and its adherents invisible. This would either exclude all those who claim to belong to a gender category but consider it to be a natural belonging rather than a contingent, human construction, and vice versa, or it would create a hierarchy in each gender category, such that the gender category “transgender” would be made up of those who *correctly* understand their gender identity to be an experience of appearing according to the cultural construction “male or female” and those who *incorrectly and naively* take their gender identity as an experience of *being* “male or female” or vice versa. Obviously, this is unacceptable according to the constraints of universality and equality that our liberal institutions strive to embody in their definitions. Thus, we must expand the definition to include *both* constructionist and essentialist claims, such that:

**GI6:** “a mental disposition by which one (1) (a) internally senses that the self, in a non-trivial manner, *is or appears to be* male, female neither, or (b) by which one internally senses that the self in multiple, non-trivial respects *is or appears to be* both male and female, and (2) senses that this disposition is stable.”

This definition pragmatically includes what is actually a furious debate within feminist and queer discussions of gender identity,<sup>22</sup> and by doing so, invites the accusation of a certain arbitrariness; it cries “both!” when the peaceful co-existence of “both” definitions is precisely what is at issue. We will query the co-existence of essentialism and constructionism further below, but for now, this unity can be defended from a political and pragmatic point of view. The claim of constructionism is such that gender, which is in fact a social construction, appears *as if it were real being*. The claim of essentialism is

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<sup>22</sup> For a good sense of this debate, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially speaking: feminism, nature & difference*. (New York: Routledge, 1989).



that one's gender identity is the experience of a true fact about the person—that is, the experience of real being. Pragmatically, there is no difference. An essentialist transgender man might say, I am a man, and mean it, while a constructionist transgender man might say, I am a man, and mean that the non-gendered  $x$  that he is constructed to appear unto himself and others as a “man.” Essentialism claims an essence and constructionism claims the appearance of an essence, but on the level of appearance, both claim the same thing. Pragmatically speaking, we can accept GI6 insofar as there is no need to rend all gender categories in two by investigating their member's ontological commitments to find whether there is “real being” or a “genderless  $x$ ” at the bottom of their self-categorization.

This leads to a larger problem. If gender identity is the sense of oneself as “male, female, both or neither,” but this internal sense is not the sense of being male, but of a constructed appearance, why should gender identity be given any more weight than sex assigned at birth? By “weight” I mean that the experience serves as evidence that supports the claim that one belongs to a gender category. For example, if to be cisgender is to be a person whose gender identity corresponds to or matches one's sex assigned at birth,<sup>23</sup> then to answer the question “Am I cisgender?” would require an investigation into the presence or absence of three pieces of evidence: my gender identity, my sex assigned at birth, and the correspondence between the two.

Charlotte Tate sums up the popular agreement, that gender identity should be given more weight than sex-assignment in evidencing the claim that a person belongs to a gender category.<sup>24</sup> But if the experience of the self as “male, etc.” is not the experience of a fact about oneself, but an experience of the self as it has been constructed to appear to oneself, why should it serve as a “trump card” in comparison to sex-assignment by parents at birth—another labelling of the body and the self according to how the body and the self have been constructed to appear?

To give a practical example, consider a cisgender female, assigned as “female” at birth, called “she”, and defined as belonging to the social categories of “girl” and

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<sup>23</sup> “Glossary of Terms” Human Rights Campaign.

<sup>24</sup> Tate, “Considering Lesbian Identity from a Social–Psychological Perspective.” Tate's view is given fuller treatment in part 5 of this chapter.

“woman.” The fact that she comes to enjoy “an innermost concept of self as female” is not a surprise. As Judith Butler insists, one “is called a name or addressed as ‘you’ prior to any sense of individuation, and that calling, especially as it is repeated and rehearsed in different ways, starts to form a subject who calls itself by those same terms, learning how to shift the ‘you’ to an ‘I’ or to a gendered third person, a ‘he’ or a ‘she.’”<sup>25</sup> Given that “I am never simply formed, nor am I ever fully self-forming”<sup>26</sup>, why should a person who knows that her gender identity as ‘she’ is not the result of a simple self-forming, but of the internalization and psychological self-subjection to the categorical sex-assignment of others, consider this data as having more weight than sex-assignment of others? Might she not repudiate her own internal sense of “being female”?

By “repudiate,” I do not mean she would cease to have the “deeply felt internal and individual experience” of being female. Rather, she recognizes that this is the experience of the constructed self, and not a sense of being. The feeling of “being female” does not refer to a true fact about herself that she could add to a list of certainties, that she is here at the desk, that she has a body, that she is thinking, and so forth. Unlike these internal senses, which are intentionally related to states of affairs concerning what, where, and how I am, the internal sense of the self as “female” indicates no kind of ontological fact about herself—it is, at best, a psychological object construed by myself and others that indicates no state of affairs outside of itself.

Were a cohort of doctors, parents and guardians to label me as a god at birth, and were I subsequently to internalize “being a god” as a fact about myself, only to later reason that there are no gods, I may, for quite some time, persist in the deeply felt internal and individual experience of myself as a god, despite intellectually repudiating this feeling of being as, in actual fact, nothing more than a feeling of an appearance. My internal-sense would not be intentionally related to a state of affairs that really obtained in the world; it would not be a felt sense of a true fact about myself; it would be a persistent fantasy, or a bad habit of mind, comparable to a dream in which one “knows that one is dreaming,” a hallucination which one understands as a hallucination, or an aesthetic experience in which one cannot help but see pretty trees, rivers, and a shepherd, even though one

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<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

knows that he is really just looking at paint. In this situation, I would not be of the mind to give any greater weight to my identity as deity than to the assignment of myself as “deity” by others.

To put the problem simply: how can we argue that gender identity has greater weight than sex assignment at birth while arguing that gender identity is, at least very often, the internalization of one’s sex assignment at birth? If my internal sense that I am female is the result of being assigned as female then my internal sense is only as good as my assignment—according to constructionism, no good at all. And this not simply a theoretical problem, but one that may produce real victims. Imagine a person who intellectually repudiates his internal sense of being male as an internalized social construct. He subsequently identifies as “genderqueer” or “agender” in order to indicate that the only true fact about his being is a negative one. Gender is just a social construct, while his body in its pre-discursive mystery is that  $x$  which is not gendered. Nevertheless, his internal sense of self as “male” persists with the same persistence as a name, recently changed, may continue to be registered as an address to the person who has changed it. According our working definition, this self-categorized “agender” man is, in fact, cisgender—he has a deeply felt internal experience of himself as male, which corresponds to, and indeed, results from his sex-assignment to the category “male” at birth. Definitions of gender identity are not concerned with personal beliefs, only personal sense, feeling, innermost concept, and experience, and so GI1-6 *de facto* refuse to recognize the existence of the agender person.

Painfully, our current definition of “gender identity” would also exclude those raised as what they now consider to be the wrong sex, who have an deeply felt of experience of being that wrong sex, despite believing it to be a violent imposition of a social construct into their psyche over and against what they take to be a metaphysical truth about their being, i.e. “though I cannot help but feel like a member of the social category “woman,” I am not: I am a man.” One can imagine this situation occurring to an intersex child, surgically “corrected” to appear as “female” on the basis of a medical discourse, who finds out about this surgery later in life. Our current definition would erase the very means by which such persons are able to define themselves out of the category of “cisgender,” a person whose “gender identity corresponds with their sex assigned at

birth.” Their counterargument—that their “felt-sense” is only a felt-sense of a psychological object which has been formed by the constructing hands of others and internalized unwittingly by the self—would not suffice if the definition of gender identity is blind to any distinction between an internal sense that is believed to be related to real being (essentialism) and an internal sense that is related to what is believed to be a social construct (constructionism). These cases indicate the bind we are in: If we avoid erasing either constructionists or essentialists by relativizing the being/appearance distinction as in GI6, then we exclude all those who would categorize themselves according to their belief about a true fact of their being over and against their appearance, i.e. the one who would say, “I feel like a woman but I know I am a man.”

Perhaps another clause is necessary to break the bind. Gender identity could be the internal sense of being or appearing male, female, both or neither, except in the case in which one does not consent to having the internal sense that one has. Put positively, we have:

**GI7:** “a mental disposition by which one (1) (a) internally senses that the self, in a non-trivial manner, is or appears to be male, female or neither or (b) by which one internally senses that the self in multiple, non-trivial respects is or appears to be both male and female, and (2) senses that this disposition is stable and (3) *which one consents to having.*”

Taken at face value, this definition would divide all gender categories once again, excising and disappearing all those who do not make an act of consent to feeling the internal sense of being “male, female, both or neither” that they feel. It is probable that very few people have ever actively consented to feeling the internal sense of gender that they feel, as the realm of internal sense is characterized by its affectivity, a lack of agency, and an impressionability that rarely inspires the position of critical detachment one must have in order to freely consent to feeling what one feels. As few people consent to the internal sense of being angry, but rather feel themselves overcome by it, so few people consent to the internal sense of being “female,” but find themselves already with that sense. Perhaps here, and only here, we may borrow theology’s distinction between

the active and the permissive will and include both the active “yes” and the permissive lack of a “no” as equally indicating consent, using the terms “active” and “passive.”

**GI8:** “a mental disposition by which one (1) (a) internally senses that the self, in a non-trivial manner, is or appears to be male, female or neither or (b) by which one internally senses that the self in multiple, non-trivial respects is or appears to be both male and female, and (2) senses that this disposition is stable and (3) which one *actively or passively* consents to having.”

Even with this improvement, there are two major problems with GI8. The first mitigates against the intelligibility of the definition. Much like “deeply” and “innermost” in GI1, “having” is an ambiguous term. It could indicate that one does or does not consent to feeling/experiencing the mental disposition we are calling gender identity. If this were the case, it would be almost meaningless, as, in a certain respect, no one “consents” to feeling or experiencing something, and were they to consent or not, it would hardly change the phenomenological fact of the experience. The idea that “I do not consent to being sorrowful,” understood in this sense, means nothing more than “I do not like being sorrowful,” which, applied to the experience of gender identity, returns us to a form of voluntarism, and an insipid one at that—one that would render all those who do not consent to the mental disposition they find within themselves as merely raging against the incontrovertible bulk of raw experience. Thus “having” should be articulated in greater detail. The one who protests against a mental disposition that she understands to be the result of a violent imposition is not rejecting the experience as such, but the experience insofar as it is taken to indicate some true fact about herself, and not just any fact, but the fact of her gender.

**GI9:** “a mental disposition by which one (1) (a) internally senses that the self, in a non-trivial manner, is or appears to be male, female or neither or (b) by which one internally senses that the self in multiple, non-trivial respects is or appears to be both male and female, and (2) senses that this disposition is stable and (3) which one actively or passively consents to *indicating one’s gender*.”

GI9 leads us back to the debate between the essentialists and the constructionists. Is it not the case that we have snuck a presumption of essentialism into our definition of gender identity, where “indicating one’s gender” could only mean “indicating that one *is* male, female, both or neither”? If this is the case, it would follow that no gender constructionist could be said to have a gender identity, because no gender constructionist could ever actively or passively consent to a mental habit indicating that one *is* male, female, both, or neither. Obviously, when we confronted this same difficulty in the articulation of GI6, we solved it by allowing the internal sense of gender to be taken as the sense of either *being* this or that gender (essentialism) or *appearing* to be this or that gender (constructionism). To retain the suspension of judgment between the two rival ontologies in the clause (3) of our working definition would look like this:

**GI10:** “a mental disposition by which one (1) (a) internally senses that the self, in a non-trivial manner, is or appears to be male, female or neither or (b) by which one internally senses that the self in multiple, non-trivial respects is or appears to be both male and female, and (2) senses that this disposition is stable and (3) which one actively or passively consents to indicating that one *is or appears to be male, female, both or neither.*”

#### 4. The challenge of consent

Nevertheless, several problems remain. The first is an obvious structural problem. If it is the case that “gender identity” is a mental disposition by which one internally senses the self as male, female, both, or neither *and consents to this appearance*, it would follow that all those who do not consent to what they nevertheless sense do not, thereby, have a gender identity. But then what are we to call the person who has a deeply felt sense of themselves as female, but believes this sense to be a violent construction of her psyche, externally imposed? To say she does not have any gender identity at all would undo the very universality that we are striving for—that universality which de-hierarchizes

“gender” by declaring that everyone, of every “gender,” has a gender identity, and that one’s “gender” is simply the relation of this gender identity to one’s sex-assignment at birth. Rather than arguing for a fundamental class of people who do not have gender identities, it would make more sense to argue that the person in question *has* a gender identity but does not consent to having it.

But if this is the case, then the clause concerning consent cannot be included in the definition of “gender identity,” rather, all people should be said to have a gender identity, whether they would consent to it or no, while another category of experience, what we will call *gender consent*, modifies this. Such a structural change would simplify the definition of gender identity to:

**GI1:** “a mental disposition by which one (1) (a) internally senses that the self, in a non-trivial manner, is or appears to be male, female or neither or (b) by which one internally senses that the self in multiple, non-trivial respects is or appears to be both male and female, and (2) senses that this disposition is stable.

And introduce a new category of experience, gender consent, or GC, where:

**GC1:** A volitional act by which one consents to allow one’s gender identity to indicate that one is or appears to be male, female, both, or neither.

And our general formula for establishing one’s gender (GCF1) must be shifted:

**GCF2:**  $G=SSA$  If and only if  $SSA=GI$  and  $GC$

This way, one could still have the gender identity of “female,” a mental habit which leads one to internally sense that the self appears to be female, etc.,” while withholding the gender consent which would render one’s gender identity as a valid part of one’s ultimate “gender,” or gender-categorization.

More modifications are necessary, because, as it stands, GC1 undoes what was achieved by GI2, namely, admittance of the obvious fact that one’s gender cannot be

dependent on any active mental act, and subsequent description of gender identity as a mental habit or disposition. GCI would reintroduce the problem by making one's gender depend on an act of consent, such that the gender of person who has the gender identity "male" and the sex-assignment "female" and thus consents to appear as a "transgender man" on Monday is wiped away on Monday night when he falls asleep and on Tuesday morning when he forgets to make an act of consent.

Could we resolve GC1 in the same manner as GI2, arguing that it is, in fact:

**GC2:** *a disposition of the will towards the performance of acts* by which one consents to allow one's gender identity to indicate one's being or appearing to be male, female, both, or neither.

While this resolves the problem of an ever-active act of consent, it does not resolve a deeper problem: Some people never make *any* volitional act by which they allow their gender identity to indicate their gender. A non-Western, self-described "woman" whose gender identity corresponds to her sex assignment at birth and who has never heard the term "cisgender," or even "gender identity," would hardly perform any volitional act by which she allows her gender identity as female to indicate her gender—"cisgender." Would her lack of gender consent indicate that she could not be included in the category "cisgender," like it does for the person who believes that her internal sense of being female was a violent imposition? If so, then this terminology would be far too vague for any effective use by liberal governments and institutions, as any claim to represent, de-hierarchize, aid, or otherwise address any gender category would only really address those who have given "gender consent" at least as many times as necessary to deduce the existence of a volitional disposition.

Could we simply face this problem as we faced GI6, where we argued that one's consent could be active or passive? No, because a volitional disposition can only be deductively known on the basis of its acts—a person who never performed an act of courage could not be deduced to be courageous, likewise, a person who never consents to the indications of her internal sense of gender cannot be said to have a volitional disposition of gender consent. One way to resolve this conundrum is to modify the



definition so that, instead of demanding a positive act of consent, it could demand a negative act of refusal, such that:

**GC3:** a disposition of the will towards the performance of acts by which one *does not* consent to allow one's gender identity to indicate one's being or appearing to be male, female, both, or neither.

Here, belonging to a gender category would not hinge on the active performance of or disposition towards acts of consent, but on the lack of a refusal to allow one's gender identity to indicate one's gender, where:

$$G=SSA \text{ iff } SSA=GI \vee GC$$

Obviously, at this point the nominal term "gender consent" is misleading, and must be replaced by "gender refusal" (GR) where:

$$\mathbf{GCF3:} \quad G=SSA \text{ iff } SSA=GI \vee GR$$

and

**GR1:** a disposition of the will towards the performance of acts by which one *does not* consent to allow one's gender identity to indicate one's being or appearing to be male, female, both, or neither.

However, we must note that in changing our focus from consent to refusal, we have also troubled the idea that gender refusal must be a disposition of the will. Because gender refusal can only *block* the validity of the equation for gender categorization, rather than providing it with its validity, it is not necessary that GR be considered as a habit which is always "present." It may resolve into a habit, but it may also be the first act of refusal. Therefore:

**GR2:** An act by which one refuses to allow one's gender identity to indicate one's being or appearing to be male, female, both, or neither.

The real trouble with GR2 is within the ambiguity of its final clause: "being or appearing to be male, female, both, or neither." Up to now, we have been assuming that gender refusal fits with our embrace of both the essentialist and constructionist positions.

Within the essentialist position, the object of and grounds for gender refusal are clear. One experiences oneself as female, but one does not consent to the idea that this experience indicates a natural fact or some ontological truth about oneself. Such a person might reasonably say, "I have the feeling of being a woman, but I am not *in fact* a woman"—that is, she might deny that the subjective fact of her internal sense implies any objective fact about her being, which she may have a good reason to believe is male. For the essentialist, the reasonableness of the act of gender refusal depends on the assertion of a non-constructed being by which she can judge all social constructions as true or false constructions. If I say, "I have the feeling of being a god, but I am not, in fact, a god," my claim only has weight insofar as I believe that I can know enough about my ontological self to know that a felt sense of it is "true" or "not true," i.e. I feel like am I god, but I know a truth about myself that is prior to my feeling of it—that I am mortal, human, fallible, finite, and so forth. Therefore my feelings of deity must be false, deluded, hallucinatory, lingering habitually from a series of false beliefs imposed on me since childhood, or otherwise dismissible, despite being psychological. Likewise, an essentialist performing the act of gender refusal tends to do so on the basis of a belief in a non-constructed self, pointing to whatever she believes constitutes the essential nature which precedes the construction of her internal-sense—chromosomes, anatomy at birth, a remembered relationship as a "son", or any number of (arguably) founding facts. Thus she can argue "I have a deeply felt internal sense of self as a woman, but I am not a woman."

This straightforwardness falls apart when we take up the constructionist position. A constructionist who says, "I may feel female, but I am not female" is, according to his own ontological commitments, merely re-affirming the tenets of constructionism. He argues "I have an internal sense of myself as female, but I am not female, because there is

such thing as ‘being female,’ rather, one simply appears as female to oneself or others.” If this is his only option, then a constructionist could only perform an act of gender refusal towards a sense of himself as male, female, both or neither, insofar as he refuses to take up the essentialist position.

What, then, of a constructionist who would repudiate her gender identity within the logic of constructionism? Is such a thing possible? For, while I might refuse to consent to a feeling indicating a truth about my being, how could I refuse to consent to a feeling indicating a truth about my appearance? Could I argue I have a deeply felt internal sense that I am a god, but I do not *appear* unto myself as a god?

The constructionist, already understanding that all supposed being-female is only an appearing-female, says: “I may feel female, but I do not appear to be female.” But this is a contradiction, clarified by broadening the horizon of “feeling female” to include the composite definition of GI1, where deeply feeling, internally experiencing and holding an innermost concept of oneself as male, female, both, or neither are taken to broadly indicate *appearing to oneself* as male, female, both, or neither. Then the constructionist is simply saying “I appear to myself as female, but I do not appear to myself as female.”

Could one argue that, though the essentialist consents to an appearance as indicating a truth about her being, the constructionist consents to an appearance insofar as it is *desired* by the subject? In this case, the person who says, “I feel like a female, but I am not a female,” does not do so because she has some propositional knowledge of herself beyond appearance that renders the appearance into a false appearance, but because she does not want to feel female. She makes no claims about her pre-discursive, pre-constructed self, she simply claims not to want *this particular appearance*, just as the appearance that she does consent to, she consents to because she wants to appear to herself in such a way.

In a way, this a repetition of GI3’s conciliation of the constructionist and essentialist positions. There, we argued that the practical result was the same: The claim of constructionism is such that gender, which is in fact a social construction, appears as if it were real being. The claim of essentialism is that one’s gender identity is the experience of a true fact about the person—the experience of real being.

Similarly, an essentialist might reject her self-appearance as female because it does not indicate a truth about herself, while a constructionist might reject her self-appearance

as female because she wants a different self-appearance. In fact, the constructionist position covers both terms, because it could equally be said that the essentialist rejects her self-appearance as female because she wants a different self-appearance—the only difference is that the *reason* the essentialist wants a different self-appearance is because she believes that a different self-appearance would be a true self-appearance, i.e. the appearance of her real being. The essentialist position can be understood as identical to the constructionist position, though it arrives from a different route.

This would seem to keep essentialists and constructionists onboard the single boat of gender identity by introducing a variation into the working definition.

**GR3:** An act by which one refuses to allow one's gender identity to indicate one's *appearance* as male, female, both, or neither.

Here, one might consent to the appearance of the self as male because one really is male, or because one simply wants to appear as male—the definition no longer takes ontology into account. In fact, GR3 sends a ray of intelligibility back to GI6. While previously the definition sought to be inclusive of the essentialist and constructionist positions by listing both, (“is or appears to be”), it resolved the fear of contradiction by pointing out that the experience of real being would also be the experience of the appearance of real being, such that both experiences could be unified as the experience of appearances. GI2-11, on this logic, should be modified to read: “a mental disposition which leads one to internally sense that the self *appears to be* male, female, etc.” This, then, leads to our current working definition:

**GI12:** “a mental disposition by which one (1) (a) internally senses that the self, in a non-trivial manner, *appears* to be male, female or neither or (b) by which one internally senses that the self, in multiple, non-trivial respects, *appears* to be both male and female, and (2) senses that this disposition is stable.

GR3 allows us to return to the challenge of bigenderism, where we argued that adding a non-triviality clause to the definition of gender identity “formally solves the problem, but

only by punting the question of what renders an internal sense non-trivial or, more alarmingly, who decides between trivial and non-trivial senses of self.” Now we can see that non-triviality can be simply defined in reference to gender refusal. An internal sense of self is not non-trivial because we have marked out some definite sphere of triviality (an effort which would inevitably have recourse to an essentialist position). Rather, an internal sense of self is non-trivial insofar as it does not lead one to refuse to allow one’s gender identity to indicate one’s appearance as male, female, both, or neither.

Conversely, an internal sense of self is trivial insofar as it leads one to refuse to allow the resultant gender identity to indicate one’s appearance as male, female, both, or neither.

This leads to an improvement of our working definition, which no longer needs a non-triviality clause, as non-triviality is established on the basis of the omission of gender refusal, rather than as a modification of the content of one’s felt sense of gender.

Therefore:

**GI13:** “a mental disposition by which one (1) (a) internally senses that the self appears to be male, female or neither or (b) by which one internally senses that the self, in multiple respects, appears to be both male and female, and (2) senses that this disposition is stable.

## 5. The challenge of new hierarchies

GI13 and GR3 remove all reference to being. Through this definition it has become apparent that the essentialist position can have no place in the definition of gender identity except insofar as it is a route to the same conclusions as the social constructionist position. This seems to be proper to our investigation. For it cannot be the case that “gender is a social construct,” while gender identity is not a social construct, as the latter is the felt sense of the former. Properly speaking, gender identity is simply the mental habit by which we perform acts of internally sensing our self *as we are constructed to appear*.

We are lulled away from considering this because, when it is brought up, it is usually brought up in the case of a mismatch—one's gender identity senses  $x$  while one's sex-assignment says  $y$ . Essentialism sneaks in through the back door—we assume that one senses a true fact about one's being, while one is only labelled according to a convention. But this is not the position of constructionism, which does not hold that gender-when-it-is-applied-by-others is a social construct, but gender when-it-is-felt-by-the-self represents a natural being. Rather, the very categories of male and female, whether one is called them or deeply feels oneself to be them, are conventions: "queer theories reject fixed and essential identities and categories of knowledge that relate to sexuality and gender,"<sup>27</sup> whether felt by the self or applied by others.

Indeed, it is obvious that the attempts to canonize "gender identity" as an unshakeable determinant of gender are an attempt to re-deploy the idea of psychology to serve the same ontological function once served by the "naturally" male or female body. Whereas claims of appearance (I feel like a woman) were once falsified by a reference to being (but you are/have a male body), now the body is taken as a pure appearance—an inscribed, constructed appearance of sexed flesh. "My body may appear as male," we admit, but this social appearance is falsified by an appeal to true being, now located in the mind—"but I have a female gender identity." So long as this shuffle went unrecognized, our burgeoning liberal gender schemas have been drawing blood from an implicit essentialism. But according to constructionism, there is nothing essential about gender, not even in the mind.

The various spatial metaphors within liberal-institutional definitions (which call gender identity one's "*innermost* concept" or one's "*deeply* felt sense") are best understood as poor attempts to undermine the extension of constructionism to the mind, giving an aesthetic sense of an ontological/true fact of one's being which allows the truth (that one's felt-sense is the felt-sense of a construction) to "fly under the radar". Interrogating this part of the definition seems almost ridiculous—just how "deep" must a felt-sense be in order to serve as the basis for belonging to a gender category? How does

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<sup>27</sup> Nick Rumens, "Sexualities and Accounting: A Queer Theory Perspective" in *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 35 (2016): 111–120.

one know with any kind of certainty that one's innermost concept of self as "male" is not, in fact, second-to-innermost, hovering just a little above one's concept of self as a genderless Cartesian *ego*? Obviously, these metaphorical inclusions are not designed to introduce any objectivity or clarity into liberal models of gender identity. Rather, they are attempts to give gender identity the *weight* assumed by the ontologically prior body within the logic of essentialism, replacing the idea of "truth" with the aesthetic metaphor of "psychological depth." But if even the deepest of deeply felt senses is still a sense of oneself as socially constructed to appear as "male, female, both, or neither", then this vague replacement simply masks and normalizes the illusion by which a social construct is taken as real being, a natural kind, and a construct which is, at least according to the strong constructionists, an effect of cultural and social power. To insist, then, that gender identity is nothing more than a feeling of the manner in which one is constructed to appear is simply to divorce gender more finally from essentialism rather than giving essentialism a holdout in the recesses of the mind.

Thus, after lengthy analysis, it becomes apparent that the liberal-institutional definitions of gender identity and their description of its place in the general equation for determining gender cannot avoid creating a fundamental hierarchy between persons. To maintain the universality of gender identity, it was necessary to take up the constructionist position, which is strictly concerned with appearances, rather than the essentialist position, which is concerned with being. Thus, it must be the case that, of all those who claim to have a gender identity, some are more correct than others. Essentialists claim it as a feeling of a fact of their being as this or that gender: They are wrong. Constructionists claim their gender identity as a feeling of a desired construction of their being into the appearance of this or that gender: They are correct. This creates, at the bare minimum, an academic hierarchy between those who have expert-knowledge and those who have folk-knowledge—between the one who claims to be genderqueer on the basis of his gender identity, knowing this to be the felt-sense of a construct, and those who claim to be genderqueer, and understand this to be a feeling of a truth, deeply-felt, "underneath" appearances and constructions.

Such an academic hierarchy is possible, but it must be admitted that the goal of egalitarianism has quite failed. If everyone must become a constructionist in order for

everyone to become equal, then we are dealing with a restrained totalitarianism of constructionism, not liberal equality of many, privately held beliefs. There is an analogue here to a principle within certain versions of theological liberalism which argue that there are many routes to God and, so long as one gets there, it is irrelevant *how* one gets there. One may conceive of God as a Father and another may conceive God as “the sum of what is noblest in our human aspirations.” One may conceive of God as a vindictive, tyrannical monad and another as a family. From the perspective of theological pluralism all visions of God are equal insofar as they are all equally inadequate in their attempt to conceive a God who is transcendent by definition. John Hick argued that “the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, individual understandings of the category of “female” constitute different ways of experiencing a Reality which transcends all of these varied visions. Indeed, this must be the case if “there is no underlying essence to being female”<sup>29</sup> but only a social construct, which, insofar as it is contingent upon an uncountable number of individual choices and performances, can never be known “in itself.” There can be a relative peace between mythic and scientific believers (those who can distinguish myth as myth) but there is no getting around the superiority of the latter over the former. The attempt to include both social constructionism and essentialism in a single definition of gender identity fails—essentialists must be tolerated as unscientific thinkers in order to be included within the gender identity scheme.

## 6. Self-categorization over other-categorization

We are led back to the question of why gender identity has any priority in determining one’s gender over and against sex assigned at birth. If, for instance, one’s gender identity is “male” and one’s sex assignment at birth is “female,” in the absence of gender refusal, liberal governments increasingly understand such a person as a “transgender man.” But if

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<sup>28</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 235.

<sup>29</sup> Tate, “Considering Lesbian Identity from a Social–Psychological Perspective”, 19.



one's sex-assignment is an imposed construct and one's gender identity is the sensing of an imposed construct, why should gender identity always trump sex-assignment?

Should we simply argue that, in the case of the transgender man, his gender identity is not a sense of the *same* social construct as the construct imposed on him by sex-assignment at birth, and that the very lack of correspondence between the two constructs is what gives the one, gender identity, its priority in determining gender? But then, would it not be true that one's gender identity *only* trumps one's sex-assignment at birth *if* it contradicts it? If that is the case, then we must argue that for those people whose gender identity corresponds with their sex assigned at birth, sex-assignment has priority in determining their gender, while for those whose gender identity contradicts their sex-assignment, gender identity takes priority. Obviously, to argue this would mitigate against the universality of the gender identity schema, splitting the world into people defined by bodily constructions and people defined by psychological constructions without any clear and sufficient reason for doing so.

Charlotte Tate attempts to avoid this by arguing that the mere fact that that gender identity proceeds from the *self*, while sex-assignment precedes from others, is sufficient to give it a priority over sex-assignment at birth. I take her effort as one of the best articulated attempts to get around the problem of the relative value of constructed appearances within the constructionist worldview. Though she is considering the specific gender identity of "female," she gives basic guidelines to her study that mirror our own effort to fit "gender identity" within the liberal tradition, arguing that her model of female identity is logical, inclusive, and avoids voluntarism. By addressing her, I will continue to address our primary difficulty.

For Tate, the predominant method by which *others* construct one's body and person into a sexed body and a gendered person is through the assignment of male or female sex at birth on the basis of the genitalia. The way the *self* constructs one's body and person into a sexed body and a gendered person is the "personal sense of self,"<sup>30</sup> a "felt-sense or individual consciousness of the self as 'female.'"<sup>31</sup> Tate argues that "being assigned at birth...should not be privileged over other experiences of female gender categorization"

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<sup>30</sup> Tate, "Considering Lesbian Identity from a Social-Psychological Perspective", 24.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 21.

and that “it is the personal sense of self that is paramount—not how one is interpreted by others.”<sup>32</sup> She argues for the hierarchical priority of the personal felt-sense over the assignation of sex by others because “all adults who identify as female are united on the dimension of having a felt-sense or individual consciousness of the self as ‘female’.” It is a factor “presumably shared across all experiences of female identity”<sup>33</sup>.

Tate argues that the “felt-sense” of being female (synonymous with the “deeply felt sense” of GI1) is part of a process of the development of “gender identity,” a process by which one ultimately identifies oneself as being male, female, or non-binary. The felt-sense is “the unique part of this process...that is not reducible to learning via external inputs. This unique underpinning process might be characterized as an internal sense of self or a felt-sense of gender identity.”<sup>34</sup> Tate argues that “at present, no one understands from where this felt-sense might originate” but that “researchers might infer the existence of such an internal experience”<sup>35</sup> in their study of people’s intuition that their self matches or does not match the gender identity label given to them by others. She argues that “the self uses this internal sense” to determine it’s being male or female or some other gender “while others use the social meaning and cues associated with being medically assigned to an anatomy category.”<sup>36</sup> The felt sense is “private, internal information to which the self has access” and which is “likely not accessible to others unless the self discloses it”<sup>37</sup>.

It is not the case that simply having this felt sense includes a person in the category of female, which would obviously run against the same problems of refusal and consent addressed above. Rather, one must categorize themselves as female in order to belong to the social category of female. As Tate says, “self-categorization as female (rather than other people’s perception of oneself as female) [is] the main criterion for inclusion.” Tate suggests that the felt sense of being female is a necessary condition for performing this act of self-categorization.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Tate, “Gender Identity as a Personality Process,” in *Gender identity: Disorders, developmental perspectives and social implications* edited by Beverly L. Miller (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2014), 1–22, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

I say ‘suggests,’ because while Tate does not clearly state that one *must* have the felt sense of being female in order to self-categorize as female, holding this position is necessary if her view is not to be dismissed as advocating pure voluntarism. If this were the case, Tate would not pay such close attention to the “felt-sense” as the “source of information” which the self refers to in order to self-categorize. Nor would she be able to hold many of her various positions. She argues that “one cannot easily dismiss an internalized experience of a female identity simply because it did not co-occur with a birth-assignment to this gender,” but if an “internalized experience of female identity” is not necessary to include a person in the category “being female” than one *could* just as easily dismiss or accept it. It may be convenient or enjoyable for a trans woman to develop such an internalized experience, but she may just have easily belonged to the category of female before this fact. Likewise, Tate argues that “all adults who identify as female are united on the dimension of having a felt-sense or individual consciousness of the self as ‘female’.” But if this “individual consciousness of the self as ‘female’” was not necessary, and an adult could belong to the category of female without any individual consciousness of being female, the claim would be a dubious one.<sup>38</sup> Finally, Tate argues that “self-identification in terms of gender is indicative of one’s felt-sense of self.”<sup>39</sup> But if self-categorization as female always indicates a felt-sense of being female, it would be contradictory for Tate to argue that one could self-categorize as female without indicating (and thus having) a felt-sense of being female. Therefore, I take the strongest formulation of Tate’s initial argument to be as follows:

**Tate’s definition:** The felt sense of being female is a necessary condition for a valid categorization of oneself as female.

If the felt-sense is the “internal source of information” that one consults in order to categorize oneself as female, then it is crucial to understand what this felt-sense is like. A felt-sense is intentional, that is, it is always a felt-sense-*of*. To argue that there is simply a

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<sup>38</sup> Or, at the least, its truth would be contingent on Tate knowing that all adults who categorize themselves as female have an individual consciousness of female identity, which is knowledge she could not possibly have.

<sup>39</sup> Tate, “Considering Lesbian Identity from a Social–Psychological Perspective”, 24.

felt-sense, without content, would be like arguing that one has an idea without content, or a fantasy of nothing—it would be to simply misunderstand the intentional character of these acts. Tate characterizes the felt-sense as the felt-sense of being female, the “felt-sense or individual consciousness of the self as ‘female.’” What, then, is “the self as female” that one has a felt sense of?

To define the intentional object of the felt-sense as “a social construct” would undermine the very priority that Tate seeks to give the felt-sense in determining one’s gender. Instead, Tate defines the category of female when she argues that “the felt-sense of being female...is presumably shared across all experiences of female identity, and the most consistent and defensible *meaning of this social category* from a social science perspective.”<sup>40</sup> The meaning of the social category *is* the felt-sense; to be a female is to belong to a social category, the members of which all share the felt-sense of being female.

This leads to a difficulty. If the felt-sense of being female is a necessary condition for categorizing oneself as female, where “female” is defined as a social category, the members of which all have the felt-sense of being female, then all Tate is saying is that to count as female one must have the felt-sense of being one of those beings with a felt-sense of being female.

This is a rhetorical tautology at best: The female is the one with the felt-sense of being someone with the felt-sense of being female. It seeks to be inclusive, but it does so at the expense of stripping the social category of any meaningful content. I question whether it is even possible to have the felt-sense of belonging to a category, membership in which is defined by having the felt-sense of belonging to that category. This seems like a psychological nightmare in which, every time I ask whether I am female, my own investigation into my psyche is mirrored into infinity, and I am left wondering if I have the felt-sense of being female, where ‘female’ is defined as including only those beings who have the felt-sense of being female, where ‘female’ is defined as including only those beings who have the felt-sense of being female, and so on *ad infinitum*. At some point, a definition cannot simply repeat the word it is supposed to be defining—nor can a social category be defined as a grouping of all those who belong to a social category.

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<sup>40</sup> Tate, “Considering Lesbian Identity from a Social–Psychological Perspective”, 27; my emphasis.

This becomes more obvious when we consider categories more commonly agreed to be composed of members who share a common felt sense. Take the sorrowful. Presumably, the felt sense of sorrow is necessary and sufficient evidence to indicate that one belongs to the social category of “the sorrowful.” Does this simply repeat Tate’s tautology, such that “to be sorrowful one must have the felt-sense of being one of those beings with the felt-sense of sorrow?” Yes, it plugs the word “sorrow” into a general equation of categorical belonging, where one belongs to the category of things qualified by X if one is qualified by X.

Because sorrow is a particular feeling, laying claim to the felt-sense of sorrow is not to lay claim to a purely formal “belonging to the category of all of those with the felt-sense of sorrow,” as if the intentional object of the felt-sense “sorrow” were simply an intellectual recognition that one can be theoretically grouped with other sorrowing people. In the actual, particular instance, we have an implicit understanding of the content of the sorrow of which we have a felt sense. We are laying claim to a particular feeling of pain over the loss of some good, we experience a whole host of bodily and psychological contortions—tears, shrinking-inwards, moaning, the feeling of estrangement from normal life, and so on. Only because we implicitly recognize some definite content to the felt sense of sorrow can we satisfactorily formulate the categorical belonging that follows from it in purely formal terms. We can accept that the sorrowful are a group of beings who share a felt sense of sorrow, but only because we give “sorrow” the phenomenological content necessary to save it from categorical tautology.

Were we to consider a felt-sense category to which we could ascribe no phenomenological content, we would not be so content: To be kristevable one must have the felt-sense of being kristevable, where the kristevable is defined as a social category comprised of those who have the felt-sense of being kristevable—this is all well and good for tautological formulations, but we are rather at sea when it comes to the question of whether I, or anyone else, should or can categorize myself as ‘kristevable.’

The only reason Tate’s formulation of criteria for inclusion in the category ‘female’ doesn’t smack of the same absurdity is because like “sorrowful” and unlike “kristevable,” we sneak some degree of phenomenological content into the “felt-sense of being female.” Tate relies on the “felt-sense of being female” to avoid falling into the voluntarism that

would allow a cisgender man to cynically self-categorize as “female” in order to gain access to a female space. But by refusing to describe the intentional object of our felt sense, she arrives at a no-win situation: either tautology or the imposition of phenomenological content into the category “being female.” The problem with this latter path is that it is contrary to Tate’s best intentions of inclusiveness. The moment the “felt-sense of being female” implies some definite phenomenological content that can be described and contested, as in the definite content of “sorrow,” reducing being female to having the felt-sense of being female is no more inclusive than reducing female to “having female genitalia” or “having the historical experience of a female” or to any other category, membership in which is only satisfied by claiming access to this or that definite and describable piece of data.

Just as I could exclude people with the felt-sense of “being united to the good proper to them” from the “sorrowful” on the basis of having a definite description of what the felt-sense of sorrow is, so I could exclude people from the category of “female.” Thus, if I argue that I am female because I have the felt-sense of being female, where the felt-sense is considered, by me, as a felt-sense *of* something, say “inner tenderness,” then this “inner tenderness” can be the grounds on which I exclude some other person’s self-categorization as female on the basis of their felt-sense—by arguing that their sense of being “female” is not a felt-sense of an inner tenderness. Obviously, this would be ridiculous. But it seems that the reliance on felt sense either leads us into this hole or it simply remains a contentless, formal tautology which no one could possibly use as that useful “source of information” that Tate describes.

Perhaps there is another route. One might argue, for instance, that:

**TD2:** To be a female is to belong to a social category, the members of which all have the felt sense of [some particular phenomenological content] *which leads them* to self-categorize as female.

By admitting that there is a genuine, intentional felt-sense, but leaving it completely free of any particular determination, this definition argues that the intentional object of the felt-sense indicates that one belongs to the category female only insofar as it leads one to

make this categorization for themselves. Thus, for one person the “felt-sense of a history of menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth” leads her to categorize herself as female; for another, the felt-sense of an “inner tenderness”; for another it is a felt-sense of “an unbearable lightness of being”; every member of the category “female” has a felt-sense of some particular phenomenological content, and categorizes themselves as female on the basis of this content, but it is of no importance what this particular content is.

This may be tempting, as it preserves the importance of the felt-sense and the ultimate importance of the act of self-categorization, while remaining inclusive to diverse felt-senses of diverse intentional objects. But it also leads to irresolvable problems.

If one takes TD2 as doctrine, then one must confess that there is no reason to exclude a cisgender man from categorizing as female in order to invade a female space. After all, a cisgender man could easily fit into the formula: “to be female is belonging to a social category, the members of which all have the felt sense of [some particular phenomenological content] *which leads them* to self-categorize as female,” where [some particular phenomenological content] is “the desire to invade a female space.” To continue relying on the felt-sense data, while avoiding the contradiction of the cisgender male who self-categorizes as female, one would have to limit the *kinds* of phenomenological content which can lead a person to legitimately categorize as female.

Thus, for instance, one might protest and argue that such a cisgender male could not *really* be led to self-categorize as female on this basis, rather, he self-categorizes as female as a means to some other end. One might modify the definition to reflect this reality:

**TD3:** To be female is to belong to a social category, the members of which all have the felt sense of [some particular phenomenological content] which leads them to self-categorize as female, where self-categorization is an end in itself, rather than a means to an end.

But this would not fit Tate’s guideline of inclusion. It would negate the existence of all those who self-categorize as “female” in order to trouble existing binary conceptions of gender or to undo heteronormativity. Is it the case, then, that the cisgender male’s self-

categorization as female is to be denied validity because it is only temporary? His felt sense of “the desire to invade a female space” and subsequent categorization as female does not, presumably, outlast the invasion. But is this any reason to exclude him, such that we might say:

**TD4:** To be female is to belong to a social category, the members of which all have the felt sense of [some particular phenomenological content] which leads them to *permanently* self-categorize as female.

Obviously, we would take “permanently” to be a matter of the intention with which a person self-categorize as female, rather than a historical fact, lest we paint ourselves into the absurd corner of arguing that no one belongs to the social category female until they prove that this is a permanent self-categorization—that is, until they are dead. Despite this caveat, such a definition would delegitimize and erase any pre-operative transsexuals who take “having female anatomy” to be the felt-sense data by which they self-categorize as female, but who wish to categorize themselves as male, and are waiting for a surgery to give them the felt-sense of “having male anatomy” by which they feel able to do so. Likewise, taking up a ban on all non-permanent self-categorizations as “female” would exclude bigender persons who self-categorize as female on the basis of felt senses which they know to change day by day, and which, changing, may lead them to self-categorize as male.

Perhaps, then, it is not simply the manner of the felt-sense data that the cisgender male uses, but the very fact that that data can be used by a cisgender male at all. Such a deliberate exclusion would result in the following definition:

**TD5:** To be a female is to belong to a social category, the members of which all have the felt-sense of some particular phenomenological content which leads them to self-categorize as female, *and which could not lead any cisgender man to categorize himself as female.*”



But TD5 would have the unfortunate effect of excluding many people we might never have thought to exclude from the category of female. For instance, a person assigned to the sex “female” at birth might have the strong sense of solidarity and fellow-feeling with those who self-categorize as “female,” and on the basis of this felt-sense, categorize herself as “female.” The model described above would declare this self-categorization illegitimate, on the basis that it could be performed by a cisgender man who had a strong sense of solidarity and fellow-feeling with those who self-categorize as female. In reality, such a deliberate exclusion repeats the problems inherent in hinging valid self-categorizations on explicit kinds of phenomenological data.

Furthermore, by establishing a necessary reference to the male into the very category of the female, this improved definition risks recapitulating the understanding of the female as the negation of male, or the not-male, under the guise of a definition of females as those beings who self-categorize as “female” on the basis of the felt-sense of things that cannot be used by cisgender males to self-categorize as females.

Tate seems to equivocate on whether the felt-sense is the felt-sense of oneself as female, or of oneself as belonging to the category of female. The former is a felt-sense of identity, the latter is the felt-sense of belonging to a group which is larger than oneself. Based on this latter felt-sense, we might solve the problems of cisgender-male-inclusion that erupt when we leave the intentional object of the felt-sense indeterminate, by arguing:

**TD6:** “to be female is to belong to a social category, the members of which all have the felt-sense of belonging to the category of female *which leads them* to self-categorize as female.”

Obviously, this runs into the same problems of tautology as Tate’s original formulation. One belongs to the social category x by feeling that one belongs to the social category x and thereby categorizing oneself as belonging to the social category x. What is missing is any description of what unifies the members of category x beyond their formal unity. But this definition can be saved by adding a specificity, not simply by reference to an intentional object, but also by a reference to the person’s understanding of the category:

**TD7:** “to be female is to belong to a social category, the members of which all have the felt-sense of [something] which leads them to feel that they belong to the category of female [as they understand it] which leads them to self-categorize as female.”

This would exclude the cisgender man: He has the felt-sense of “the desire to invade a female space” but this felt-sense could not be said to lead him to feel that he *belongs* to the category of female. If it did lead him, for whatever reason, to “feel that he belonged” then this would be no cynical use of an unrelated felt-sense on which to self-categorize, rather the felt-sense would lead him to a [greater] felt-sense of belonging to the category “female,” a sense which cannot be cynically used (except by lying about having it) and which a cisgender male could not have, by definition. Meanwhile, the problem of tautology is solved by allowing for the person to determine the category of female for himself rather than arguing that it is identical with “all those who self-categorize as female.”

Likewise, the definition is inclusive of both trans and cis women. It is also, I believe, truer to life experience. Few people self-categorize as “female” in order to join a group of others who self-categorize as female. Typically speaking, the number of people we know to have actively self-categorized themselves as female—whether through self-disclosure, assent, or filling out a form—is rather few, and it does not form our understanding of the category. Rather, we self-categorize as “female” because we have some basic number of beliefs that all conspire to create the impression that there are others, out there, who are female, and who would self-categorize as female if asked—and that *we* belong to *them*.

I also believe that by not determining what it is, precisely, that *makes* the category “female,” we stay closer to life experience. Few people who categorize themselves as “female” have an explicit marker of what makes this category. Children, for instance, do not seem to exhibit this logic (i.e. all women have vaginas, I have a vagina, therefore I am woman), rather, children seem to categorize others around them (mothers, sisters, friends) as “female” and subsequently develop a felt sense of belonging to this social category.

By leaving “the category of female” up to the individual’s own particular understanding, TD7 fulfils Tate’s broader formulation that “individuals create the sense of what it means to be a part of a female identity.”<sup>41</sup> It does, however, lead itself open to the criticism that, by such a definition, no one can be excluded from the category of female on the basis of having a bad understanding of the category. To take a ridiculous example, a cisgender man who came to understand the category of female as being a category that contains all those people who have itchy toes, and who declared himself “female” of his felt sense of an itchy toe, would have validly categorized himself as “female” by the logic of TD7.

But I do not know that there is any other route to female identity, beyond exclusionary and tautological models, besides trusting the individual’s understanding of the category of female to avoid the ridiculous. One is at an impasse. One either (a) sets some definite meaning to the category of female, and thus excludes those who do not fit within its logical limits despite categorizing themselves as female or (b) leaves it to individuals to understand the category of female as they will, and thus risks having to accept understandings of the category “female” that one might believe to be ridiculous. However, it should be emphasized that TD7 would still exclude cisgender males from cynically claiming a ridiculous category, i.e. if they do not *really* understand the category of females as “those beings with itchy toes” then they remain excluded.

The larger problem with TD7 is that it contradicts Tate’s underlying doctrine, and ultimately, the whole liberal-institutional doctrine of gender identity, that “it is the personal sense of self that is paramount—not how one is interpreted by others”.<sup>42</sup> TD7 includes an interpretation of others by the self as constitutive of the self’s felt-sense of and subsequent self-categorization as “female.” One must first have some understanding of others as “female” in order to have the felt sense that one belongs to the social category “female.” Thus one’s personal felt sense and self-categorization are contingent on a prior categorization of others as female, and this categorization of others is not performed on the basis of the self-categorization of others (lest it fall into tautology), but on the basis of the individual’s own understanding. Unfortunately, this may, in practice,

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<sup>41</sup> Tate, “Considering Lesbian Identity from a Social–Psychological Perspective”, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 24.

lead people to continue the common practice of understanding the category of female in ways that Tate would consider to be inappropriate, i.e. according to sex assignment at birth, anatomical cues, and so forth.

To return to our original query, we might ask how the mere fact of gender identity being “from the self” rather than “from others” serves as a good reason for prioritizing gender identity over sex-assignment in determining one’s gender, when it is precisely one’s sex-assignment of others as being female that allows one to have a gender identity in the first place—to have the sense that one is, like them, female. If we must prioritize gender identity over sex-assignment, then we must also criticize our own understanding of the social category “female” (or any other social category), as it is a category known by a manifold act of sex-assignment (i.e. those beings are all female).

The only way out of this bind that I can see is to replace sex-assignment with a social survey whereby those who develop a gender identity survey a body of people, and on the basis of their self-reporting as “female,” develop the concept of the social category female, and subsequently develop the internal sense of belonging to those people who really have self-identified as female. But this utopian ideal would lead to an absurdity—each person I surveyed to self-report as “female” would have had to have done the same, that is, performed a survey in order to identify (without sex-assigning) the social category “female” which they categorize themselves as belonging to. Of course, each person in *that* survey would have had to do the same, *ad infinitum*, lest our social categories ultimately rest on some act of sex-assignment, rather than self-report. The problem that this uncovers is really the same problem as the missing intentional object. If being female is merely a social category, and, in order to resist essentialism, we argue nothing further, then there is no ground for the existence of the social category outside of itself. It is a social category all the way down—women, categorized as those who categorize themselves as women, categorized as those who categorize themselves as women, and onwards into the abyssal meaninglessness of the ungrounded social sciences.

Ultimately, Tate fails to solve our problem. If gender identity is the sense of oneself in the manner one has been constructed to appear, how can we categorize ourselves as belonging with others (belonging to a social category) on that basis, except by assigning gender to others? The only way I can belong to a gender category is by first performing

an act of construction towards others in order to have a category in which to feel that I belong. Gender identity depends on the very other-imposed constructing that liberal institutions deploy it to avoid.

At this point it would be good to rearticulate the problem. If gender is some truth about the being of a person, there is nothing that would *a priori* grant that one's feeling or sense of this being is any more or less true than another person's sense. To simply equate self-sense with correct-sense is to make "idols of self-knowledge"<sup>43</sup> despite the obvious facts of the phenomena of illusion, hallucination, habitual error, repression, stubborn refusal, or any other psychic delusion by which a felt-sense may be deemed inaccurate. As we have shown, this essentialism cannot be maintained within the definition of gender identity except as a kind of mythic knowledge. If there is no truth about the being "male, female, both, or neither" of the person, then what gives self-categorization a priority in determining one's gender over other-categorization? Not a greater access to the truth about one's being—this much is obvious. Nor, as Tate claims, the fact that "all adults who identify as female are united on the dimension of having a[n]...individual consciousness of the self as 'female.'" (Here, Tate confuses a pragmatic goal with a philosophical reason. Confronted with this argument, we would respond: "If one's goals are to expand a social category to include all those with a felt-sense of belonging to it, then one should privilege the "felt-sense of belonging to it" over all other roads to belonging to it. And if one's goals were to restrict the social category to only include those who have been assigned to it, one should do the opposite. But what is still left unanswered is: whether there is a reason for doing one, rather than the other, besides the desire to implement one's particular convictions?") Nor could we argue that self-categorization trumps other-categorization because it is more just, ethical, or less violent than other-categorization, having just shown that all acts of self-categorization rely on acts of other-categorization as conditions for their possibility. What then?

We must acknowledge that we are faced, not so much with a line of reasoning as the assertion of a doctrine. Gender identity trumps sex assignment at birth in the determination of gender because it comes from the self, and within the political theory of

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<sup>43</sup> Max Scheler, "Idols of Self-knowledge" in *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 3–97.

liberalism, embodied in liberal institutions, the individual self is ranked higher than the community, the corporate “we.”

The academic and governmental discourse of gender constructionism makes its way into law and the political discourse on human rights, but it does not, except in extremely exceptional cases, put an end to the practice of sex-assignment at birth. For most people, sex-assignment is taken as an acknowledgement of a natural kind (i.e. “it’s a boy” or “it’s a girl”). Does this mean that most people reject the priority of gender identity over and against sex-assignment at birth in determining identity? Oddly, no. What is taken as an unquestioned priority at birth is not taken as an unquestioned priority at a later date, when a person senses themselves, not according to the construct that has been assigned to them, but according to some other gender construct. Then, and only then, do many people assent to the proposition that this person’s gender identity trumps his sex-assignment at birth in determining his gender. Logically, one would expect this new configuration to “read itself back” into all other persons, so that all people are seen as being properly gendered according to their internal sense, their self-appearance, rather than their sex-assignment at birth, and their continued sex-assignment by others.

Practically speaking, the habit of sex-assignment goes on. Instead of a reconfiguration of the manner in which we determine gender, the academic and governmental discourse has thus far only convinced most people that there are two kinds of peoples, each undergoing a unique method of gender-determination: for those people whose gender identity corresponds with their sex assigned at birth, sex-assignment has priority in determining their gender, while for those whose gender identity contradicts their sex-assignment, gender identity takes priority. How else could we describe the tolerance which carries on, unchanged, in every aspect of active gendering (assigning sex, expecting normative gender expressions, etc.) but adopts a sympathetic stance towards the trans and genderqueer community, except by arguing that the bourgeois liberal is, in fact, a nihilist, one who argues, in essence, “each to their own ontology!” or “constructionism for some, essentialism for others!”

The basic, unthought position of most people in relation to the institutional deployments of the gender identity schema is this: Sex-assignment is destiny, unless you are that kind of being whose gender identity contradicts his sex-assignment, and then it is

not. Within this view, there is nothing inherent about gender identity that gives it priority in determining one's gender, rather, the contradiction itself (between GI and SSA) gives gender identity a priority over sex-assignment in determining one's gender. In practice, the gender identity schema does not simply fail to de-hierarchize gender, it also fails to properly universalize gender identity, creating a specific group of people for whom different ontological "rules" apply. While this approach might satisfy people as social creatures, who seek to tolerate some without changing their basic, essentialist approach to everyone else, it is philosophically untenable. The totalizing, ontological nature of the claim (that gender identity always has greater evidential weight than any other sources by which we determine gender) is largely unaddressed, in favour of a pragmatic, and irrational ghettoizing of this universal claim to non-cisgender populations.

This shows a second hierarchy that develops within the gender identity schematic, beyond the hierarchy that places constructionists (as people with scientific knowledge of gender) over essentialists (as people with mythic knowledge of gender). Tate argues that "being assigned at birth (by someone else)...should not be privileged over other experiences of female gender categorization (e.g. arriving at this self-categorization later in life.)"<sup>44</sup> Conversely, it must be the case that people *should* privilege self-categorization later in life over sex-assignment by others. What, then, is the status of the person whose sex has been assigned at birth, but who has not yet self-categorized as "female" later in life? What of children? What of the mentally disabled who are cared for, and continuously assigned to a sex, by a caretaker? Belonging to a gender category via sex-assignment is a weaker kind of belonging than belonging to it via self-categorization—a kind of placeholder for a full membership that only comes when the developed, able, person self-categorizes. Implicit in the hierarchy of felt-sense over sex-assignment is a hierarchy of strong over weak belonging. Ultimately, this binary must admit of degrees, such that one could belong to the category "female" by sex-assignment except in some small degree of self-categorization—say, by responding to the address "girl" rather than "boy." One might belong by some larger degree of self-categorization—say, by contemplating and believing the truth of the proposition "I am female." One might belong in some still larger degree—by declaring oneself female despite having a different sex-

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<sup>44</sup> Tate, "Considering Lesbian Identity from a Social-Psychological Perspective", 21.

assignment as male, a declaration which would overcome the weak belonging of childhood entirely. If it is the case that self-categorization is more highly privileged than sex-assignment in establishing belonging, then it must also be the case that greater ratios of self: other categorization are more highly privileged than lesser ratios, and thus the members of every gender category would be hierarchically arranged according to their degree of self-categorization over categorization by sex-assignment.

## Chapter II: The meaning of sexual difference in the biblical tradition

The following chapter asks the question: If the gender identity model is not a reasonable, consistent, or egalitarian method of categorizing gender, then what is it? It is the ongoing effort to oppose the Judeo-Christian doctrine “male and female He created them.” In this way, the effort presupposes anthropologies which both pre-date and oppose the anthropology in which the human person is male or female from the beginning. The chapter seeks first, to lay out these alternative anthropologies as they express themselves in ancient myths of creation (II.1-3); second, to describe the Judeo-Christian doctrine as a polemic inveighed against these myths (II.4, II.7-11); and third, to posit what might be the non-polemical meaning of the doctrine within the Judeo-Christian tradition (II.5-6); all in order to make the argument that, like these anthropologies, the gender identity model ends up, against the best intentions of its advocates, resuscitating the antifeminine biases of antiquity.

### 1. Gender identity as a form of philosophical liberalism

The previous chapter has shown that the theoretical and institutional deployment of “gender identity” has ended in a crisis, reinstating the very exclusionary practices that it was deployed to avoid. It reduces all those who believe that gender identity relates to a fact about themselves to a set of mythic believers, while elevating those who understand



gender identity as the felt-sense of a social construction to the level of a scientific class. Greater degrees of self-categorization into gender categories are privileged over lesser degrees of self-categorization in a hierarchy that mirrors liberalism's structural privileging of the individual over community, the adult over the child, the healthy over the ill—in short, of people capable of high degrees of rational self-will over people lacking such capacities.<sup>45</sup> A new “ideal man” appears—not the one who most adequately conforms to the social categories “man” or “woman,” but the enlightened one who bravely faces the fact that gender is “just a social construct” and self-categorizes over and against their sex-assignment at birth, proving their individual autonomy over and against those who, through lack of critical theory or simple slavishness to power, live stodgily, and without subversion, within the structures of power into which they are born. The one who most thoroughly receives their gender assignment without any act self-categorization is unenlightened, held in suspense until a possible future in which they consent-to or reject their sex-assignment at birth.

The situation is lamentable, but easily understood. The liberal model of gender identity fails to achieve a non-hierarchical gender system for the same reason that it captures the Western imagination: it operates according to the principles of philosophical liberalism. This suggests that queer theorists are correct in their broad claim that every social order produces its “gender,” understood as a mode of behaving and thinking that gives significance to the facticity of the differentiated body. For now, and while a complete analysis of the social order we broadly refer to as “liberalism” is not our immediate charge, it must suffice to show the fundamental fittingness of the gender identity model with the presuppositions of philosophical liberalism.

First, by its own self-description, philosophical liberalism is premised on the rejection of traditional forms of authority in exchange for the practice of individual consent.<sup>46</sup> This

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<sup>45</sup> James E. Block, *The Crucible of Consent: American Child Rearing and the Forging of Liberal Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012)

<sup>46</sup> See *ibid.*, 15: “Having appropriated the spirit of willing self-regulation from religious dissent (with the added advantage of enforceability), liberalism would proclaim itself a society based on consent. Institutions were now legitimate only if established by popular mandate and sustained by public conviction. Moreover, citizens were now accorded wide initiative in economic, social, and personal matters consistent with their emerging capacities as agents. But they could also be held accountable for pursuing social ends or goals and for using the appropriate institutional procedures or means to achieve them. These were, after all, the product of their own agreement to sustain the social compact. Consent would thus at once empower citizens and carefully direct them not to autonomy but to collectively circumscribed and regulated choices.”

is the myth of liberal revolution, with its exchange of kings and queens for social contracts established by the consent of the governed; it is the logic by which children are raised within liberal nation states, trained to become masters of their own will, able to freely consent to the institutions of liberal society.<sup>47</sup> Gender identity satisfies the prerequisites of a genuinely liberal institution in that it operates within this same narrative structure: the “gender binary” and “rigid gender roles”<sup>48</sup> are the pre-existing forms of governance that do not rely on the consent of the governed, but begin socially and psychologically governing the thoughts and actions of individuals before they have developed the rational self-will necessary to consent to or revolt against them. The gender identity model is an argument that these “traditional gender” forms are contingent and only govern a people insofar as they consent to them; the emancipatory hope invested in gender identity is part of the broader liberal hope emancipation from all forms of authority that cannot be reducible to an original moment of consent.

Secondly, the liberal model of gender identity is continuous with the idea of the androgynous individual as the true unit of a nation. In his thesis “Androgynous Democracy: American Modernity and the Dual-sexed Body Politic,” Aaron Sheen argues that the image of a being that is neither male nor female, but both or neither, has served as an essential role in the construction of nation states, serving as a symbol of both civic unity and the fundamental sameness of human beings that allows for their homogenous governance.<sup>49</sup> The vision of men and women, at the level of their participation in the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 22: “Thus, as the child in American practice was gradually won to his own regulation, the coercive dimensions of liberal citizen formation were deftly and strategically folded within the growing individuals’ efforts to establish and enforce limits on themselves.”

<sup>48</sup> The format of a moral revolution against an oppressive tradition continues to guide the work of instituting and normalizing the gender identity model within liberal states and empires: “[R]igid gender roles can hamper individual choices and restrict the potential of both men and women” found in Repo, *The Biopolitics of Gender*, 146 who cites the European Commission’s *Strategy for Equality between Women and Men 2010–2015* (Brussels: SEC(2010) 2079/2), 10.

<sup>49</sup> See Aaron Shaheen, *Androgynous Democracy: American Modernity and the Dual-Sexed Body Politic* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2010) Here Shaheen describes the vision of the counterrevolutionary French philosopher Pierre-Simon Ballanche: “Paradoxically, Ballanche argues that reclaiming the Garden of Eden requires a progressive political and social agenda, and a democratic government is therefore instrumental in the attainment of prelapsarian androgyny. For Ballanche, democracy holds the promise that men ‘the most active component of the original androgynous composite can teach the passive female ‘initiates’ to find their own political voice...The American and French Revolutions pinpoint a significant step in reclaiming these mystics’ prelapsarian vision.” (25–26)

State, as fundamentally pre-gendered “citizens,” allowed for the successful, emancipatory introduction of women into the body politic as voters:

“As Thomas Laqueur suggests, the liberal subject that evolved out of John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Adam Smith was neuter in order to represent the universality of God-given natural rights: ‘Social-contract theory at its most abstract postulated a body that, if not sexless, is nevertheless undifferentiated in its desires, interests, or capacity to reason. In striking contrast to the old teleology of the body as male, liberal theory begins with a neuter individual body: sexed but without gender, in principle of no consequence to culture, merely the location of the rational subject that constitutes the person’.”<sup>50</sup>

Gender identity is a contingent, felt-sense of belonging to a social category, the unifying content of which remains nebulous. To have “gender” in and through this model preserves the priority of the genderless or androgynous individual, that pre-gendered *x* which receives, rejects or consents to being “male, female, both or neither” as a metaphysically subsequent modification of the individual person. While classical liberals like Locke would have undoubtedly quailed at the various formulations of contemporary queer theory, this anthropology is well suited to liberal governmentality, which deals with its subjects universally, as right-bearing individuals, rather than “women” as opposed to “men.” As Andrew Willard Jones argues, “[b]ecause real difference between persons is understood as the source of conflict (and so also economic friction), liberalism seeks to map onto all human interaction this sovereign matrix of abstract personae, properties, rights, and contracts, thus eliminating real, personal difference.”<sup>51</sup> Nowhere is this more obviously achieved than in the reduction of a created male-female difference to a metaphysically prior androgyny.

Thirdly, liberalism aims at universality in and through a declaration of agnosticism on otherwise divisive theological and philosophical definitions.<sup>52</sup> Liberalism purports to

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 106

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Willard Jones, “The End of Sovereignty” in *Communio* 45.4 (2018): 408–456, 415.

<sup>52</sup> See David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996)

tolerate all religions by absenting itself from the religious sphere, declaring the public sphere to be “neutral” in respect to the questions of God and man’s relationship to the divine. Within liberal states, “freedom of religion” means that religion is a private choice made by individuals which, by definition, bears no weight in the public sphere. This “agnosticism” is, in fact, a series of positive claims, belief in which is enforced by the diffused power of liberal states: that man is a kind of being whose political nature is irrelevant to his relationship with God; that true religion is found in private choice rather than corporate profession; that social orders ought to be established and preserved within a sphere of rights, duties, and activities that would be what they are whether or not God exists, and so on. Liberalism masks its doctrines concerning man, God, and the world as a lack of any doctrine.<sup>53</sup> This critique mimics a basic critique of queer theory against the male-female binary: positive beliefs about gender are masked as observations of nature, rendering the enforcement of the gender binary easier and more general by making it invisible.<sup>54</sup> In the deployment of “gender identity” as a universal, non-hierarchical categorization of all people within its logic, liberal institutions do not stray from, but reinforce this model. By absenting themselves from ontological claims and attempting to reduce the question of gender to a private, individual felt-sense, they assume and mask a positive claim about the human being, namely, that human beings are fundamentally a pre-gendered *x* available to being gendered by power, whether one’s own or another’s.

Finally, within liberalism, the givenness of gender gives way to the *potential to be gendered* in a prioritization of potency over act which is the hallmark of philosophical liberalism.<sup>55</sup> In liberalism’s revolutionary description of “faith,” known colloquially as “the separation of Church and State,” what we might call man’s creation as an irreducibly religious being gives way to man’s creation as a being with the potential to be religious, a potential which may or may not be activated. Likewise, the founding myths of liberalism reduce the givenness of man’s social nature, his creation as an irreducibly familial and

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<sup>53</sup> For an extended argument on this point, which grounds this liberalizing “move” in the late medieval theological distinction between God’s *potentia ordinata* and His *potentia absoluta*, the latter power taking precedence as an infinite power prior to any particular act or instantiation, see D.C. Schindler’s *The Politics of the Real*, (New Polity Press, 2021), especially pages 41–67.

<sup>54</sup> To refer to a classic example, Judith Butler argues that gender “is the repeated style of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being,” [Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (Routledge Classics, 1990), 45]

<sup>55</sup> Schindler, *Politics*, 3–40.

political being, to the power of an individual to socialize, enter into contracts, establish familial bonds, and otherwise *become* communal. This prioritization of the individual does not “get rid of the family” any more than the prioritization of irreligion and agnosticism “gets rid” of subsequent possibility of becoming religious. Both religion and society can remain good and even necessary for the full flourishing of the fundamentally irreligious and atomized organism. Rather, both are more subtly and profoundly undermined by being relegated to a secondary order, no longer bearing on man as a gift of the original creation without which he would simply not be as man, but reappearing as choices which he may make, and goods which he may (or may not) pursue. Likewise, gender, within liberalism, is redescribed as a secondary achievement of the fundamentally androgynous being, an anthropological inversion which gives rise to the anxiety which characterizes both the insistently “normal” and “natural” gender identities alongside those who find themselves “outside” of a successful “gendering” into these identities. Not, again, that the primacy of the androgyne “gets rid” of gender: historically speaking, the destabilizing effect of liberalism has been to heighten and intensify the personal need to achieve or accomplish gender out of its absence, for what is bracketed as a sure gift of Creator order returns as a construction of the creature, tenuous as all works of human hands.

This is not to argue that our current model of gender identity presumes a temporal “genderlessness” in the human person, a real moment of existential androgyny that is subsequently undone by an act of gendering—the first flood of hormones or the first squeal: “It’s a boy!” If this were the case, my argument would be rebutted by the Butlerian point that there is no body which pre-exists its cultural interpretation; that no subject comes to be except through an entry into an already gendered world; that there is no moment of an actually existing pre-gendered subject.<sup>56</sup> But this would be to confuse temporal priority with ontological priority. Even if there is never a real moment in which

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<sup>56</sup> Anticipating chapter 5, we quote Judith Butler again, who argues “it is necessary...to cure ourselves of the illusion of a body beyond the law. If subversion is possible, it will be subversion from within the terms of the law...The culturally constructed body will be liberated, neither to its ‘natural’ past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities” [*Gender Trouble*, 126]. Butler’s bracketing of any natural, original body and the subsequent reduction of the possibilities of gender, whether conservative or subversive, to the mundane sphere of human power, is an assertion made throughout her work. As in the various limitations of liberalism, this limitation is made *a priori*, a foundational first principle that all that can be known is the human construction of a thing, never a natural thing.

the human person is not being gendered, it is nevertheless the case that this being-gendered describes a fundamentally genderless unit being assigned to a gender category, whether by itself or others. Whether by the vicissitudes of power, the constructing gaze of the Other, or the exigencies of the castration complex, this  $x$  may always and already be assigned to a gender category, but it is always an assignation of an  $x$  which, without this assignation, would not be gendered at all. Within this anthropology, gender is a contingent attribute of the human person, even if there is no instance of a human person who is not gendered.

## 2. All models of gender are theological anthropologies

This, then, is the anthropology that is both presumed and masked by our institutional definitions: human beings are fundamentally androgynous. This vision of sex and gender as the constructed appearance of a fundamentally sexless and genderless being is not new. As we will see, it is already present in humanity's myths of primal androgyny, which would describe all sexual difference neither as natural, belonging to the order of creation, or anything essential to the human person, but an accidental and contingent modification of the androgynous subject by a (usually malicious) power. If this is the case, then the Jewish and Christian anthropology which asserts the theological opposite, that sexual differentiation is "from the beginning" (Matthew 19:8)<sup>57</sup> and very good, becomes directly relevant. This assertion, that there is nothing in the human person metaphysically prior to their creation as sexually differentiated, is not a limitation of which gender identities one may construct. Rather, the doctrine appears as a counter-assertion. It reveals the presumption of primal androgyny precisely as a presumption, not a natural fact; an assertion as "scriptural" as the biblical doctrine; a claim made in faith, opposing the doctrine "male and female He created them," not as a better explanation of the facts, but as a rival claim, asserted with what power it can muster.

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<sup>57</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Revised Standard Version Second Catholic Edition of the Bible.

In what follows, my aim is not to show a unified Jewish and Christian tradition articulating a single argument concerning the nature of sexual differentiation. Rather, I aim to reveal an argument concerning the meaning of sexual differentiation, the premises of which are latent and scattered throughout the tradition of biblical exegesis, especially of the book of Genesis. This argument is expressed in force by some, in part by others, and scarcely alluded to by most, and so my effort is to express, not what has been expressed, but what *can be coherently expressed* using the insights of the Jewish and Christian doctors—in what some might call a *ressourcement* or a creative retrieval. Ultimately, I am not interested in whether a particular exegete would agree with my conclusions in their entirety. I am content that their particular intuition, interpretation or insight gives credence to a particular premise within the entire argumentative edifice of this chapter—even if they would not recognize that entire edifice as the fruit of their own exegetical labours. In some respects, this simply *must* be the case whenever one considers both Jewish and Christian exegetical voices as contributions to one argument.

I am not making an argument that relies, for its truth, on the historical proximity of the exegetes to their source material. This archaeological prejudice would appear particularly absurd in the case of Hebrew Bible, which is itself a text composed of the exegesis of thinkers diversely divorced from their source material—namely, the Jewish oral tradition. Rather, my argument relies on the plausibility of the exegetical interpretations themselves; on whether they make sense out of the entirety of the Genesis text and Bible as whole, or only make sense out of an isolated proof-text; on whether they cohere with the other voices of the exegetical tradition or stick out like sore thumbs.

My turn to a theological explanation of sexual differentiation is motivated, in the first place, by liberalism's implicit theological turn, which asserts *a priori* that sex and gender are secondary accomplishments of a primarily sexless and genderless anthropoid, and thus aligns itself, not with deductive or inductive reasoning, but with a sort of founding myth. As will become apparent, I do not think this move is foolish in the slightest. Rather, I think that sexual differentiation is *properly* a matter for theological thought. Investigation into sexual difference cannot avoid asking what is irreducibly given as true about man and woman, given as a foundational assumption and a first principle, prior to the deductive and inductive work of reason, as that which is given to be reasoned upon.

This is not to say that philosophy has nothing to say about sexual differentiation. It is, rather, to admit that philosophy cannot supply itself with its materials—its first principles—but inevitably philosophizes about what appears as given.

### 3. Sexual difference in the myths

In Hesiod's account of the myth of Pandora, the men of the Golden Age live with the gods, participating in their immortality. Then tolerance turns to envy, and the two fight over the distribution of the sacrificial meal. Prometheus, humanity's hero, hides worthless bones under choice fats, tricking the gods into accepting the inferior helping. In response, Zeus constructs a trick of his own, a beautiful woman who is, in truth, a poison for man; "an evil thing in which they may all be glad of heart while they embrace their own destruction."<sup>58</sup> The rest is well known. Mankind accepts her into his home and is thus inaugurated into an age of reproduction, suffering, and death. The Golden Age comes to a close.<sup>59</sup>

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu is created from clay to live an idyllic existence as an animal among animals.<sup>60</sup> Then a hunter, furious that Enkidu "[helps] the game (and) the animals of the steppe to escape"<sup>61</sup> his traps, pursues the help of a female prostitute, demanding that she "treat the savage-man to the skills of a woman."<sup>62</sup> She seduces Enkidu, sleeps with him for seven days and nights, and so strips away his animal existence: "After he was sated with her charms / He set his face toward his game. (But)

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<sup>58</sup> Hesiod, *Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycle, Homeric*. Translated by Evelyn-White, H G. Loeb Classical Library Volume 57. (London: William Heinemann, 1914) v. 42

<sup>59</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Pandora, la premiere femme* (Bayard 2006) Vernant discusses the way in which woman brings on the age of death and reproduction. Both amount to the same phenomenon: because man now dies, he must reproduce.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Hiedel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) For analysis of the heroic structure of the Sumerian myth, especially concerning the blurred manner in which Enkidu seems to be both an animal and a god before his encounter with the woman, see Wolff, Hope Nash. "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Heroic Life." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 89, no. 2 (1969), 394.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* I.iii.11.

<sup>62</sup> Tzvi Abusch, *Male and Female in the Epic of Gilgamesh: Encounters, Literary History, and Interpretation* (Winona Lake: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 148.



when the gazelles saw him, Enkidu, they ran away...”<sup>63</sup> The woman explains that he has been given intelligence, wisdom, and that he is now like a god. But Enkidu is made a mortal god, one who must die, and for this he curses the woman: “The place of thy festivities may the drunken defile with vomit.”<sup>64</sup> A god convinces Enkidu to allay his curse with some gratitude for being introduced to civilization, but the message is clear: woman is a curse for man.

In the Babylonian epic *Atrahasis*, man’s procreation and multiplication burdens the land and wearies the gods, and so, after destroying them in a great flood, humanity is re-created to include “among the peoples women who bear and women who do not bear.”<sup>65</sup> Women are fashioned to ensure that man no longer threatens the gods. In these myths, and myths like them, sexual differentiation represents a first fall of man. Plato’s *Symposium* relays Aristophanes’ myth of primal androgyny, a myth which needs little recollecting here, so long as we recall that Zeus splits the original humans into two sexes precisely because he fears that, in their androgynous state, mankind will be able to scale Olympus and overpower the gods. To divide man is to weaken him, ensuring that he does not encroach on celestial realms.

Jewish rabbis of talmudic times take up Plato’s story to make it a myth of their own:

A midrashic tradition, extant in several variants, cleverly exploits Psalm 139:5, read as, ‘You have shaped back and front,’ and Genesis 2:21, ‘And the Lord God...took one of his sides,’ to form a coherent story that, in its fullest version, clearly betrays the influence of Plato: “R. Samuel bar Nahman said, When the Holy One, blessed be he, created the first man, he created him *diprosopon*. Then he split him and made two bodies, on each side, and turned them about. Thus it is written, ‘He took one of his sides.’” But even the simpler versions betray by their

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> “The Epic of Gilgamesh: Additions to Tablets V-VIII and X” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* ed. James B. Pritchard (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1950), 24

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Jeremy Cohen, *Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It* (Syracuse: Cornell University Press, 1989), 22, 42, and 144.

interchangeable use of loan-words *androgynos* and *disprosopos* (or more often *du' prosopa*) their Platonic paternity.<sup>66</sup>

Within Greek mythology, this weakening split is symbolized by the woman more than the man, and thus Ancient Greek thought was concerned with a certain overcoming of the woman, or at least a continual suppression of her role as a source and participant of the *polis*. The Athenians developed a founding myth in which Hephaestus, lusted after the virgin goddess Athena, who escaped his clutches. “His seed fell on the ground which became fertilized and later gave birth to Erichthonius,” the first ruler of Athens.<sup>67</sup> This allowed for the city of Athens to claim its origin, not in sexual division, but in a womanless form of reproduction, a fact that Vigdis Soleim argues “confirms political reality, for there are only male citizens.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Meeks, Wayne A. “The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity.” *History of Religions* 13, no. 3 (1974), 185-6. Because this myth comes from a Jewish source, it might be seen as a mark against my most basic thesis, namely, that the biblical story of the creation of the woman is a polemic over and against the tendency of the myths to posit man as an androgyne. Several points must be made. First, and as Meeks mentions, the midrash is obviously in dialogue with Plato’s *Symposium*. From the perspective of the biblical text, this rabbinic tradition seems to depart from the Genesis text and its interpretation within the Bible itself (see, for instance, Tobit 8:6) for the sake of syncretism. On the other hand, as Daniel Boyarin has argued, the rabbis can be seen as taking up the myth for the usual purpose of altering it: the rabbis noticeably do not include any description of the androgyne as more divine than the first man or woman, nor do they describe sexual difference as a kind of weakening, rather, in line with the fundamental thrust of Genesis, they describe the primal androgyne as a merely physical conjoining without divine attributes and the splitting of the androgyne as a banal event, without loss. [Boyarin, Daniel. “‘This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel’: Circumcision and the Erotic Life of God and Israel.” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (1992), 480–483]. Finally, the rabbis are not in agreement here: “one said: Adam was created with a tail [*zanav*], which God removed from him and from which He created Eve,” [Talmud, Eruvin 18a:16] which would no more signify a prior, androgynous Adam than God creating Eve from the rib of man. Indeed, some take tail to simply mean “rib”: “It means tail, which he explains to mean that the *tzela* was an appendage, i.e., one of the ribs in Adam’s chest.” [Berakot 61a:17] The Talmud cites others as arguing that the reason for a distinction between God creating the singular Man and the plural male and female is not because he created an androgyne but, “at first, the thought entered God’s mind to create two, and ultimately, only one was actually created.” [Eruvin 18a:16] In the final analysis, the rabbinic myth of an androgynous Adam is a (dubious) attempt to use the Greek androgynous anthropology against itself and in support of a heterosexual, binary description of the human person—that is to say, in defense of the biblical doctrine “male and female He created them.” This earthly, somewhat comic story must be distinguished from the use made of it in later gnostic and kabbalistic sources, as will be discussed in III.2.

<sup>67</sup> Vigdis Soleim, “A Greek Dream—to Render Women Superfluous” in *Social Science Information* 25.1 (1986), 68.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

The Lezidi people still hold, in what appears to be a syncretic account of ancient and gnostic myths, that they originated unlike the rest of humanity, from Adam's seed alone. Eszter Spät recounts the oral tradition:

After the birth of their first children, there arose a dispute between Adam and Eve as to who was the real parent of the children. While Eve claimed that she, from whose womb they had sprung, was the real author, Adam insisted it was the father from whom the power of life came. To prove their point, they decided to hold a contest. Both of them put their seeds into separate jars, which they sealed. After nine months they opened the jars: Eve's jar was full of worms and maggots, while in the jar of Adam they found a beautiful boy, who was then named Shahis bin Jarr (the Witness of the jar)[...] The Yezidis[...]all spring from this Shahid of miraculous birth, while the rest of mankind are the offspring of the common children of Adam and Eve."<sup>69</sup>

The Zoroastrian myth of the first couple is similar: "According to the Bundahišn, the world was created by Ohrmazd ("Lord Wisdom"), the Zoroastrian supreme deity, as a battleground where Good and Evil clash for a predetermined time period, and ultimately Good prevails. One of the good creations Ohrmazd created was Gayōmard ("mortal life"), the protoplasmic human who ultimately was defeated by the forces of evil."<sup>70</sup> Like Hephaestus, Gayomard's seed falls on the ground, and "in forty years, with the shape of a one-stemmed Rivas-plant, and the fifteen years of its fifteen leaves, Matro and Matroya grew up from the earth in such a manner that their arms rested, behind on their shoulders, and one joined to the other they were connected together and both alike. And the waists of both of them were brought close and so connected together that it was not clear which is the male and which the female."<sup>71</sup> A male figure is the origin of the original,

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<sup>69</sup> Spät, Eszter. "Shahid Bin Jarr, Forefather of the Yezidis and the Gnostic Seed of Seth." *Iran & the Caucasus* 6:1/2 (2002), 27–8.

<sup>70</sup> Secunda, Shai. "The Construction, Composition and Idealization of the Female Body in Rabbinic Literature and Parallel Iranian Texts: Three Excursuses." *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 23 (2012), 64.

<sup>71</sup> The Bundahisn ("Creation") Or Knowledge From the Zand, in *Sacred Books of the East, Volume 5: Pahlavi Texts Part 1*: (Oxford University Press, 1897), 15.1. Accessed 2022: <http://www.avesta.org/mp/bundahis.pdf>

androgynous plant-couple. It is not possible to detail which myths, from which nations, and in which form, directly influenced the authors of the Genesis text. Given the parallels in the story of the Great Flood, it has long been obvious that the authors were familiar with the source material for Atrahasis and Gilgamesh in one of their many forms.<sup>72</sup> It has been similarly shown that Genesis attacks the Egyptian myths.<sup>73</sup> For our purposes, it suffices to point out that two major anthropological claims were being circulated in the myths of the Ancient Near East, and that it is highly likely that Genesis, as a polemical text, was concerned with them: That man was once God, a god, or at least a threat to the gods, and that the division of man into male and female constitutes a fall from this prior, god-like state.

#### 4. Genesis as a demythologizing text

The difficulty the Genesis text takes with what Hans Urs von Balthasar calls “the antifeminine bias of antiquity,”<sup>74</sup> the mythic complaint against the woman who mortalizes and hominizes the once-divine man, lies in its declaration that man is not divine, nor was he ever, nor does he compete with God for divine status. Man is a creature, and this is “very good.” This is evidenced by his place at the end of the first account of creation, a demythologizing text in which those things the Israelites’ neighbours worshipped as gods are declared to be creatures. The sun-gods and moon-gods of the Hittites,<sup>75</sup> the earth-goddess and the sky-god of the Sumerians,<sup>76</sup> the animal

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<sup>72</sup> “It appears that the Genesis cosmology represents not only a “complete break” with the ancient Near Eastern mythological cosmologies but represents a parting of the spiritual ways brought about by a conscious and deliberate antimythical polemic which meant an undermining of the prevailing mythological cosmologies.” Gerhard F. Hasel, “The polemic nature of the Genesis Cosmology” in *Evangelical Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1974), 102.

<sup>73</sup> Josef Ratzinger, *‘In the Beginning’: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995). Cf. Gordon H. Johnston, “Genesis 1 and Ancient Egyptian Creation Myths” in *BIBLIOTHECA SACRA* 165.2 (2008): 178–94

<sup>74</sup> Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1986), 197

<sup>75</sup> O.R. Gurney, *The Hittites* (London: Penguin Archeology, 1952), 130

<sup>76</sup> J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 27

and plant idols of the Egyptians<sup>77</sup>—all are duly demoted as works of the One True God.<sup>78</sup> The Genesis account demythologizes creation by critiquing the would-be self-sufficiency of any and every created good, and it is for this reason that subsequent, biblical critiques of idolatry refer back to it.<sup>79</sup> For it is this quality of “existing in itself” that most clearly appears divine to man, who has existence from another, and loses it in the end.<sup>80</sup> God is the one who depends on nothing else for his being, in whom, as the medieval scholastics put it, essence and existence are one. A thing that lacks this sufficiency is not God.

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<sup>77</sup> The Christian critique of idolatry reserves its highest disdain for this mistake: “As the Egyptians, then, were more stupid than the rest of the nations, these and such like gods did not suffice for them. Nay, but they even apply the name of gods to animals in which there is no soul at all. For some of them worship the sheep and others the calf; and some the pig and others the shad fish; and some the crocodile and the hawk and the fish and the ibis and the vulture and the eagle and the raven. Some of them worship the cat, and others the turbot-fish, some the dog, some the adder, and some the asp, and others the lion; and others the garlic and onions and thorns, and others the tiger and other such things...Great then is the error into which the Egyptians wandered;—greater, indeed, than that of any people which is upon the face of the earth,” [Aristides of Athens, “The Apology of Aristides,” in *The Gospel of Peter, the Diatessaron of Tatian, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Visio Pauli, the Apocalypses of the Virgil and Sedrach, the Testament of Abraham, the Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, the Narrative of Zosimus, the Apology of Aristides, the Epistles of Clement (Complete Text), Origen’s Commentary on John, Books I–X, and Commentary on Matthew, Books I, II, and X–XIV*, ed. Allan Menzies, trans. D. M. Kay, vol. 9, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1897), 274]

<sup>78</sup> This work of demythologization is taken up throughout the Scriptures and continues within the Christian tradition: “The divine law, then, not only forbids the worshipping of idols, but also of the heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon, or the other stars; yea, not heaven, nor earth, nor the sea, nor fountains, nor rivers, must be worshipped, but we must serve in holiness of heart and sincerity of purpose only the living and true God, who also is Maker of the universe.” [Theophilus of Antioch, “Theophilus to Autolycus,” in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 108]

<sup>79</sup> Consider, for instance, Deuteronomy 4:15–24, which condemns the act of idolatry with reference to the hierarchy of Creation, notably including a warning against imagining the Lord could be male or female: “Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And beware lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them and serve them, things which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.” Cyril of Alexandria endorses the idea that the Scriptures are written polemically: “The fact that the people of Israel were filled with every extreme folly, and went to an excess of miserable thinking in honoring molten figures and works of craftsmen and bypassing the one who is God in truth and by nature, he alleges by saying that he is the one who *establishes the heaven, fixes the earth* in place, and is maker of the stars.” [Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 115, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 238]

<sup>80</sup> STh., I q.2 a.3 resp.: “Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.”; Also, see STh., I q.11 a.4.

Genesis pierces the mythological claim to creaturely sufficiency with a threefold thrust, by describing all things as *created*, and then as *separated*, and then as *named*.

That being-created annuls the claim to divinity is obvious—if a thing depends on another for its existence, it cannot claim the sufficiency that characterizes deity.<sup>81</sup>

Being-separated achieves for the intelligible essence of a thing what creation achieves for its existence—a radical dependence. “God separated the light from the darkness,” (1:4) the earth from the sky, and the seas from the land, the light that rules the day from the lights that rule the night.<sup>82</sup> With each separation, it becomes clear that *what something is* is only constituted and known insofar as it is embedded in a total world; in relation to something else; rubbing against its opposite, its complement, its negation, and its neighbour. If there was only sea, what would the sea be? Rather, the sea is radically dependent on the dry lands in order to be demarcated and defined. Only God can be “God alone,” requiring no exterior relation for his intelligibility, God “perfectly comprehending Himself,” as Thomas Aquinas puts it.<sup>83</sup>

Being-named ensures that what is created and separated is not then discarded by God but belongs to him, subsists through his sustenance, and remains under his providential care. The words of Isaiah serve as a template: “I have called you by name; you are mine.” (43:1) That God “called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas” (9:10) expresses his continued dominion over them—they are his, and thus so not have the independent status of divinity.<sup>84</sup> The Christian apologist Aristides wrote, “He has no name, for everything which has a name is kindred to things created.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> “And those who believed of the men of the past, that some of them were gods, they too were much mistaken...He has a beginning and an end, and he is born and dies. But God, as I said, has none of these things in his nature, but is uncreated and imperishable. And hence it is not possible that we should set up man to be of the nature of God,” [Aristides, *The Apology of Aristides*, 268]

<sup>82</sup> As we will argue, the recognition that that which gives way to something else cannot be divine is apparent in the medieval *Sefer HaYashar*, Book of Genesis, Noach, 13: “And Abram saw the change [in the sun and the moon] and he wondered greatly at the things which the Lord had created in the earth. And Abram thought a great deal over what he had seen, and he finally concluded, saying unto himself: Now, neither of these can be God; but all of them are servants of the one invisible God, who is the ruler of heaven and of earth, of the sun, and of the moon, and of the stars also.”

<sup>83</sup> STh., I q. 14 a. 3

<sup>84</sup> Human naming, while it participates in divine naming, does not necessarily constitute an act of domination, or at least not in an unequivocal sense. Throughout the Scriptures, human naming usually signifies that “an essence which God has already fashioned is recognized by [...] man and celebrated in its meaning,” George W. Ramsey, “Is Name-Giving an Act of Domination in Genesis 2:23 and Elsewhere?” in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50.1 (1988): 35

<sup>85</sup> Aristides, *Apology*, 264

This “threefold thrust” theory seems to run into a difficulty with the creation of living things, which interrupt the steady rhythm of “let there be” followed by “God separated” and “God called.” The creation of vegetation, sea creatures and land animals receives no word of separation, and as for appellation—God produces neither bestiary nor herbarium. But separation and appellation do not characterize the first account of Creation *as such*—as if its purpose was simply to construct a cosmology of well-named and harmonious opposites. Rather, separation is a part of the goodness of a particular creature in part because it saves it from the myths, from divinization, i.e. from the idolatry of men. In living things it is not merely separation, but sexual separation for the sake of *reproduction*, which works to ensure that a creature will be seen as a creature, and not as a god. Living things do not exist as self-sufficient, immortal beings, but “according to their kind.” Plants and animals are created as reproductions of a kind which only continues to exist insofar individuals of that kind continue to “be fruitful and multiply.”<sup>86</sup> It would be ludicrous to ascribe divine sufficiency to a being which must reproduce itself in order to persist. This was understood in the Classical world, as Jean-Pierre Vernant has shown,<sup>87</sup> and it is the argument levelled against the Roman gods by a number of the Christian Fathers: Arnobius boasts of “the opinions of wise men, who cannot restrain their laughter when they hear distinctions of sex attributed to the immortal gods.”<sup>88</sup> Lactantius asks:

If the gods, therefore, are immortal and eternal, what need have they of another sex? That they might have offspring, I suppose. What need have they, even, of offspring, since those who are always going to be do not need any succession? For, certainly in men and in other animals, the diversity of sex and coition and generation have no reason other than that all species of living things (since by the condition of

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<sup>86</sup> See Part II.5, below, for a detailed description of the metaphysical nature of plant and animal reproduction.

<sup>87</sup> Vernant, *Pandora*

<sup>88</sup> “I ask of each man whether he himself believes in his own mind, and persuades himself that the race of the gods is *so* distinguished that they are male and female, and have been formed with members arranged suitably for the begetting of young?” [Arnobius, “The Seven Books of Arnobius against the Heathen (Adversus Gentes),” in *Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Hamilton Bryce and Hugh Campbell, vol. 6, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 525]

their mortality they will perish) may be preserved by succession in turn. But for God, who is everlasting, neither sex nor succession is necessary.

Someone will say that this is so ‘in order that He may have ministers or those over whom He may exert sway!’ *But what need is there of the female sex*, since God, who is omnipotent, as He is called, can procreate sons without the employment and operation of woman?<sup>89</sup>

And so, from the presence of female gods, Lactantius concludes that “[n]o one is so lacking in awareness but that he knows that those whom the unskilled and foolish consider and adore as gods were mortals.”<sup>90</sup> The command to reproduce effectively safeguards living things from idolatry and reveals the mortality of any would-be god.

As for the naming of living things, it is given to mankind to complete, so that he might actively participate in the Creation.<sup>91</sup> For now it is sufficient to note that, as reproduction saves living things from idolatrous eyes, so man’s appellation of living things renders his worship of them absurd. As John Chrysostom writes, summarizing a long-standing

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<sup>89</sup> Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, Bk. I, Chapter 8, in *The Fathers of the Church* Volume 49, (CUA Press, 1964), 39. See also Hilary of Poitiers, who does not merely point to the lack of any need for reproduction, but the inability for that which is self-existent to have any being “superior to itself,” as a female god would be superior to a male god in respect of her femaleness: “It could not hold that neglect of a world created by Himself was worthily to be attributed to God, or that deities endowed with sex, and lines of begetters and begotten, were compatible with the pure and mighty nature of the Godhead. Nay, rather, it was sure that that which is Divine and eternal must be one without distinction of sex, for that which is self-existent cannot have left outside itself anything superior to itself.” [Hilary of Poitiers, “On the Trinity,” in *St. Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. E. W. Watson et al., vol. 9a, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1899), 41]

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. See also Augustine, who seems to suggest the same point in his *City of God*: “Who can number the deities to whom the guardianship of Rome was entrusted? Indigenous and imported, both of heaven, earth, hell, seas, fountains, rivers; and, as Varro says, gods certain and uncertain, male and female: for, as among animals, so among all kinds of gods are there these distinctions.” [Augustine of Hippo, “The City of God” in *St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 48]

<sup>91</sup> “For someone to give a few names to be remembered is not a great thing, but it is too large and too great a thing for any human being to bestow thousands of names in a single moment, without repeating any. It is possible for someone to bestow many names on many kinds of insects, animals, beasts, and birds, but never to name one kind by the name of another belongs either to God or to someone to whom it has been granted by God...If God did indeed give Adam ruling authority, make him a participant in creation, clothe him with glory, and give him a garden, what else should God have done that Adam heed the commandment but did not do?” [Ephrem the Syrian, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, ed. Thomas P. Halton and Kathleen McVey, trans. Edward G. Mathews Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, vol. 91, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 103–104]



tradition, “with human beings [naming] constitutes a symbol of dominion—when they buy slaves, to change their name. Hence God provides that Adam too, as their master, should give names to the brute beasts.”<sup>92</sup> How could the object of man’s dominion become his dominator? “[F]or he is better than the objects he worships” (Wisdom 15:17).

It is fitting that the first account of creation ends with man. Men have a special proclivity to “regard as an object of worship the one whom shortly before they had honoured as a man.” (14:20) To the extent that it lauds man’s special place in Creation, Genesis also views man as thrown into the greatest danger of idolatry, by himself and by others—a well-placed worry given the idolatry in which the authors of Genesis were embedded, and given their own nuanced claims that man is “in the image” and “after the likeness” of God. So the demythologization process commences: That mankind is created is clear—“God created man.” (1:27) That mankind is named is made clear later on—“he blessed them and named them Man when they were created.” (5:2) That mankind is to reproduce is also clear—“be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth,” (1:28) God says. But they are not simply to reproduce according to a singular kind, rather, they are also separated—“male and female he created them.” (1:27)

Why is it the case that only man is created “male and female” in the first creation account? Are not the “cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth” all male and female? Yet they are described as being created “according to their kinds.” (1:24) This suggests that the authors of Genesis did not make a strict equation between animal sexual differentiation and human sexual differentiation, a suggestion which is clarified as a claim within the second creation account, traditionally considered as a detail of the first.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Chrysostom, J., *Homilies on Genesis 1-17*, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 74, in *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1986) 190

<sup>93</sup> “The real sense of the verse is: here it tells you that both of them were created on the sixth day, but it does not explain to you how that creation took place; this it explains to you in another place [i.e. the second creation account].” Rashi, “Rashi on Genesis 2:18.” In *Pentateuch with Rashi’s commentary*, translated and edited by M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, 1929, Public Domain. Retrieved September 29, 2021, from [www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Genesis.2.18](http://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.2.18)

## 5. Human sexual difference as the intellectual form of the body

While the rest of this work will be concerned with sexual difference as a divine technique of demythologization, what follows is an explanation, not of what the male-female binary prevents, but of what it allows. This is necessary to maintain an orthodox view of Creation: the reduction of any act of creation to a means of preventing evil (in this case, the evil of idolatry) would impute a certain necessity to evil; naming it fundamental to Creation; contradicting the divine declaration that Creation is “very good.” Rather, that which protects from sin and prevents the loss of good must be understood as doing so secondarily and contingently, in and through a primary purpose or *telos* for the good, for “wickedness is nothing else than the withdrawal of goodness, just as darkness is nothing else than the withdrawal of light.”<sup>94</sup> Adam is not given hands to keep occupied and so distracted from temptation; he is given hands to till and keep a Garden, a secondary result of which is a devoted occupation which protects from temptation.<sup>95</sup> Likewise, sexual difference cannot be given merely to aid man against the temptation to imagine he is “like God,” rather, it must have its purpose in the attainment of some good, one which may be subsequently understood to protect against the idolatry of the myths.

It is important to note that this section does not attempt to tackle the difficult question of the metaphysical status of sexual difference, a question which, to my mind, is still an

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<sup>94</sup> John Damascene, “An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,” in *St. Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, vol. 9b, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1899), 43.

<sup>95</sup> Ambrose gives this argument concisely in his interpretation of Adam’s tilling and keeping of the Garden of Eden: “The act of tilling and the act of keeping are one and the same thing. In tilling there is a certain exercise of man’s virtue, while in keeping it is understood that the work is accomplished, for protection implies something completed” [Ambrose of Milan, “Paradise,” *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage, vol. 42, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1961), 302–303]. Ambrose calls tilling and keeping one, unified act, in which “keeping” protects the good only because “tilling” attains it.

open debate between those who hold that it is from the soul<sup>96</sup>, or from the body<sup>97</sup>, or as an accident, or as an essential accident,<sup>98</sup> or as belonging to the substance, and if so in what sense.<sup>99</sup> I hope that the following description of sexual difference as being fundamentally for the intellectual operation will add to this discussion, but it begins with a fundamentally different question: not, “what is the place of gender within the metaphysical structure of the human person?” but “why would God make the human person man and woman?”

Likewise, though this section relies on St. Thomas Aquinas’ interpretation of the Genesis text, it is not the case that Aquinas makes the same argument: the various insights of Aquinas serve as the premises of an argument that he did not himself address. Though Aquinas does conclude that the distinction of male and female forces is for the sake of the intellectual operation, it is unclear in what sense he means this, and to ascribe to him the idea that sexual difference is a necessary condition for rationality in the human animal would be to ascribe too much.

The Genesis text is sparse and intimidates anyone who would derive the meaning of “man” and “woman” without recourse to the history of its interpretation. Nevertheless, the text alone does indicate this much: that man is not sexually differentiated as the other animals are sexually differentiated. Only man is described as “male and female” in the first creation account of Genesis, as opposed to the “cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth,” which are created “according to their kinds.” (Gen. 1:24)<sup>100</sup> Thomas Aquinas interprets this as signifying an essential difference between the two: “animals

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<sup>96</sup> See, especially Finley, John. “The Metaphysics of Gender: A Thomistic Approach” *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, 79:4 (October 2015): 585-614

<sup>97</sup> See especially Newton, William. “Why Aquinas’s Metaphysics of Gender Is Fundamentally Correct: A Response to John Finley.” *Linacre Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (May 2020): 198–205

<sup>98</sup> See especially Fortin, Timothy. “Finding Form: Defining Human Sexual Difference,” *Nova et Vetera*, Spring 2017 (Vol. 15, No. 2) 397-431

<sup>99</sup> The work of D.C. Schindler has remained, as far as I can tell, unaddressed. See Schindler, D.C. “The Exclusivity of Gender and the Gift of Motherhood” *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 46:2 (Summer 2019): 237-267 and Schindler, D.C., “Perfect Difference: Gender and the Analogy of Being,” *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 43:2 (Summer 2016): 194-231.

<sup>100</sup> It is not until the account of the Flood that the other animals are described as “male and female,” a fact accounted for, not by the elevation of the animals to the unique differentiation of man, but by a descent of man to the status of the animal in and through his sin, as we will argue in Part III.2.

and plants may be said to be produced according to their kinds, to signify their remoteness from the Divine image and likeness, whereas man is said to be made to the image and likeness of God.”<sup>101</sup>

Augustine argues that “[m]an’s excellence consists in the fact that God made him to His own image by giving him an intellectual soul, which raises him above the beasts of the field.”<sup>102</sup> The “image of God,” throughout the Christian tradition, has been consistently placed in man’s intellect, his mind: “We perceive then that we have a certain part, in which is “the image of God;” viz. the mind and reason...It is this same that we call “understanding;” which “understanding,” indeed, is wanting to the brutes.”<sup>103</sup> Given this tradition, we might expect Aquinas to argue that it is the lack of “mind” within the beasts which disqualifies them from being made in the “Divine image.” Why, then, does he argue that remoteness from the divine image is signified in and through being made according to kind?

For Aquinas, the being made according to kind expresses a certain subordination of the individual animal to that kind, or “species.” The individual animal is not everlasting: “[I]n things corruptible none is everlasting and permanent except the species, it follows that the chief purpose of nature is the good of the species.”<sup>104</sup> It would be more proper, from this perspective, to think of other animals as being “instances” of their species. Individual cats do not exist for themselves; they exist for the preservation and continuation of this species, “cat,” in the world. The species, for its part, is that divine idea of “cat” which remains mysterious to us, but which is incarnated and revealed in every instance of cat—a kind of window into the mind of the Creator. Because they enjoy this mode of being as non-identical instances of a divine idea, individual animals do not do anything new. Rather, not merely in copulation, but in the motions and manner of their existence as well, animals *reproduce*: “all animals of the same species operate in the

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<sup>101</sup> STh., I q. 72 a. 1 a. 2

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in STh., I q. 93 a. 2

<sup>103</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “Expositions on the Book of Psalms,” in *Saint Augustin: Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 8, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 140. There is an abundance agreement on this point, and it will suffice to gesture towards it: “For having been endowed with reason and mind, and free-will after the image of God, he was fitly entrusted with dominion over earthly things by the common Creator and Master of all...” [John Damascene, *Exposition*, 43]

<sup>104</sup> STh., I q. 98 a. 1

same way, as though moved by nature and not as operating by art; every swallow builds its nest, and every spider spins its web, in the same manner.”<sup>105</sup>

This manner of existence is improper to the possession of an intellectual soul. “The souls of brutes are not self-subsistent, whereas the human soul is; so that the souls of brutes are corrupted, when their bodies are corrupted; while the human soul could not be corrupted unless it were corrupted per se.”<sup>106</sup> The intellectual soul, naturally ordered towards the intellectual vision of the eternal, incorruptible God, neither corrupts nor passes away. It cannot be said that “the chief purpose of nature is the good of the [human] species,” because the individual human being himself is “everlasting and permanent.”

In fact, while the animal species is a divine idea, instantiated in several individuals, the human species is only a “species” in an analogical sense. God does not create the human species and then allow it to reproduce itself through time. God creates each, unique, particular human being, in every act of human generation. The creation of Adam and Eve is not simply a recounting of what happened then. It is also a revelation of what occurs in every act of human generation, in which God takes determinate matter and breathes into it “the breath of life.” As Aquinas says, “the rational soul can be made only by creation; which, however, is not true of other forms.”<sup>107</sup> God creates every rational soul *ex nihilo*, and this soul in-forms the matter that human procreation arranges. This is simply not the case with the other animals, and “[t]his truth is implied in sacred Scripture, for in speaking of other animals, it ascribes their souls to other causes, as in the text: ‘Let the waters bring forth the creeping creatures with a living soul’ (Gen. 1:20), and so it is with other things.”<sup>108</sup> The unity of individual animals in their species, insofar as they are instances and reproductions of a divine idea, is not the same as the unity of the human “species,” wherein each individual is uniquely created in the image of God, with an intellectual soul communicating its form to his individual body. In fact, the human species is more properly called the human family, for it is the society of uniquely created human beings, joined by their common end: the intellectual vision of God.

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<sup>105</sup> Summa Contra Gentiles (SCG) II Ch. 82 par. 2 This is also why, for Aquinas, animals have “no desire for perpetual existence, but only a desire for perpetuation of their several species.”

<sup>106</sup> STh., I q.75 a.6 resp.

<sup>107</sup> STh., I q.90 a.2 resp.; see also STh., I q.118 a.1

<sup>108</sup> SCG II Ch. 87 par. 7

Aquinas describes the story of Eve's creation from the rib of Adam as a revelation of this unique difference. In an objection to whether the woman ought to have been made from the man, Aquinas postulates: "things of the same species are of the same matter. But male and female are of the same species. Therefore, as man was made of the slime of the earth, so woman should have been made of the same, and not from man."<sup>109</sup> This argument hinges on the Scriptural tradition that male and female animals are produced from a common, determinate matter. Aquatic creatures are produced from the waters, and thus the Genesis text reads: "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures." (1:20) Land creatures are produced from the earth, and thus the Scripture reads "let the earth bring forth living creatures." (1:24) But the male and female human beings are not produced from a common, prior, determinate matter: "But the life of man, as being the most perfect grade, is not said to be produced, like the life of other animals, by earth or water, but immediately by God."<sup>110</sup>

Aquinas argues that though "created nature has a determinate principle...[and] therefore from determinate matter it produces something in a determinate species [nevertheless] the Divine Power, being infinite, can produce things of the same species out of any matter, such as a man from the slime of the earth, and a woman from out of man."<sup>111</sup> It is clear, then, that the original man and the original woman are of the same species, not as a result of what we might call the natural course of things, but by a special act of Divine Power—"as for the dead to be raised to life, or the blind to see: like to which also is the making of man from the slime of the earth."<sup>112</sup> Following the principle that "in describing man's production, Scripture uses a special way of speaking, to show that other things were made for man's sake,"<sup>113</sup> we must ask—what essential difference between man and the other animals is revealed in this unique mode of sexual differentiation?

In the unique, twofold creation of Adam and Eve, the Scriptures reveal what experience bears out: male and female human beings are not two modes of a common,

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<sup>109</sup> STh., I q.92 a.2 obj. 2

<sup>110</sup> STh., I q.72 a.1 ad 1

<sup>111</sup> STh., I q. 92 a. 2

<sup>112</sup> STh., I q. 91 a. 2

<sup>113</sup> STh., I q. 91 a. 4

pre-sexed human species.<sup>114</sup> They are not instances of a human type which is neither male nor female, as we might argue that male and female cats are instances of the species “cat,” their material sexual difference ordered to the reproduction of that species. God does not create Eve as an instance of the idea of human; her being-female is not, as the Aristotelean description goes, a lesser mode of the unitary production of the human being, which would otherwise tend towards the production of the male, if not for intervening material conditions. Such ideas can be found in Aquinas, but they are in fruitful conflict with this theological insight: that the first man and woman are created by two, unique acts of Divine Power; that ever after, in every act of human procreation, a new act of Divine Power creates a new intellectual soul, destined for the contemplation of Truth and forming new, determinate matter into an intellectual body.

Man’s body, in its sexual difference, is not some animal thing that is then invested with rationality, the capacity for intellectual operation, and thus the capacity to see God. Rather, man’s body, in its sexual difference, is intellectual—it is formed by the intellectual soul.<sup>115</sup> This can become unclear. It is easy to speak of man’s “sensitive

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<sup>114</sup> This emphasis on a common predeterminate matter for the animals, but not for man, may continue the polemic, noted above, against the myth of primal androgyny. The Old Babylonian childbirth ritual and the conclusion of the Assyrian version of the Atrahasis Epic describes the “mother goddess” making men and women from the same batch of clay: “...she drew upon her clay. [Fourteen pie]ces she pinched off; seven pieces she placed on the right, [Seven pie]ces she placed on the left...(Of the) [seven] and seven mother-wombs, seven brought forth males, [Seven] brought forth females” [“Creation of Man by the Mother Goddess” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* Third Edition, ed. James B Pritchard (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969) 99–100] Egyptian myths, not mentioning sexual differentiation specifically, have mankind proceeding from the tears of Amon-Re, or from his semen (and other fluids): “I planned in my own heart, and there came into being...the forms of children and the forms of their children. I was the one who copulated with my fist, I masturbated with my hand. Then I spewed with my own mouth...” (Ibid. “A Hymn to Amon-Re”; “The Repulsing of the Dragon and Creation,” Less dramatic is his form as Khnum, “a god who fashioned mortals as on a potter’s wheel,” but again, out of the same “stuff.” See in the same collection “The Divine Attributes of Pharaoh”, 431.) In these, as in all such myths, men and women can be reduced to the material sameness from which they were made. Within this field of “equality,” the Genesis text describes a fundamental “inequality.” There are two distinct materials, and two acts of creation, out of which the man and the woman are made. This has served, throughout the Jewish and Christian tradition, as a sign of radical differentiation, even as the creation of the woman “out of” the man serves as a sign of their radical belonging.

<sup>115</sup> The Thomistic thinker Timothy Fortin argues that, “if we are to understand the “why” of sexual difference, we must see how sexual difference is in fact for the sake of the ultimate human end. We must therefore see how sexual difference serves the highest of human capacities. This means we must part company with those who would see sexual difference as somehow being an intrinsic enemy of reason, standing in essential opposition to the spirit. Rather, it is now for us to try to make the case that, far from being the “flesh” that is opposed to the “spirit,” sexual differentiation in the human person is precisely for the sake of man’s highest powers and thus the friend and helper of the human person in his journey to

soul,” or the “sensitive part of the soul” in a univocal sense, as that thing which he shares with the beasts; that operation which offers up bodily sense-perceptions to the intellectual; a sort of animal-in-man which produces the building blocks of man’s universal knowledge, collecting the material fuel necessary for the immaterial intellect’s operation of abstracting the universal from the particular. Against this naive description, Aquinas states:

[A]lthough the sensitive souls in man and brute are generically alike, they differ specifically, as do the things whose form they are; since, just as the human animal differs from the other animals by the fact that it is rational, so the sensitive soul of man differs specifically from the sensitive soul of the brute by the fact that it is also intellective.<sup>116</sup>

The intellectual soul is the form of the human body. The body is for the intellectual soul as the means whereby the human person achieves his intellectual end of seeing God, as Aquinas says: “The end of man, therefore, is to arrive at the contemplation of truth. It is for this purpose, then, that the soul is united to the body, and in this union does man’s being consist. ... the soul is united to the body so that it may acquire knowledge.”<sup>117</sup>

Man is an animal, but “it is by the same principle...that one is a man, an animal, and a living thing”<sup>118</sup>—and this principle is the intellectual soul. Man can be called an animal because, like the animals, he is animated, but, unlike them, it is the intellectual soul that animates him. His animation, then, is specifically distinct from the animation of all other animals, just as his having life is specifically distinct from all other forms of living in the

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achieve his final end...far from being opposed to reason, sexual difference is precisely for the sake of reason and all the gifts that this spiritual power affords to man.” [Fortin, Timothy, “Reciprocal Generativity: Reason, Intimacy, and Sexual Difference” *Logos*, Vol 24:1 (Winter 2021) 97] Fortin is obviously on the correct path, and while a full discussion of the Thomistic effort to find a metaphysical description of gender as, perhaps, an essential accident, is not my concern here, I would ask: is sexual difference which is for the sake of reason the same as sexual difference which is for the sake of the highest ends of the other animals? And if it is not the same, which he seems to suggest, what differences does this different end make in the specifically human, worship-orientated meaning of “male” and “female”?

<sup>116</sup> SCG., II Ch. 89 par. 12

<sup>117</sup> SCG., II Ch. 83 par. 28

<sup>118</sup> SCG., II Ch. 58 par. 3



plant and animal kingdoms. The intellect is man's soul, and this soul alone is the form of the body, which means that the body cannot but be an intellectual body. "Rational" does not modify "animal" to produce a certain kind of animal. Rather, animation is a particular form of being that the intellectual soul gives to that which it forms in order to achieve its end, namely, the intellectual vision of God. It can be truly said of man that we live for God, that we move for God, and this means our living and our moving is constitutively unlike the living and the moving of the other animals, who live and move for the reproduction of their kind—even while it bears a generic similarity that allows us to use the same words to describe man, animals, and plants.<sup>119</sup>

Similarity between human bodies is derived from the common end of the human person, which is to see God in an intellectual vision, an end imparted to the body by the intellectual soul, which is its form. Once we understand the body as an intellectual body, it is obviously not the case that just *any* body could be "inhabited" or "informed" by an intellectual soul. Because "the proximate end of the human body is the rational soul and its operations...[and] since matter is for the sake of the form"<sup>120</sup> the body is disposed towards the intellectual operation. While the full breadth of Aquinas' epistemology is not at issue here, it should suffice to recall that the body, for Aquinas, is the human person's primary engagement with the world, through which he senses particular things—this tree, that neighbour, the heat from the sun, and so forth. The human person's capacity to contemplate things in truth depends on this primordial engagement with them, through the sensing body. Therefore, a body formed by a soul for the purpose of this body-soul-unity's contemplation of Truth itself, God, must be uniquely sensitive, that is, uniquely capable of sensing the world in its particularity so as to be able to contemplate the truth of things in their universality.

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<sup>119</sup> Thus, Aquinas provides a metaphysical ground for the theory of Merleau-Ponty, who stressed the primacy of perception in the apprehension of being: [W]hen I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world. The ontological world and body which we find at the core of the subject are not the world or body as idea, but on the one hand the world itself contracted into a comprehensive grasp, and on the other the body itself as a knowing-body." [Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 474] But, while Merleau-Ponty treats the body from the point of view of subjectivity, Aquinas looks at the body as an object in the world, constituted in its particularities by the intellectual soul.

<sup>120</sup> STh., I q. 91 a.3 resp.

Again, it is important not to conflate this sensing-body with the bodies of other animals; to argue that man uses an unequivocally animal body to gather the materials necessary for the intellectual operation. That which is formed by a distinct final cause is a distinct being; a body formed for the contemplation of God is a distinct body. The human body is a body-transcending-itself towards its end of contemplation:

“Therefore, in the soul of the brute there is nothing supra-sensitive, and, consequently, it transcends the body neither in being nor in operation; that is why the brute soul must be generated together with the body and perish with the body. But in man the sensitive soul [which operates in and through bodily organs] is possessed of intellective power over and above the sensitive nature and is therefore raised above the body both in being and in operation...”<sup>121</sup>

Man’s body can be described as quantifiably more sensitive (that is, excellent at sensing) than the bodies of other animals. And to some extent, this is true: “The sense of touch, which is the foundation of the other senses, is more perfect in man than in any other animal; and for this reason man must have the most equable temperament of all animals. Moreover man excels all other animals in the interior sensitive powers...”<sup>122</sup> But such generic comparisons should not lose sight of the fact that they exist for the sake of man’s specific difference. The body of man is not merely quantifiably more sensitive and temperate than the other animals, as a cheetah is faster than a man, but qualitatively different, insofar as he senses *for* the contemplation of truth, and finally, God.

Aquinas, in establishing that the body is a body-transcending-itself towards contemplation, views the uniqueness of the human body—its upright posture, its soft skin—as being for that end. Because these traits are necessary for the end of the intellectual soul, it is clear that “an intellectual substance is not united as form to such a body except a human one”<sup>123</sup> which simply *is* matter transcending itself towards the

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<sup>121</sup> SCG., II Ch. 88 par. 12

<sup>122</sup> STh., I q.91 a.3 ad 1

<sup>123</sup> SCG., II Ch. 90 par. 2

contemplation of God.<sup>124</sup> One could imagine an intellectual soul forming a different body, say, that of a wolf, but as the form of that body, the intellectual soul would tend its body towards intellectual contemplation, and thus cause the body of the wolf to be the body of a man: “[T]he most evenly tempered body is the human, so that, if an intellectual substance is united to a mixed body, the latter must be of the same nature as the human body...there would be no specific difference between the animal so constituted and man.”<sup>125</sup>

But it is not merely the traits of the body shared by men and women that are for the sake of the intellectual operation. Sexual difference itself is for the sake of the intellectual operation, and thus can never be equated with the sexual differentiation of the other animals, which is for the sake of the reproduction of the species. To show this, Aquinas relies on a hierarchical vision of the first Genesis account, in which the increasing complexity and nobility of the living creatures that God creates are marked by an increased sexual differentiation. From the non-living world, in which things are only “male” and “female” by rough analogy, plants are the first to spring forth. Plants, according to Aquinas, “possess the active and passive [that is, the male and the female] generative power together.” The reason for this androgynous state is that the telos of the plant is its fruit. Because “the noblest vital function in plants is generation” —because plants are for being fruitful and multiplying—it makes sense that they are in, as it were, a constant state of coition, their entire being, from root to leaf, absorbed in the busyness of generation.

Next, the animals are created. In the animal, the constancy of reproduction is cut short by the separation of the powers of generation into the two sexes: “Among perfect animals the active power of generation belongs to the male sex, and the passive power to the female.” The reason for this separation is that, for the animal, the noblest function is no

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<sup>124</sup> Because of this, the Christian tradition of blazoning the body as fundamentally *for* worship is not hyperbole, but description. If the end of the intellect is contemplation of God, and the intellect is the form of the body, then the particular ends of the particular members of the body must be those activities which most directly achieve that end of contemplation. Ambrose argues that the “knee has a certain flexibility, by reason of which the offended master is especially appeased, his ire softened, and his favors induced;” that “the hand is placed on the holy altars as conciliator of divine grace [and] [t]hrough it we offer as well as partake in the celestial sacraments;” that “[m]an becomes the organ of the voice of God and gives utterance with his corporeal lips to the oracular words from heaven” and so forth. [Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 42]

<sup>125</sup> SCG., II Ch. 90 par.

longer generation: “there is a vital operation nobler than generation, to which their life is principally directed; therefore the male sex is not found in continual union with the female in perfect animals, but only at the time of coition.” This vital function is sensation, by which the individual animal moves towards what is desirable for the preservation and continuation of its species.

Finally, man and woman are created through two acts of Divine Power, from two pieces of unique, determinate matter; created and called “male and female” as opposed to the animal kinds. This is because “man is yet further ordered to a still nobler vital action, and that is intellectual operation. Therefore there was greater reason for the distinction of these two forces in man; so that the female should be produced separately from the male; although they are carnally united for generation.”<sup>126</sup>

It is not the case that man is a rational animal who, like the other animals, comes in either a male or female form for the sake of the reproduction of the human species. Man is distinctly male and female for the sake of the intellectual operation. Being sexually differentiated, in the distinct manner in which man is sexually differentiated, allows for rationality, intellect, mind.<sup>127</sup> Even while man does generate offspring in and through sexual difference, in the particular, co-creative manner we have described, Aquinas describes this as a carnal unity that does not exhaust the reason for being created male and female.<sup>128</sup> Man’s intellectual operation requires his distinct male and female twofoldness; indeed, as we have discussed, his bodily twofoldness is the necessary result

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<sup>126</sup> STh., I q. 92 a.1 resp.

<sup>127</sup> In saying this, it seems that something more than Timothy Fortin’s description of sexual difference is necessary, insofar as he describes human sexual difference as the same generative power that belongs to any living thing, though with this difference, that the rational human “will know herself as she stands toward the divided power of generation; she will know herself as sexually differentiated.” [Fortin, Timothy. *Finding Form: Defining Human Sexual Difference*, *Nova et Vetera*, Spring 2017 (Vol. 15, No. 2) 419]

<sup>128</sup> Indeed, it is precisely insofar as the meaning and *raison-d’être* of sexual difference is not limited to carnal unity or reproduction that carnal unity can be a free gift and reproduction can be a moral act, governed by justice and charity towards all. A stone does not give itself to the ground as it falls towards it; a male animal does not freely give itself to a female animal by tending towards the natural end of reproduction, in which their sexual difference terminates. But a person, for whom sexual difference is for the sake of the intellectual operation; for whom sexual difference can be freely orientated towards virginity without forsaking its purpose and final cause of contemplation; indeed, a person whose sexually differentiated body is for the sake of the contemplation of God, the end of the intellectual operation that sexual difference enables and disposes the body towards; such a person can offer up sexual difference for the sake of carnal unity and reproduction as a free gift.

of his intellectual soul disposing matter towards contemplation.<sup>129</sup> It is not only “not good for man to be alone,” it is also not possible, except as an abortive thought of a human person not destined for and ordered towards the contemplation of the truth.

Aquinas does not articulate the precise manner in which sexual difference disposes the body to the intellectual operation, and while, within this work, the concept will remain a profound mystery, we will make a preliminary foray into an answer.

## 6. Human sexual difference as a necessary condition of language

In a late work, the early German phenomenologist Max Scheler argued that “the animal has no objects.” Animals only perceive things insofar as they have importance to “the organism’s survival and prosperity.”<sup>130</sup> Aquinas, speaking in his own idiom, argues the same. In distinguishing that which we share with other animals from that which do not, he says that “the operation of the apprehensive power is completed in the very fact that the thing apprehended is in the one that apprehends: while the operation of the appetitive power is completed in the fact that he who desires is borne towards the thing desirable.”<sup>131</sup> Both men and animals are borne towards things desirable, but only men apprehend things in an intellectual mode, having them within themselves as intellectual objects, universal, nameable, and knowable in truth.

By this logic, an animal has no “world,” only an environment (from the French *environ*, “to surround”). The animal is encircled by a limited number of drive-objects that fulfil a corresponding number of drives. Man apprehends beings as being, rather than as simply desirable, and is thus potentially open to the revelation of any and all beings. This thesis helps to explain Aquinas’ observation that no animal seems to do anything qualitatively

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<sup>129</sup> “For Aquinas, the focus of explaining sexual difference is radically different: in order to grasp this part or aspect of human existence, it must be understood in terms of the whole of human existence. Ultimately, this means that it must be understood in terms of a cascade of ends that resolves in human beatitude: the wedding feast of the Lamb.” Fortin, “Reciprocal Generativity,” [97](#).

<sup>130</sup> Max Scheler, *The Human Place in the Cosmos* (Northwestern University Press, 2009).

<sup>131</sup> STh., I q.81 a.1 resp.

new—a giraffe will not study the moon, because the moon does not appear as the possible fulfilment of a drive aimed at the giraffe’s survival and prosperity. Scheler uses the example of a lizard that will run at the sound of a rustle in the grass but will not flinch at the sound of a gunshot. We might consider the spider that does not “see” the fly until the fly wriggles in its web. Higher animals may “learn,” not in the sense that a human being learns in a world of things open to exploration, but by including some new object or routine as a help or hindrance to the fulfilment of some drive. Whatever success we have in teaching apes, dolphins and pigeons to “use language” or “perform sums” is predicated on human researchers giving these acts some importance to the life of the animal—like giving the ape a piece of fruit when he selects the correct word, scratching a dog behind the ear when it sits, or administering electric shocks to chimpanzees when they choose the wrong door.

The human being, Scheler argues, is the animal who says ‘no’ to its drives, attaining object-consciousness. When the drive is refused, the drive-object is seen, not as for-me, corresponding to my drives, but as containing multiple possible uses, angles, sides; appearing to consciousness irrespective of its possible usefulness to the life of the animal.

In all likelihood, Aquinas would have disagreed with the description of man as the animal that says ‘no’ to its drives, as it suggests a kind of creation *sui generis* of man from the animal. Rather, he would have argued that the human being, by its nature, already has the potency to relate to objects outside of the constraints of appetite. Nevertheless, Aquinas might very well have argued that, while every human being has the natural potency to transcend a life limited to drive-fulfilment, this potency must be activated; this seems to be a great part of childhood.

Instead of positing the production of intellectual objects through the mere negation of the animal drive or desire, there is another tradition which argues, in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, that the “ontological structure of ‘my’ world demands that it be also a world for others.” The object is distinguished from the drive-object, not just by being a thing “cancelled-out” but because it appears as a thing “for another,” as being given over to other possible uses, angles and views. The moment I know the body of the other, not simply as a drive-object in my environment, but as a “zero point of orientation,” another view; another perspective; another set of projects and goals; only then do the drive-

objects of my environment begin to relate to the other and to myself, and thus take on the quality of “objects” proper; appearing to consciousness irrespective of its possible usefulness to my life. In order for objects to appear, the other must appear. To say that man is by nature social and by nature rational is not to describe two different qualities that inhere in an individual animal, rather, neither specific difference is conceivable without the other. In the human person, intelligence is always also linguistic; what it means to know things as universal is to be capable of sharing those things with another; to be united with them in the common medium of the word.

This is not separate from the former tradition’s theory of the appearance of the intellectual object in the ascetic suppression of the drives. In order for the other to appear, he cannot simply be the fulfilment, help, or frustration of my drives. He must be seen as his own, a genuine other point of orientation—a conscious subject who causes there to be a world. This is impossible for the plant, which is, as it were, in a constant state of coition in which no other appears, as it is for the animal, which only has “things” in its environment insofar as they are objects of its appetite. The male animal, to the female animal, does not appear as a subject which gives all things their detachability from drive-life, for the simple reason that the male exists as male for the sake of the reproduction of the singular “kind.” He appears as the drive-object par excellence—all individual animals are driven to preserve their species.

But the original woman is created by a separate act of Divine Power. Her femaleness cannot be reduced to a function that serves the species, because it is not merely a modification of the species, nor of some common determinate matter, but a definite something created immediately by God, which must be dealt with in its own right. In the Genesis text, the unity of man and woman does not follow naturally, as does the unity of a male and female dog. Rather, God ordains the woman to the man, bringing her to him, and him to her, and the man accepts her in freedom, as she accepts him. The human race which results from their unity is not equivalent to another animal species, which reproduces a kind. Rather, the human race describes the real, historical unity of individuals related to the same parents and destined towards the same fulfilment of their intellectual natures in the contemplation of God.

The first woman, to the first man, can appear as a subject which gives all things their theoretical detachability from drive-life, because she does not exist for the sake of the reproduction of a singular kind, but for her own sake—as a unique, individual creation of God. Likewise the man unto the woman: because man is male and female, man can be rational, for the rational apprehension of an object requires that it appears as an object-for-others, and the other is only truly revealed in one who is unlike me, irreducible to a common origin and detached from the finite limit of my desires, and yet like me, insofar as we are created for each other and destined towards the same end of the contemplation of God.

For God to say of Adam, without Eve, “it is not good,” and of Adam, with Eve, it is “very good,” contains more than a divine commentary on man’s ideal condition. The goodness of the Creation is coincident with its being.<sup>132</sup> In a real sense, the divine declaration that something is “not good” can only mean that thing is not *real*, that it has not, in fact, been created: “For thou lovest all things that exist, and hast loathing for none of the things which thou hast made, for thou wouldst not have made anything if thou hadst hated it.” (Wisdom 11:24) The passage “it is not good for man to be alone,” properly understood, expresses that it is not *true* that man is alone, that man is a being constituted in and by relation.

The sexually differentiated flesh is the first sign of this ontological fact. In it, man does not merely see another human being, bearing the attribute of “intellect,” and so able to speak. Rather, the flesh of the female makes the flesh of the man “male,” just as the flesh of the male makes the flesh of the woman “female.” Each determine the other.

Man, the “rational animal,” is not incidentally, subsequently, or extrinsically social, as if his intellect were the interior workings of a man-alone, who, formulating words within himself, subsequently spoke them, *establishing* relationship. Man is always already in relationship; he simply *is* that kind of being who is co-determined by another, a co-determination both signified and realized by the sexually differentiated body. This unique co-determination is not incidental to the use of words, rather, it is the ground of possibility for language use.

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<sup>132</sup> STh., I q.5 a.1 resp.



Sexual difference is a kind of wound, in that any attempt to imagine myself as an individual renders and my body wanting, odd, and incomplete, until I see myself and my body in the light of the sexually differentiated other. But it is only because I experience myself as incomplete that the things and stuff of this world, impinging on my senses, can be rendered into words.

Aquinas says that the separation of the male and female is for the sake of the intellectual operation, and the intellectual operation is precisely this: to abstract universals from the individuality of sense-experience.<sup>133</sup> The sense-experience of a being constituted by his relation to another can only be a sense-experience potentially for another. But a sense-experience-potentially-for-another is no longer a sense-experience, but a universal. Sexual difference enables the intellectual operation of abstraction by rendering every experience of the body into the experience of a body that only is what it is in and through a body which it is not, an act which prevents any particular sense-experience from being complete, finished, and unavailable to being taken as an experience for which another view is possible.

Augustine points out that “God was surely not ignorant of the fact that He had created nothing among the animals that was like the man and able to be his helper. Was it necessary that the man also should recognize his need and thereby receive his wife as a more precious gift because, in all flesh created under heaven and living in this atmosphere in which he was placed, he found nothing else like her? But it would be strange if he could not have known this unless all the animals had been brought to him and placed before his eyes.”<sup>134</sup> On the basis of this analysis, we would answer Augustine as follows: Adam was shown the animals, prior to the gift of the original woman, not in order to better understand his need for sexual differentiation in the manner in which the animals are sexually differentiated,<sup>135</sup> but to reveal the particular inadequacy of their mode of sexual difference for being like

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<sup>133</sup> And therefore the object of every sensitive power is a form as existing in corporeal matter. And since such matter is the principle of individuality, therefore every power of the sensitive part can only have knowledge of the individual. STh., I q.85 a.1 resp.

<sup>134</sup> St. Augustine, *St. Augustine: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, ed. Johannes Quasten, Walter J. Burghardt, and Thomas Comerford Lawler, trans. John Hammond Taylor, 42nd ed., vol. II, Ancient Christian Writers (New York; Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 1982), 84–85.

<sup>135</sup> Admittedly, this is the interpretation of many of the Christian Fathers, as in Ambrose: “Besides this, there is a reason why everything was brought to Adam. In this way he would be able to see that nature in every aspect is constituted of two sexes: male and female. Following these observations, he would become aware that association with a woman was a necessity of his lot” [Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 328].

him, as a kind of negative anthropology. As Chrysostom argued, “after the act of creation, after the brute beasts were brought forth, some suited for eating and some capable of assisting with man’s service, the human being that had been formed stood in need of someone to talk to and able to offer him much comfort by a sharing of her being.”<sup>136</sup> There is a twofold description of man here: man a speaking being who shares his being with another. It is a summary of the above argument to say that man is a speaking being precisely *because* he shares his being with another.

## 7. Human sexual difference as non-divinity

We have sketched out a positive vision of sexual difference, as an enabling difference that forms the ground of possibility for the intellectual operation, which has as its end the vision of God. Put pithily, we say that human sexual difference is for the sake of seeing God.<sup>137</sup> Within the Genesis text, this capacity for seeing God is not simply understood positively, but prophylactically as well: sexual difference is for the sake of preventing *not* seeing God.

In describing the creation of Man, the authors of Genesis reverted to the same language they used in their anti-idolatrous “separation” of the sun and the moon, the earth and the seas, adding this commandment to “be fruitful and multiply,” in order to emphasize that, at the very core and from the first moment of their creation, man and woman are radically dependent, self-insufficient, and thus most certainly *not God*.<sup>138</sup> This

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<sup>136</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1–17*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 74, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 200.

<sup>137</sup> As Timothy Fortin puts it. “For Aquinas, the focus of explaining sexual difference is radically different: in order to grasp this part or aspect of human existence, it must be understood in terms of the whole of human existence. Ultimately, this means that it must be understood in terms of a cascade of ends that resolves in human beatitude: the wedding feast of the Lamb.” [Fortin, “Finding Form”, 96.]

<sup>138</sup> A medieval commentary by Rabbi Bachya ben Asher describes God as considering this kind of relationship: “When he spoke about G-d “originally” planning to create two separate human beings, he wanted to explain to us that G-d wanted both man and woman to be independent personalities who would at the same time draw on each other for support. He meant for us to picture the function of the male and the female of the species to be similar to the relationship between sun and moon, for instance.” [Rabbeinu Bahya, “Bereishit, Chapter 2:18” in *Torah Commentary by Rabbi Bachya ben Asher* trans. Eliyahu Munk, (Brooklyn: KTAV Publishing House, 1998).] Ultimately, the sun-moon relationship is rejected, because “G-d decided that it was not good that man, the crown jewel of His creation, should be the only active

becomes clearer through a Jewish tradition on the verse “it is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18), which rescues the text from a understanding, in which Eve is created for the sake of Adam’s loneliness. Rashi explains God as reasoning thus: “I shall make a help meet for him *in order that people may not say that there are two Deities*,”<sup>139</sup> citing the midrash of Rabbi Eliezer: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said: I am alone in My world and this one (Adam) also is alone in his world. There is no propagation before Me and this one (Adam) has no propagation in his life; hereafter all the creatures will say: Since there was no propagation in his life, it is he who has created us. It is not good for man to be alone...”<sup>140</sup> This same fear, that the animals and the angels will mistake man-alone for God, is expressed in the Bereishit Rabah, though it is Adam’s sleep, in which God creates Eve, rather than Eve herself, that serves as the decisive proof that man is not God.<sup>141</sup>

These stories are based on the same intuition present in the demythologizing separation of the sun and moon—the solitary being risks being mistaken, and mistaking itself, as God. Thus Eve is a “help” or a “helpmate” for Adam, not simply in the sense of helping him to reproduce,<sup>142</sup> rather, reproduction itself is drawn up into that greater need for help, or salvation—salvation from idol-worship and help in persisting as man rather than seeking to be a god. This is evident in the act of sex itself, that meeting of the helper

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factor in the universe whereas the woman should be no more than a receptacle, a servant, just like the moon which only acts as a receptacle for the sun’s rays.” Despite the inadequacy of the sun and moon image, the need for a primal separation clearly motivates the creation of man as male and female: “As soon as G-d entertained that thought He added that it was not suitable that man should be the only type of inhabitant of earth just as the angels are the only inhabitants of the celestial regions.”

<sup>139</sup> Rashi on Genesis 2:18:1

<sup>140</sup> Chapter 12:4 in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, trans. Gerald Friedlander (London 1916)

[https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei\\_DeRabbi\\_Eliezer.12.4](https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_DeRabbi_Eliezer.12.4)

<sup>141</sup> “Said R’ Hosha`ya: In the moment that the Holy One created Adam Harishon, the first Human, the ministering angels erred and sought to say ‘Holy/Qadosh’ before him (to worship him) . . . What did the Holy One do? ‘He cast upon him deep sleep’ [Gn 2:21] and all knew that he was Adam.” [Bereishit Rabah 8:10, Merged from Rabbi Dr. David Mevorach Seidenberg, from “Kabbalah and Ecology” Sefaria Community Translation, [www.sefaria.org/Bereishit\\_Rabbah](http://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit_Rabbah).] This need to “mortalize” Adam is presented in the Rabbeinu Bahya: “Rather, just as the other creatures in our terrestrial universe were created in pairs and reproduced themselves, so Adam (man) too should have a partner and he and she would reproduce and be subject to death as are all the other creatures in our ‘lower world,’” [Rabbeinu Bahya, Bereshit 2:18.]

<sup>142</sup> Aquinas, repeating an argument from Augustine, says “we are told that woman was made to be a help to man.... But she was not fitted to help man except in generation, because another man would have proved a more effective help in anything else” [STh., I q.98 a.2 s.c.] Inevitably, he contradicts this rather dour assessment in other places: “[T]he human male and female are united not only for generation, as with other animals, but also for the purpose of domestic life, in which each has his particular duty, and in which man is the head of the woman,” [STh., I q.92 a.2 resp.]

and the helped, which, according to at least one Talmudic tradition, serves as a kind of catechesis on the origin of man as a creature:

And the students of Rabbi Dostai further asked him: For what reason does a man engage in intercourse facing down, and a woman engage in intercourse facing up toward the man? Rabbi Dostai answered them: This man faces the place from which he was created, i.e., the earth, and that woman faces the place from which she was created, namely man.<sup>143</sup>

From this perspective, there is no contradiction between the observation that sexual difference is for the sake of procreation and the argument that sexual difference is for the sake of the prevention of idolatry: the very form of human sexual difference makes the act of procreation into a liturgy of origins and a celebration of the unique “determinate matter” which constitutes them as creatures.<sup>144</sup> In this sense Genesis is an inversion and a polemic against the myths of primal androgyny. Because mankind as a created, separated, and named being is “very good,” their bifurcation into male and female cannot be considered as a fall, the loss of a golden age, or the caprice of envious gods.<sup>145</sup> Rather, their glory is in always appearing as “little less than a god,” and so, insofar as being male and female is a sign of insufficiency which guarantees non-divinity, being male and female is a perfection of mankind’s nature, and any attempt to undo this constitutive difference can only be a step towards idolatry—towards a vision of man as a unitary, solitary, and non-procreative competitor of God.

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<sup>143</sup> *Talmud*, Niddah 31b:15

<sup>144</sup> By comparison, we can consider the various myths in which sexual intercourse appears as a kind of reconstitution of a divine androgyne, a reference to a prior, fundamental sameness as opposed to a reminder of a fundamental difference. Aristophanes primal androgynes, who seek, through the act of sex, to reunite with their lost halves; or the couple of the Zoroastrian myth, who, as Shai Secunda puts it, “have sex, reinstating them in a sense to their initial conjoined state. Not insignificantly, Mahliyānī refers to Mahlī as “brother,” and Zoroastrian tradition remembers them as the first practitioners of the sacred act of...incestuous marriage. As foreign (and forbidden) as the concept of a religious mandate for sibling marriage may seem to the Western mind, we might still appreciate that a twin brother and sister engaging in the world’s first sexual union between two equal parts, reinstates humankind to its primal unified existence.” [“Construction”, pg. 65]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says as much in his description of the creation of Eve. For Bonhoeffer, human creatureliness is known as an experience of boundedness, of limitation *vis a vis* divine freedom: “The Creator knows that this free life as a creature can be borne within its limit only if it [the limit] is loved, and out of unfathomable mercy the Creator creates the helper who is a partner suitable for a human being. The helper who is a partner had to be at once the embodiment of Adam’s limit and the object of Adam’s love.”<sup>146</sup> Eve, in being female, embodies Adam’s limit, and thus serves him as he serves her: as a sacrament of his creatureliness, presenting Adam’s own not-being, his boundedness, as a loveable object.<sup>147</sup> This means that, in marrying Eve, Adam marries his own limit; he realizes the creature he is by loving the creature he is not. Bonhoeffer describes this marriage, not as something *causing* Adam’s creatureliness, but as realizing, incarnating, and liturgically celebrating it: “The boundary within which Adam lives has now taken on bodily form...With the creation of woman, humankind’s limit has advanced into the midst of the created world. This, to be sure, did not increase the danger of transgressing against the limit; on the contrary it lessened it, for Adam would now be obliged to worship God as his only Creator all the more fervently.”<sup>148</sup> The Christian

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<sup>146</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3”, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Volume 3*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), vv. 18-25

<sup>147</sup> This sheds light on another midrash, in which God first creates Eve apparently as a foetus or a new-born: “And Adam said: this is now...” Rabbi Yehuda bar Rebbi said: In the beginning He created her, and [Adam] saw that she was full of secretions and blood and separated her from him, and He returned and created her a second time. As it says: “this is now” this is the woman this time. This is now for me the one who will be my partner in the future.” [Beresheit Rabbah 18:4] While the story serves to explain a semantic problem, it also recognizes that a necessity for the other to appear in *loveliness*. This loveliness is not merely an answer to the question of sexual attraction; it is an answer to the question of the vocation of man and woman, which, to adopt Bonhoeffer’s language, is to mercifully embody the limitation and boundedness of man in a way that is easy to love.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 7. It does not indicate any deficiency in Bonhoeffer’s thought, that he does not quite explain *sexual* difference, only that individual difference of woman as *other*; a difference which, potentially, another male might have presented to Adam. As he says, “Eve, the other person, was the limit given to Adam in bodily form. He acknowledged this limit in love...he loved it precisely in its nature as a limit for him, that is, in Eve’s being human and yet ‘being another human being’.” (v.7) Bonhoeffer is not wrong, but I would suggest that Eve in her femaleness constitutes, not just a negative a limit for Adam (I am not her) but a creative limit constituting him as male (I am *him*). Because of this, the woman is the sacrament of the Other even as she is the sacrament of the creature; she effects what she signifies in a way that no other male could do for Adam. For it is only in fantasy that we can imagine another male being “another human being” for Adam. Human being is male and female being, and so only the female can be “another human being” to Adam, not by representing the species “human” in her particular flesh (which, presumably, another man could do) but by the reality of her presence which makes Adam male, realizing the human species between them, male and female. Another male is as much a fantasy as Adam being alone; it is to imagine the human being as something other than it is. Thus a midrash argues that Adam cannot be called a human being

vision, in which man is destined for a deification, nuances but does not undo Genesis' fundamental opposition to idolatry. The Christian is to become godlike, to "put on the new man, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness," (Ephesians 4:24) but this divinity is a sharing, or a participation in the divine life, received as a gift from God. This participatory mode of divinity preserves the pre-eminence of God—even the deified man could never be said to be God *as God is God*—and it is unlike what the mythic mode we have been discussing, in which man has "divinity," not as a supernatural gift, but as an attribute belonging to him by nature and subsequently denied to him. This inversion forms a major part of the Christian polemic against mythical thought, as in Hippolytus' address to the Greeks: "*The Creator* did not wish to make him a god, and failed in His aim; nor an angel,—be not deceived,—but a man. For if He had willed to make thee a god, He could have done so. Thou hast the example of the Logos. His will, however, was, that you should be a man, *and* He has made thee a man. But if thou art desirous of also becoming a god, obey Him that has created thee, and resist not now, in order that, being found faithful in that which is small, you may be enabled to have entrusted to you also that which is great."<sup>149</sup>

Whereas the myths tend to mourn the arrival of the female as a curse, within the Genesis account, the man rejoices in being given the woman as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (2:23)—that which he is and which is, nevertheless, not reducible to him. The joy of the man in the woman is precisely a joy that affirms the creaturely, non-divine status of both. He does not praise the woman as "my partner" or "my other self" but as "my flesh" and "my bone," Hebrew signifiers for weakness and strength, as well as mortality and corporeality.<sup>150</sup> Pandora would not be lovingly called "flesh," precisely because she inaugurates the age of corruptible flesh, and human weakness. What we have already seen in Lactantius, we now quote from Theodoret of Cyrus: "an immortal nature

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without Eve: "R' Chiya bar Gomdi said: He is not even a whole human / adam shalem, for it says: "And He blessed them and called their name Adam". [Gn 5:2]" [Beresheit Rabah 17:2]

<sup>149</sup> Hippolytus of Rome, "The Refutation of All Heresies," in *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. J. H. MacMahon, vol. 5, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 151.

<sup>150</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. "Of The Same Flesh and Bone (GN 2,23a)." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1970): 532–42

does not require the female.”<sup>151</sup> But a mortal nature does—indeed, it needs her precisely in order to remain mortal.

## 8. The fall of man as a bid for androgyny

If “it is not good for man to be alone” is a phrase that represents a critique of primal androgyny, (i.e., “it is not good for man to be without sexual difference”) then we would expect the story of the Fall of Man to reverse the mythic account (in which man falls into increasing differentiation) for an account in which man falls into increasing sameness, eradicating of the constitutive wound of sexual difference.

In the order of the narrative, the woman is made in response to the evil (the “not good”) of the solitary man, attacking the myths which called woman a curse on would-be male/androgynous divinity. The Fathers of the Church tend to intuit that the destruction of the woman was essential to Satan’s program, but they are often constrained to argue that this is because the woman represents a weaker principle than the man; by nature more passionate, earthly, and prone to vice; an easy target for serpentine suggestion. Whatever catechetical value these interpretations have had, they sit uneasily with another axiom of Christian thought, that “when the devil approaches someone, he bestows an honor, for the devil approaches Saints,”<sup>152</sup> which would seem to suggest a distinction of honour, rather than one of weakness. Regardless, these interpretations rely less on the taciturn Genesis text and more on Philo’s interpretation of it: he describes man and woman as two parts of an original, spiritual androgyny, in whom Man represents Mind and Woman represents body, in which the Mind becomes rather woefully enmeshed.<sup>153</sup> Likewise, the Fathers tend to draw from Aristotle’s biology, which argued that woman was formed as a “misbegotten” male, the result of being cold, rather than hot; wet, rather

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<sup>151</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *The Questions on the Octateuch Volume 1*, trans. Robert C. Hill, The library of early Christianity (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 2007), 83

<sup>152</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, trans. Paul M. Kimball (Dolorosa Press, 2012), 111

<sup>153</sup> Philo. *Questions on Genesis*, trans. Ralph Marcus, Loeb Classical Library 380 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953)

than dry; and passive, rather than active, and so on. This misguided tradition has had the unfortunate effect of misguiding its critics, who turn and take the Genesis text *itself* as irredeemably “androcentric,”<sup>154</sup> when, in fact, this “one-sex” model of primary masculinity and deviant femininity represents an intellectual hold-out of the very myth of primal androgyny that Genesis is at pains to dissolve.<sup>155</sup>

If the woman is introduced as the gift by which the man is helped to rest in his creatureliness rather than covet divinity, then the serpent’s attack on the woman, rather than the man, makes as good sense as the provincial advice for attacking a serpent oneself: one should “cut off the head.”<sup>156</sup> Cut off this avant-garde of creaturely resistance and the man will be easy prey to the fangs of idolatry. When Augustine considers the woman-first order of the temptation, he is forced out of his literal reading of Genesis into a figurative reading ungrounded in any literal sense: “Hence, why does Scripture put it this way except to show clearly that we cannot be tempted by the devil except through the animal part, which reveals, so to speak, the image or exemplification of woman in the one whole man.”<sup>157</sup> But if the woman was created as a means of resistance to the spectre of idolatry, Augustine could ground his figurative sense in a literal reading of Genesis.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> For the full argument, see David J. A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).

<sup>155</sup> See section III.2 on the masculinizing of the androgyne.

<sup>156</sup> Edith Stein intuits the insufficiency of an interpretation that leans on woman as naturally deficient, writing “that the tempter first tempted the woman may signify that he had easier access to her, not that the woman was more easily induced to evil (indeed, both Adam and Eve were still free of an inclination to evil), but because the nature of the temptation was in itself of greater significance for her.” Stein locates this greater significance in the possibility that the sin of Eve some form of sexual perversion, and thus of greater significance to the female who is “more strongly affected by procreation.” [Stein, Edith. “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman”, in *Essays on Woman*, in Volume 2 of *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, Edited by Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven and trans. By Freda Mary Oben (ICS Publications, Washington D.C., 2000), 64] Without denying this possibility, the focus of the Genesis narrative suggests that Eve is tempted in her procreative power precisely insofar as human procreation is already the affirmation of the very good nature of creatureliness which it is her created vocation to protect.

<sup>157</sup> Augustine, “Against the Manichees Book 2” in *On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees; And, on the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*, trans. Roland J. Teske in *Fathers of the Church 84: Saint Augustine on Genesis* (Washington D.C.: CUA Press 1991) 32

<sup>158</sup> Augustine is absolutely committed to this task and resists any attempt to render the original sexual differentiated creation into an appearance of difference that covers a real androgyny: “Now, the words here obviously refer to the bond of marriage in which a man and woman are bound to each other. In the light of our Lord’s language it is absurd to interpret ‘male’ and ‘female’ as symbols, either of the spirit that rules and the flesh that obeys, or of the rational soul that controls and the irrational appetite that is restrained, or of the contemplative faculty that is higher and the active power which is lower, or of understanding in the mind and sensation in the body. It is, therefore, certain that male and female were created in the beginning exactly as we see and know them now, as human beings of different sex. If the two were called one, that is



This idea, that woman is a gift which prevents the appearance of divinity in man, is not expressed in the Christian tradition as directly as we have seen it in the Jewish commentary tradition.<sup>159</sup> But it fits well with a broad patristic consensus that the reason for the law of the garden was to keep man from considering himself as God. Cyril of Alexandria puts it this way: “it was absolutely necessary for the man who had come into such glory and delight to understand clearly that God held a position over him as King and Lord. Lest man should fall by the considerable prosperity that was readily available to him, possibly even wishing to be freed from the authority and supremacy of him who ruled, God immediately issued a law...”<sup>160</sup> Augustine argues that “they were persuaded to sin through pride...Thus they refused to obey his Law as if, by his prohibition, he jealously begrudged them an autonomy that had no need of his interior light, but used only their own providence...” Man seeks to imitate God in his autonomy, but “[o]nly God can be happy by his own power with no one ruling.”<sup>161</sup> Thus there is another sense in which “it is not good for man to be alone”—it is not good for him to be alone in his rule over himself; not good for him to issue a law unto himself; not good to act as a solitary, autonomous being; for he will thereby take himself as being “like God.”<sup>162</sup>

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explained either by their unity in marriage or by the fact that the first woman was made from the side of the man,” [Augustine, *The City of God*, 14.22]

<sup>159</sup> Of course, it was intuited that man risked thinking of himself as a god, and that God’s creation was ordered so as to prevent this: “For He perfected Adam, whom He made after His image and likeness. But for this reason He completed His works before He created angels and fashioned man, lest perchance they should falsely assert that they had been His helpers.” [Victorinus of Pettau, “On the Creation of the World,” in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis, vol. 7, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 341] Likewise, God’s particular creation of the original man and woman prevented polytheism: Eve was made from Adam “not as if He were unable to make his wife separately, but God foreknew that man would call upon a number of gods. And having this prescience, and knowing that through the serpent error would introduce a number of gods which had no existence,—for there being but one God, even then error was striving to disseminate a multitude of gods, saying, “Ye shall be as gods;”—lest, then, it should be supposed that one God made the man and another the woman, therefore He made them both; and God made the woman together with the man, not only that thus the mystery of God’s sole government might be exhibited, but also that their mutual affection might be greater.” [Theophilus, *Theophilus to Autolycus*, 108]

<sup>160</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaphyra on the Pentateuch, Volume 1, Genesis*, trans. Nicholas P. Lunn, *Fathers of the Church* 137 (Washington DC: CUA Press, 2018) 56

<sup>161</sup> Augustine, *On Genesis: Two Books Against the Manichees and On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis* (Washington D.C.: CUA Press 1991) p. 118

<sup>162</sup> “But, lest man should conceive thoughts too high, and be exalted and uplifted, as though he had no lord, because of the authority and freedom granted to him, and so should transgress against his maker God, overpassing his measure, and entertain selfish imaginings of pride in opposition to God; a law was given to him by God, in order that he might perceive that he had as lord the Lord of all.” [Irenæus, *The*

This patristic, anti-idolatry reading can be mapped onto the reading which sees woman as the anti-mythic principle of man's creatureliness, for the simple reason that the law, propagated to forbid idolatry, was only broken insofar as the man and the woman acted "alone", abandoning what we might crassly call their "gender roles." The man tended to become like the woman and the woman tended to become like a man in their mutual will to become "like God." John Chrysostom points this out in a commentary on God's punishment of Adam: "After all you are the head of your wife, and she has been created for your sake, but you have inverted the proper order. Not only have you failed to keep her on the straight and narrow but you have been dragged down with her, and whereas the rest of the body should follow the head, the contrary has in fact occurred, the head following the rest of the body, turning things upside down..."<sup>163</sup> This argument can found more clearly in Ephrem of Syria, who argues that "[b]ecause she believed the serpent she ate first, thinking that she would be clothed in divinity in the presence of the one from whom she, as a woman, had been separated. She hastened to eat before her husband that she might become head over her head, that she might become the one to give command to that one by whom she was to be commanded and that she might be older in divinity than that one who was older than she in humanity."<sup>164</sup> St. Ambrose asks, rhetorically, "What other cause of enmity is there except envy? As Solomon says: 'By the envy of the devil, death came into this world'"<sup>165</sup> but this is not simply man's envy for God's authority but, as part and parcel of this envy, man's envy for the woman and the woman's envy for the man. Thus the punishments God gives the man and woman are punishments given to usurpers. God punishes Adam, not merely for disobeying his command, but by

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*Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, ed. W. J. Sparrow Simpson and W. K. Lowther Clarke, trans. J. Armitage Robinson, Translations of Christian Literature. Series IV, Oriental Texts (London; New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; The Macmillan Co., 1920), 83]

<sup>163</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1-17*, 231.

<sup>164</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, "Commentary on Genesis" in *Selected Prose Works*, 112-13. This argument can be read in Augustine, though he moves it into a figurative key: "Still [the devil] deceives by means of the woman. Nor can our reason be brought to the consent that is sin, except when delight is aroused in that part of the soul *which ought to obey reason as its ruling husband*." [Augustine, *Against*, 117]

<sup>165</sup> Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 332. See also Gregory of Nyssa: "Envy is the passion which causes evil, the father of death, the first entrance of sin, the root of wickedness, the birth of sorrow, the mother of misfortune, the basis of disobedience, the beginning of shame. Envy banished us from Paradise, having become a serpent to oppose Eve. Envy walled us off from the tree of life, divested us of holy garments, and in shame led us away clothed with fig leaves." [Gregory of Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses*, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 120.]

doing so in and through a rejection of differentiation, i.e., “because you listened to the voice of your wife” (Genesis 3:17), while Eve is punished by subjection: “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (3:16), which Ephrem interprets as “‘*You shall turn to your husband,*’ to be counselled and not to give counsel and ‘*he shall rule over you,*’ because you thought that by eating of the fruit you would rule over him.”<sup>166</sup>

It is tempting to do away with this tradition of the androgynous fall because it relies on an idea that we now find repellent, that in the order of creation, the man was made to rule over the woman, and thus a reverse in the order of rule amounts to a blurring of sexual difference. But it is quite possible to use a different lens to focus on the same subject. There is another patristic theme, for instance, that bewails the man and the woman’s decision to separate, the woman facing the serpent without the man and the man retiring, leaving the woman. Thus Chrysostom, for all his horror of the woman shirking the *rule* of the man, also argues that she shirks her face-to-face equality with him: “[W]hy did you disgrace yourself, departing from the one for whom you were created, as whose helpmate you were made, in whose dignity you had equal share, one with him in being and one in language”?<sup>167</sup> Likewise Ephrem says “she stole away from her husband and ate”<sup>168</sup> while Augustine, in broader terms, argues that a chief cause of desiring to be “like God” and of slavery to demons is that “each soul finds enjoyment in its private domain, and by a disregard for the God who presides over all souls for their benefit and salvation, desires to ‘play God’ in respect to itself or others where possible”.<sup>169</sup> In this case, it is not simply a hierarchical inversion that inverts the order of sexual differentiation, rather, it is the attempt to descend into a private domain, to be a woman-alone or a man-alone, which God already declared “not good.” Because the man and woman only *are* man and woman in the light of the sexually differentiated other who faces them, leaving the man or leaving the woman to be alone is a symbol of sexual undifferentiation, of androgyny. Even if one disagrees that a hierarchical order of rule attained the unequivocal welfare

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<sup>166</sup> Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works*, 119-20

<sup>167</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1-17*, 214

<sup>168</sup> Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works*, 119

<sup>169</sup> Augustine, *83 Different Questions*, trans. David L. Mosher, Fathers of the Church 70 (Washington DC: CUA Press 2010) 200

and common good of prelapsarian man and woman,<sup>170</sup> one can see that such a rule has been posited, within the tradition, as a part of the larger meaning of sexual differentiation, and thus remain convinced that the first sin involved sexual undifferentiation, even while remaining unconvinced that the inverting of the order of rule was the precise *mode* of this sexual undifferentiation.

Another description of the Fall of Man that frames it as a bid for androgyny can be found in the speculation that an act of sexual perversion was the cause of the Fall. Edith Stein posits exactly this in her *Essays on Woman*:

The direct consequence of original sin gives us a clue as to what they may be held accountable for: the consequence was that man and woman saw each other with different eyes than they had previously; they had lost innocence of interchange with one another. So the first sin may not only be considered as a purely formal one of disobedience to God. Rather it implied a definite act which had been forbidden and which the serpent presented enticingly to the woman and then the woman to the man. Indeed, the act committed could well have been a manner of union which was at variance with the original order.<sup>171</sup>

What definite act? While his analysis of “eating fruit” as an Ancient Near Eastern and biblical euphemism for a sexual act seems correct, Ronald A. Veenker is too hasty in his judgment that “the very structure of the narrative suggests that ‘the transgression,’ or the ‘eating of the fruit,’ is the sex act and nothing less.”<sup>172</sup> Despite a few outliers, the main thrust of the Christian and the entirety of the Jewish exegetical tradition held that there was sexual procreation before the Fall. As for the Biblical narrative itself, Adam and Eve are encouraged to “eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:2). If “eating

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<sup>170</sup> The argument to make in order to retain the patristic notion of male headship as a sign of sexual differentiation would be fraught with difficulties, but would have to ground itself in the idea that prelapsarian rule would be *de facto* innocent of whatever charge of patriarchal domineering could be leveled against it: “But a man is the master of a free subject, by directing him either towards his proper welfare, or to the common good. Such a kind of mastership would have existed in the state of innocence between man and man...” [STh., I q. 96 a. 4]

<sup>171</sup> Stein, Edith. “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman”, pg. 64

<sup>172</sup> Veenker, Ronald A. “Forbidden Fruit: Ancient Near Eastern Sexual Metaphors.” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 70/71 (1999), 67

fruit” is the sexual act, then it rather looks as if the Genesis narrative describes the sex act as belonging to Adam and Eve from the first: “You may eat freely of every tree of the garden.” (2:15) Indeed, taken together with the command to “be fruitful and multiply” the abundance of allowed fruit in comparison to the singular, prohibited fruit seems to weigh the scales in favour of Stein’s position, namely, that some particular perversion of the sex act is prohibited, and not the act itself, which is available in abundance. If we recall the above-mentioned Talmudic tradition, in which sexual intercourse is itself a reminder of the unique, differentiated creation of male and female, and so of their creaturely insufficiency, then a certain logic appears. Whether or not the particular act of disobedience was an act of sexual perversion, any sexual act performed by a man and a woman who wished to be like God would have to be an act that obscures sexual difference as a sacrament of insufficiency. The litany of sexual perversions (onanism, sodomy, the mere neglect of each for the other, etc.) all have this much in common: that they do not require the other sex in the fullness of their difference.<sup>173</sup> The medieval story of Lilith as the proto-Eve who rejected the Talmudic description of sexual intercourse, in which man face earth and woman faces man, does very little to illuminate the nature of the first sin, but it does imagine the kind of sexual act, as well as the relation between the sexes, that an undifferentiated creation would entail. Here, God neglects to use differentiating determinate matter, and instead creates the first man and woman as the Babylonian Mother Goddess might have created them—out of the same stuff.

He then created a woman for Adam, from the earth, as He had created Adam himself, and called her Lilith. Adam and Lilith began to fight. She said, “I will not lie below,” and he said, “I will not lie beneath you, but only on top. For you are fit only to be in the bottom position, while I am to be in the superior one.” Lilith responded, “We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> This will be further discussed in III.2.

<sup>174</sup> Quoted in Wojciech, Kosior “A Tale of Two Sisters: The Image of Eve in Early Rabbinic Literature and Its Influence on the Portrayal of Lilith in the Alphabet of Ben Sira.” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues*, 32, (2018), 113

In this imaginary fall before the Fall, the sexual act is impossible, a fight, and finally, a separation. Where the sexual act does is not an embrace of difference or twofoldness but identity it ends in envy: the two attempting to assimilate a position that cannot be shared.

## 9. Androgyny as the bodily form of idolatry

The dream of androgyny is a mask that hides the aspiration to produce, not a harmonious unity of male and female, but a neuter term. This must be the case if “male” is only “male” in relation to “female,” and vice versa: any proposed unification of sexual difference into a third term would be, to the degree it was actually achieved, the annihilation of sexual difference, which relies on the maintenance of a fundamental twofoldness for its existence. Feminist authors have noted this paradox and largely declared “androgyny” to be without radical potential for the liberation of women, not only because it erases the category of woman as a meaningful category, but because, historically speaking, the resulting neuter term of the androgynous harmony is usually taken in the image of the male, and not the female.<sup>175</sup> Rendering sexual difference into a relative and surmountable appearance which can be overcome by asserting the existence of a pre or post-differentiated *x* carries an immense danger, namely, that a return to this *x* will not be a return to a more fundamental nature, but to another projection of power, a projection which expands its scope to all of human nature and goes all the more undetected for appearing as the fundamental truth which is “behind” the mere appearances of male and female.

This concern is a part of the Scriptures, which espouse this fundamental intuition that the machinations of earthly power are stayed by differentiation and helped by undifferentiation. While there are many forms of differentiation, the Bible knows of only one that is irreducible within the human family—sexual difference, understood as the either/or of being male or female, and asserted *a priori* as concomitant with creation itself—“male and female he created them.” Any attack on sexual difference is an attack

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<sup>175</sup> See, for instance, Friedrichsmeyer, Sara. “The Subversive Androgyne,” *Women in German Yearbook* Vol. 3 (1987), 63-75

on the real grounds of differentiation itself, and any attack on differentiation is analogously understood as the assertion of the myth of the primal androgyne over and against the doctrine of sexual differentiation.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Scholars who argue otherwise are usually looking to milk the Bible for some justification for “egalitarian gender roles.” To take a representative example:

“Many biblical scholars are now of the opinion that what we read of in the first three chapters of Genesis is (inter alia) the creation of a whole, “genderless” being in the likeness of God, or both male and female in gender (Gen. 1:26–27) This gender-united being, or androgyne, is only later separated in two in order that the human may commune with itself and, in its diversified state, help itself in the work it is given to do on the earth (Gen. 2:18–25). But the text makes plain that the Adam, the human being, is to be considered a unity, a oneness because, for example, the two halves come together in marital union (Gen. 2:23–24). This union is a symbolic reminder that the two are in reality one being, and it is in bigender or rather nongender that Godlikeness, or more precisely Yahweh-likeness (the particular Hebrew God) is manifest.” [Barber, Peter John. “The Role of the Androgyne in the Biblical Subversion of the Mytho-Sacrificial World: Exploring the Early Messianic Lineage as a Series of New Adams Author(s)” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, Vol. 22 (Spring 2015), 207]

The author precedes to make a case which can only be said to establish androgyny as an ideal within Israel’s theology by stripping it of any meaning. Androgyny is defined as “a character’s behavior that is atypical of her biological gender in terms of what her culture or society expects of her, especially in that this behavior is seen as more characteristic of and appropriate for the opposite sex.” [206] This is typical of literary treatments of the Bible which mask their own materialistic presumption, namely, that sexual difference is *reducible* to its expression/performance, as opposed to being that irreducibly given difference with which all expression, performance, and role wrestles. This presumption magically transforms every banal excursion into the world of the opposite sex into an anthropological event *sine qua non*: where the female sex simply *is*, among other things, the cultural expectation of smoothness as opposed to hairiness, then Jacob is an androgyne by virtue of lacking arm hair. On the slight evidence of Rahab being rather more courageous than expected, she is “another androgyne who saves the day.” [211]

It is untenable that God would make a human androgyne and *then* separate it in order that it might commune with itself, given that the capacity for communion is constitutive of the human as such. To speak in this manner is to unwittingly take the side of the myths that Genesis text deconstructs: to imagine the original man as something other than human.

It is likewise untenable to take the original creation of “male and female” to apply to a singular being, Adam, as if he/it/they androgynously combined these two modes within his person prior to the Creation of Eve. Their very existence as traits relies on their existence as real, different creations, from which all traits are derived. To speak of Adam harmonizing a female principle with a male principle in a cosmos in which there is, as of yet, neither a female nor a male is, frankly, incredible.

It is finally untenable to identify the apparently androgynous oneness of Adam with the oneness of a marital unity, which is obviously a unity of love that depends at every instance on the maintenance of the uniqueness and difference of the two poles of the relation. To call “marriage” a reminder of nongender Godlikeness is only to give evidence of never having been married. The description of Levinas is a classic one and should serve as basic response: “The pathos of love, however, consists in an insurmountable duality of beings. It is a relationship with what always slips away. The relationship does not ipso facto neutralize alterity but preserves it. The pathos of voluptuousness lies in the fact of being two. The other as

As we have seen, Aquinas arrives at a description of vegetable androgyny from the perspective of Aristotelian biology. The Jewish commentary tradition arrived at the same description from linguistic analysis, at least in the person of Radak, a medieval commentator who argued concerning the fruit trees of Genesis: “when this tree emerges from the bowels of the earth it is not to be masculine but is to directly produce fruit; much as a woman produces children. The trunk does not need to be fertilized by a feminine counterpart. The tree therefore bears a name which includes its masculine and feminine counterparts.”<sup>177</sup> The reason for this association of the fruit tree with androgyny seems apparent in the Genesis text. The description of “fruit trees of every kind that bear fruit with their seed in it” is heavy with the feminine image of “bearing fruit,” as in, “the fruit of the womb” (Genesis 30:2) and the masculine image of seed, as in “a flow of semen.” (Leviticus 22:4)<sup>178</sup> Within the narrative of the fall, then, the woman, stands under a potent image of androgyny and usurps the role of her husband, while her husband, receiving from her a command to eat of the fruit of the tree, usurps the role of his wife. But is not simply the case that the androgynous tree provides a fitting background for the androgyny that characterizes the sin of the man and the woman, rather, the tree is an idol.

Though a full theology of idolatry is beyond our purposes, some preliminary description of the idol is necessary in order to make sense out of the man and woman’s androgynous decline. An idol is an image which obscures what it purports to represent, in

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other is not here an object that becomes ours or becomes us; to the contrary, it withdraws into its mystery.” [Emmanuel Levinas, quoted in Fortin, Timothy, “Reciprocal Generativity.” [111-121](#)]

<sup>177</sup> Radak, *Radak on Genesis*, translated by Eliyahu Munk and Sefaria Community Translation, Public Domain, 1.11.4 [www.sefaria.org/Radak\\_on\\_Genesis](http://www.sefaria.org/Radak_on_Genesis). The 19th century exegete Shadal argues that “has seed in it...refers back to trees, that the trees should have everything they need for the preservation of their species on earth.” [Shadal, *Shadal on Genesis*, Sefaria Community Translation, Public Domain, 1.11.4 [www.sefaria.org/Shadal\\_on\\_Genesis.1.11.4](http://www.sefaria.org/Shadal_on_Genesis.1.11.4)]

<sup>178</sup> Likewise, from this same perspective it can be argued that not merely the Tree of Life, but all trees are signs of immortality. Philo: “For God willed that Nature should run a course that brings it back to its starting-point, endowing the species with immortality, and making them sharers of eternal existence. For the sake of this He both led on the beginning speedily towards the end, and made the end to retrace its way to the beginning. For it is the case both that the fruit comes out of the plants, as an end out of a beginning, and that out of the fruit again, containing as it does the seed in itself, there comes the plant, a beginning out of an end.” [Philo of Alexandria, “Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis 2 and 3” in *Philo, Vol. I*, trans. F. H. Colson, G.H. Whitaker, Loeb Classical Library 226 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929)] Immortality, as we will explore in III.4, is directly associated with androgyny, which would seek to avoid death by the infinite reproduction of the plant.



three ways. Spiritually, it purports to represent God, or at least a god. In fact, it represents a demon who operates through and behind the idol (Leviticus 17:7, Deut. 32:17, Psalm 106:37).<sup>179</sup> Psychologically, it purports to attain some natural good for man. In fact, this natural good masks man's striving after a supernatural good—namely, to be God. Socially, it purports to be an object of piety and worship. In fact, this “work of human hands” masks a power structure which redirects the wealth and ownership of its worshippers into the hands of an earthly power. The result of idol worship is the incorporation of its worshippers into a state of slavery, both spiritual and historical, and this state of slavery confers the qualities of the idol onto its slaves, who are willing participants in its total mechanism.<sup>180</sup>

Aquinas describes the temptation of the serpent as disguised and mediated by the tree: Satan “tempted directly concerning one thing because he was tempting indirectly concerning another. Hence in the case of the first man he suggested that he eat of the tree, which pertained to a bodily sin directly, but he secretly led him on to arrogance and greed, which are spiritual sins. Hence he said, you will be as gods.”<sup>181</sup> The tree, then, is the object which masks the desire to be like God with the desire for natural goods.

The tree, considered as a wealth for the fulfilment of natural desires and bodily goods, easily masked man's supernatural desire to seize goods proper to God alone, and thus rendered his rebellion “easy”. As far as the woman was concerned, she ate for understandable reasons: because “the tree was good for food...a delight to the eyes, and...to be desired to make one wise” (3:6). That she would be “like God” is conspicuously absent from her motivations. Aquinas argues that, because there was no disorder between the first woman's body and spirit in the original creation, “gluttony” could not have motivated her transgression, rather, gluttony resulted from her spiritual and idolatrous sin of pride: “Yet the very goodness and beauty of the fruit was not their first motive for sinning, but the persuasive words of the serpent, who said: *Your eyes*

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<sup>179</sup> “People call the images of the nations ‘gods,’ whereas this word is more precisely applied to the demon active in the image.” [Theodoret, *Questions*, 81]

<sup>180</sup> “What is this [Moses’ making the Israelites consume the golden calf] but that the worshippers of the devil had become the body of the same? In the same manner as men confessing Christ become the Body of Christ; so that to them is said, *but you are the Body of Christ and the members*” [Augustine, *Expositions*, 346].

<sup>181</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on Matthew*, 317

*shall be opened and you shall be as Gods*: and it was by coveting this that the woman fell into pride. Hence the sin of gluttony resulted from the sin of pride.”<sup>182</sup>

Likewise, the tree served as the mask for the true object of the woman’s piety—the serpent. Ephrem the Syrian points this out in his commentary, arguing that “just as the serpent desired, [the woman] directed her eyes away from the serpent who was before her and began to look upon the tree to which she had been commanded not to draw near.”<sup>183</sup> This redirection is necessary, because, according to Aquinas, “the devil also knew his own weakness [that] no one but the willing is conquered by him”<sup>184</sup> but, if he were to reveal himself as our adversary, no one would be willing to join him. An idol is necessary for the “father of lies” (John 8:44) who “disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Corinthian 11:14) to appear as anything but repellent.<sup>185</sup> Thus, as Ephrem says, “it was not so much the serpent’s counsel that entered her ear and provoked her to eat from the tree as it was her gaze, which she directed toward the tree, that lured her to pluck and eat of its fruit,” not because the tree was overpowering in its brilliance, but because, by redirecting her gaze, she no longer kept before her eye and her mind the strangeness and impertinence of the serpent: “She could have said to the serpent...’[I]f I do not know between good and evil, how can I discern whether your counsel is good or evil?...She however, said none of these things to the serpent so as to overcome it, but instead fixed her gaze on the tree and thus swiftly brought about her own defeat.”<sup>186</sup> Thus, the idol masks the devil, which is the true object of Adam and Eve’s piety, as Aquinas argues in his commentary on Romans: “Adam, indeed, believed the devil’s promise more than God’s threat, as is clear in Genesis 3; in a way, then, he preferred the devil to God. Therefore, idolaters sin in the likeness of Adam’s sin, because they abandon the worship of God to venerate the devil.”<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> STh., II-II q.163 a.1 ad 2

<sup>183</sup> Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works*, 112

<sup>184</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on Matthew* 329

<sup>185</sup> “It was by means of the true religion alone that it could be made manifest that the gods of the pagans were nothing but unclean spirits who used the memory of people departed or the images of earthly creatures to get themselves reckoned as gods and who then rejoiced with proud impurity that divine honors should be paid to such disgusting and indecent things, all the while hating to see men’s souls turn to the true God,” [Augustine, *City of God*, 12.33]

<sup>186</sup> Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works*, 112

<sup>187</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, L. 3 par. 261. Also, Ambrose: “Hence you may note that the serpent is the author of idolatry, for his cunning seems to be responsible for man’s error in introducing many gods.

If the theological description of the idol as a mask is correct, then the tree is the idol which the serpent deploys, beguiling the woman with a secondary order of goods and acts which mask a primary order of devil-worship and the envy of God. This theological description is supported by the biblical evidence. It is characteristic of idol-worshippers that they “become like what they worship,” as meticulously detailed in the recent work of G.K Beale.<sup>188</sup> There is a description of tree-worshipping idolater in Isaiah which, whether or not consciously inspired by the Genesis account, shows that such an account makes sense within the biblical tradition:

For you shall be ashamed of the oaks  
in which you delighted;  
and you shall blush for the gardens  
which you have chosen.  
For you shall be like an oak  
Whose leaf withers,  
And like a garden without water. (Isaiah 1:29-30)

Like the idolaters of Isaiah’s account, the woman delights in the tree, only to become ashamed after choosing it for food: “They knew that they were naked.” Having used the tree as an idol which both incited and masked their desire to be “like God,” they now become like unto their idol: “They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.” (3:7)<sup>189</sup>

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His deceit lay in stating that they will be like gods, for not only have men ceased to be like gods, but even those men who were like gods (to whom it was spoken, ‘I have said you are gods’) have fallen from His favour” [Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 342].

<sup>188</sup> G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009)

<sup>189</sup> Many within both the Christian and Jewish traditions have taken the tree of knowledge to be a fig tree, and the leaves which covered Adam and Eve’s nakedness to be taken from the very tree of which they ate: “And I sought leaves in my portion, that I might cover my shame; and I did not find them from the plants of paradise, since, at the time that I ate, the leaves of all the plants in my portion fell, except of the fig alone. And having taken leaves off it, I made myself a girdle, and it is from those plants of which I ate.” [Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., “Apocalypse of Moses” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: The Twelve Patriarchs, Excerpts and Epistles, the Clementina, Apocrypha, Decretals, Memoirs of Edessa and Syriac Documents, Remains of the First Ages*, trans. Alexander Walker, vol. 8 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 567]

This anti-idolatry reading sheds new light on the fact that “the man and his wife were naked, and were not ashamed,” (2:25) one which does not exclude the Augustinian and patristic interpretation, that man and wife were without concupiscence, but includes it. The man and the woman were both exposed in their sexual differentiation, but did not, for this, experience this differentiation as an evil, or a lack. They were unashamed of their peculiar flesh-and-bone condition of radical insufficiency. Freedom from concupiscence, within the patristic tradition, is the result of a submission of the highest in man, his reason, to God. This God-ruled reason was freed, in turn, to rule that which was lower in man, namely, his passions. This is why “when against God’s command men desired to be God, not by legitimate imitation, but by illicit pride, he was cast down to the mortality of the beasts.”<sup>190</sup> A reason that shirks off God as its ruler loses its rule. Thus, the maintenance of mankind’s status as “creature” before the Creator was requisite for the maintenance of mankind’s reason over his passions—that is, for his freedom from concupiscence. As the Wisdom of Solomon has it, “the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication,” (14:12) and not the other way around. Again, if “the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil” (14:27) it would make sense to see the cause of concupiscence in idolatry, rather than suspecting the cause of idolatry in concupiscence.<sup>191</sup>

After their disobedience, the man and the woman cover their genital difference with the leaves of an androgynous tree, and “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God *among the trees of the garden*.” (Genesis 3:8) The chief sign of their sexual differentiation has become the chief sign of their failure to become like the God who is beyond sex, and so they cover their genitals and obscure themselves androgynous plant world, descending, as it were, down the hierarchy of creation. This requires careful analysis, as the anti-idolatry interpretation is easily confused with a rote Augustinian interpretation, namely, that shame welled up in the disobedient because, by shrugging off the rule of God from their reason, their reason could no longer rule their passions, and

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<sup>190</sup> Augustine, *Against the Manicheans* Book 2, 84

<sup>191</sup> We should likewise consider Tertullian’s claim, that “[t]he principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry” [Tertullian, “On Idolatry,” in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 3, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 61].

their bodies began to act by their own rule—genital arousal being a chief sign of this new state of the flesh which no longer required the consent of the well-ordered will in order to move.<sup>192</sup> A close reading of the biblical account shows that the Augustinian interpretation of original shame makes better sense as a “moment” within an original *fear*.

While originally “the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed,” the Genesis account does not mention, directly, that the man and his wife felt shame after their sin. It says, “then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together,” (Gen. 3:7). If the Augustinian description seems to describe an act (disobedience) followed by an affection (shame), the biblical account describes an act followed by knowledge. Their *knowledge* of being naked, rather than their feeling of shame over being naked, seemed sufficient to the Genesis account to explain the subsequent act of covering their genital difference with leaves. Their seeing and knowing is the result of believing the serpent’s promise that they would see (“your eyes will be opened”) and that they would know (“knowing good and evil”). This parallel suggests a reading of Genesis 3:7 which emphasizes a great let-down of the man and woman’s serpentine expectations. That is, “We wanted our eyes to be opened to spiritual mysteries, and instead they were opened onto our naked flesh; we wanted to know like God, instead, we know that we are naked.” To know that they are naked is to know that their idolatrous hopes have been crushed. If this is the case, then “nakedness” takes on a primary meaning of *non-divinity, as known by those who would have divinity*.

Indeed, the emotion following the Fall in the biblical account is not shame, but fear, and it is a fear, not of the man for the woman, but of the man for God: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” (3:10) One would rather expect Adam to say, “I was afraid, because I broke the commandment,” or “I was afraid, because I have made myself worthy of your punishment,” but instead, he says “I was afraid, because I was naked.” Being naked could only make Adam afraid of God if the meaning of his nakedness was non-divinity, and not the creaturely non-divinity

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<sup>192</sup> Augustine gives many accounts of lust as a loss of the body’s obedience throughout his work: “And therefore, being ashamed of the disobedience of their own flesh, which witnessed to their disobedience while it punished it, ‘they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons,’ that is, cinctures for their privy parts... Shame modestly covered that which lust disobediently moved in opposition to the will, which was thus punished for its own disobedience. Consequently all nations, being propagated from that one stock, have so strong an instinct to cover the shameful parts.” [Augustine, *The City of God*, 14.17]

which is “very good”, but the non-divinity which Adam only knows through an envious comparison—*the lack of being God as known by the one who would be “like God.”* Adam believed the lie of the serpent, that God was his competitor,<sup>193</sup> and in trying to compete, he realized just how inadequate he was for the contest. Genesis 3:10 shows him continuing in this new mode of existence—a failed and woefully inadequate competitor for divinity, afraid of God as a man with a knife fears a man with a gun. Gregory the Great argues that this is a combination of fear with pride, the former recognizing man’s inadequacy, and the latter persisting in competing with God: “And hence the first man waxed bolder after his sin, saying, *The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.* And truly, he had fled to hide himself out of fear, yet when he was called in question, he made it appear how swoln he was with pride while he feared; for when punishment is feared as the present consequence of sin, and the face of God being lost is not loved, the fear is one that proceeds from a high stomach, and not from a lowly spirit. For he is full of pride who does not give over his sin, if he may go unpunished.”<sup>194</sup>

To argue that the would-be androgynous body is a fundamentally fearful body is not to say that nakedness can be divorced from its sexual meaning. Quite the opposite: the *reason* that nakedness signifies non-divinity, as known by those who would have divinity, is because nakedness is always the revelation of sexual difference, that sacramental sign of creaturely insufficiency. Nakedness is not the brute fact of not wearing clothes. It is sexual difference in envious comparison to one who is not sexually differentiated—God. There is a certain comedy here, revealed by the divine joke that ends the narrative of the mankind’s fall: “God, then, replied to man’s proud ambition, showing the results of man’s desire for what the Devil had suggested in the words *You will be like gods.* Behold, God said, *Adam has become like one of Us.*”<sup>195</sup> Adam and Eve would have denied the meaning of their sexually differentiated flesh to become “like

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<sup>193</sup> STh., II-II. Q163. a. 1: “Further, a gloss on 1 Tim. 2:14, The woman being seduced was in the transgression, says: The Apostle rightly calls this seduction, for they were persuaded to accept a falsehood as being true; namely that God had forbidden them to touch that tree, because He knew that if they touched it, they would be like gods, as though He who made them men, begrudged them the godhead.”

<sup>194</sup> Saint Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, vol. 1 (Oxford; London: John Henry Parker; J. G. F. and J. Rivington, 1844), 216.

<sup>195</sup> St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 173.

gods.” Beholding them we see—sexually differentiated flesh under fig-leaves. This is all their idolatry can achieve: not the likeness of God, but the hiding of humanity from God and from themselves; not the androgynous body, unmarked by its constitutive insufficiency, but the sexed body, obscured; not a true ascent to the divine height, but a futile faking of vegetable and animal positions.

This is an important point, because the axiom that the worshipper becomes like what he worships can lead to the idea that the means by which this likeness is attained is by a kind of spiritual osmosis, as if, by idolizing the tree, man simply takes on tree-like qualities. But if all idol-worship is the mask by which our desire to be like God passes, covertly, as a desire for natural goods, and by which the adversary passes as a friend, our “becoming like the idol” is likewise a mask, one which hides the fundamental inability for the idol (and thus the devil) to grant these desires.

If man would be God, but man cannot be God, then God must be redefined. Man must shift the goalposts to attain the goal. Therefore Aquinas argues that ignorance of the true God is a dispositive cause of idolatry,<sup>196</sup> for, if we knew Him, we would also know that no creature could possibly be Him. The lie of the serpent is a lie about the nature of God, which renders him into a possible target of man’s aspirations. The serpent describes God as withholding the means by which man can be like him, insinuating that he is jealous over his divinity as of a scarce commodity. According to an early Christian tradition, the serpent tells them woman that God fears their becoming divine: “God, knowing this, that ye shall be like Him, has had a grudge against you, and said, Ye shall not eat of it. But do thou observe the plant, and thou shalt see great glory about it.”<sup>197</sup> Rashi, citing an older tradition, argued that the serpent insinuated that God attained his knowledge of good and evil by eating of the tree: “Every artisan detests his fellow-artisans (“Two of a trade never agree”). The serpent suggested to her: God ate of the tree and created the world, so if you eat...”<sup>198</sup> If God is one who eats of the tree and attains knowledge, then he is really no

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<sup>196</sup> STh., II-II q. 94 a. 4: Men fall to idols “on account of their ignorance of the true God, inasmuch as through failing to consider His excellence men gave divine worship to certain creatures, on account of their beauty or power, wherefore it is written (Wis 13:1, 2): ‘All men . . . neither by attending to the works have acknowledged who was the workman, but have imagined either the fire, or the wind, or the swift air, or the circle of the stars, or the great water, or the sun and the moon, to be the gods that rule the world.’”

<sup>197</sup> “Apocalypse of Moses” 567

<sup>198</sup> Rashi on Genesis 3:5:1

more than an exalted man, who may eat of the tree and attain the same. And if God became God by means of the tree, then the tree is, in a sense, more powerful than God. The reason why idol-worshippers become like what they worship is not auxiliary to their envious desire to be “like God,” rather, it is *because* they want to be like God that they must mediate him through, and ultimately transform him into, a more imitable object. Then, by becoming like *this* object, they become like God—having already made him in their image.

Becoming like what they worship, however, is always described as a punishment, for if the human is already “after the likeness of God” then the attempt to seize a greater likeness by imitating some other thing than God can only be movement towards the subhuman. As Lactantius argues, “how can those images which neither feel nor are moved be considered like to God...it is man himself who feels, and is moved, and does many great actions.”<sup>199</sup> But it is only a punishment from the perspective of true religion. For the idol worshipper, their “glory is their shame”, for they become like their man-made “God”.

By making God dependent in his divinity on a created good, man treats a created good as God, and thus redirects his desire to be “like God” towards this created good—faking by descent what he could not attain by ascent. The shame of nakedness is best understood in relation to this *fear* of nakedness, where nakedness is understood as the sacramental sign of man’s failure to become like God through his idol and the promise of the devil, who operates the idol. The man and the woman cover their nakedness by covering with leaves and hiding among the trees, indicating that they persist in the same sin, continuing to compete with the sufficiency of God by imitating the created self-sufficiency of their idol, the tree.

The man and the woman are not blushing and embarrassed before each other and their newly disobedient flesh as much as they are openly antagonistic—especially in the attitude of the man towards the woman: “as is the custom with pride, he does not accuse himself of having consented to the woman, but pushes the fault off upon the woman.”<sup>200</sup> The reason for this is simple: if, under the assumption of creatureliness, woman is the one

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<sup>199</sup> Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, 99

<sup>200</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Against the Manichees*, 121



who confirms and realizes the very goodness of creaturely insufficiency, then, under the assumption of competition with the divine, the woman becomes the obstacle to man's self-sufficiency, and thus divinity. The woman becomes, as a result of the Fall, what the myths describe her as a result of her creation—an adversary given by an adversarial God for the sake of crippling man's efforts to seize divinity, “as if she had been given to Adam for this purpose, and not rather that she should obey her husband and that both of them should obey God!”<sup>201</sup> Thus the man faults God for his fearful nakedness,<sup>202</sup> describing the woman as God's weapon: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” (3:12) Like Pandora, like Enkidu's harlot, the woman is blamed, and the Genesis text stands revealed as a precise inversion of the myth of primal androgyny, describing a prideful fall from differentiation into a never-realized sameness, where the myths describe a fall from a divine sameness into a humiliating difference.

Idol-worship is always a deception. The fruit of the tree does not really make man like God, man does not really cover his creaturely insufficiency by becoming like unto the trees, and the blurring of sexual differentiation bemoaned by Ephrem and Chrysostom does not really create a harmonious androgyne, able to compete with a God who is “his own happiness.” Rather, the blurring of sexual differentiation was always resentment towards that other who wounds man's would-be self-sufficiency—God's tribunal simply reveals it. Hatred of the woman is the only true “fruit” that the grasp at androgynous divinity attains, and the only “sameness” established between the those who would be “like God” is a mutual disappointment in the sexually differentiated other who frustrates

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<sup>201</sup> St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 168. Ephrem of Syria reminds Adam that the woman is not a Pandora, but a help, and that his unreasonable acquiescence to the voice of his wife is not an excuse, but an attempt at sexual undifferentiation: “If God gave you the woman, O Adam, He gave her to you to help you, not to cause you harm, and as one to be commanded, not one to give command” [Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works*, 118].

<sup>202</sup> Augustine sees, in Adam's accusation of God, the continued attempt to be “like God” by that inverse action of idolatry, which shifts the goalposts and calls God “like man”: “For he did not just say, “The woman gave to me,” but added on, “The woman you gave to me.” Nothing is as familiar for sinners as to want to attribute to God everything for which they are accused, and this arises from that vein of pride. For man sinned in wishing to be like God, that is, to be free from his dominion, as God is free from all dominion, since he is the Lord of all. Because he could not be equal to him in majesty, now that he has fallen and is lying in his sin, he tried to make God his equal. Or rather he wants to show that God has sinned, while he himself is innocent” [Augustine, *On Genesis* 121].

this desire: “although her sex is different from Adam’s, her pride is the same.”<sup>203</sup> The ones who would eradicate their constitutive difference, signified in the uncovered flesh, only end up stunting their capacity to rejoice in that difference; they are only androgynous and equal in their mutual refusal to celebrate their creaturely status. Sexism, especially of the man towards the woman, is the real achievement of would-be androgyny; a constant, restless suppression of the meaning of the woman is the only real form that the would-be androgynous body can take.

## 10. The garments of skin as a likeness to the animals

If creation is hierarchically ordered towards increased sexual differentiation until it reaches man, whose sexual differentiation is unlike all others and, according to Aquinas, allows for his intellectual operation, it makes sense that the purported ascent beyond differentiation was, in fact, a descent. In Daniel’s story of another would-be god, Nebuchadnezzar, this descent down the hierarchy of sexual differentiation is made explicit: Nebuchadnezzar’s attempt to become like God is punished by his actually becoming like an animal. His fall parallels Adam’s, giving further credence to the notion that Adam’s sin was primarily understood as idolatry.<sup>204</sup> Nebuchadnezzar considers Babylon as existing “for the glory of my majesty” (Daniel 4:30). Likewise, the man and the woman reorder the meaning of Eden as existing for their glory, rather than for the glory of God, when they eat of the fruit in order to become wise. Both Nebuchadnezzar and Adam immediately face the judgment of God, the former through “a voice from Heaven” (Daniel 4:31) and the latter from “the Lord God walking in the garden” (Genesis 3:8). God strips Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—“the kingdom has departed from you, and

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<sup>203</sup> St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 168–169

<sup>204</sup> “For it is hence that the King of Babylon, while he was secretly revolving in his own mind, in the pride of his heart, saying, *Is not this great Babylon which I have builded?* (Dan. 4:30) was suddenly turned into an irrational beast. For he lost all that he had been made, because he would not humbly keep back what he had done; and because in the pride of his heart he lifted himself up above men, he lost that very human faculty, which he had in common with man” [Saint Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, vol. 1 (Oxford; London: John Henry Parker; J. G. F. and J. Rivington, 1844), 253–254].

you shall be driven from among men” (Daniel 4:31-2)—and strips Adam of Eden—”He drove out the man” (Genesis 3:24). Nebuchadnezzar is cursed to dwell “with the beasts of the field” and “eat grass like an ox” (Daniel 4:32) while Adam is cursed to toil and to “eat of the plants of the field.” (Genesis 3:18).

The accounts are not exact parallels, as Nebuchadnezzar explicitly loses his intellectual operation and becomes like a beast—“his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers, and his nails were like birds’ claws” (Daniel 4:33)—while Adam is still able to reason, though the tradition holds that, by sin, he lost that wisdom which was infused in him by God. Indeed, as God showed mercy to Nebuchadnezzar by making his descent last only “until you have learned that the Most High rules the kingdom of men” (Daniel 4:32). God can be seen as showing mercy to Adam by not letting him plunge to the degree of likeness which he took on through his androgynous idol-worship: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.” (Genesis 3:21) The meaning of the garments of skin is contested throughout the Jewish and Christian tradition, though it is consistently taken as a great kindness of God.<sup>205</sup> From this reading, the exchange of the covering of plants for a covering of animal skins is a sign that the punishment of God *stops* man’s plunge down the hierarchy of creation, and reinscribes sexual differentiation, only this time, in accord with man’s new, sinful state. While not reduced to it, man’s sexual differentiation is garmented in the sexual differentiation of the animals in which he is clothed.

The man and the woman are reminded by punishment of the sexual differentiation they could not keep in mind by obedience. Adam is cursed to toil with the earth, not arbitrarily, but as a reminder of his unique origin “*for out of it you were taken*; you are dust, and to the dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). As Ephrem puts it: “Because ‘you are from the dust’ and have forgotten yourself, ‘you shall return to the dust,’ so that,

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<sup>205</sup> “Deeds of loving-kindness are mentioned at the beginning of the Torah, in its middle, and at its conclusion. At the beginning of the Torah, the naked are clothed, as it is said: *The Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin, and He clothed them*; in the middle of the Torah, the ailing are visited, as it is said: *And God appeared unto him in the grove of Mamre*; and at the conclusion of the Torah, the dead are buried, as is said: *And he was buried in the valley in the land of Moab*. In this way you must walk in the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He.” [Midrash Tanchuma, trans. by John T. Townsend, (1989) Vayishlach 10:5 [https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash\\_Tanchuma](https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanchuma)]

through your state of humiliation, you shall come to know your true essence.”<sup>206</sup> Eve is cursed to toil with the rule of her unique origin—her husband, from whose side she was taken. (3:16) Instead of the pleasurable, perfecting knowledge of sexual differentiation visible in their “nakedness without shame,” sexual differentiation is known in and through pain: “To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing’” (3:16) and the man is given thorns and thistles with which to toil.<sup>207</sup> This accords with and forms a type for God’s program of penance: “as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you” (Deut. 8:5), or, as Chrysostom says, “the punishment inflicted on the fallen demonstrates God’s great love.”<sup>208</sup> God’s punishment has the intention of fulfilling in the disobedient what was previously fulfilled by their obedience.<sup>209</sup> Just as in Nebuchadnezzar’s punishment, the descent to an animal status is not merely the result of losing reason’s rule over the body; it is also the means by which the man and the woman are able to re-cognize the supremacy of God and the very goodness of their creaturely status.

Unlike the idolatrous desire for a mythically devised divine androgyny, animal androgyny, understood as the unity of the male and female in the one “kind” which is

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<sup>206</sup> Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works*, 120. See also John Chrysostom: “It was not without purpose that he said, ‘from which he was taken.’ It was that he might in this work have a constant reminder of his humiliation, and be in a position to know that his subsistence derived from that source, and the composition of his body originally came from the soil—hence, he says, till the soil from which he himself was composed.” [John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 18–45*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 82, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 9.]

<sup>207</sup> Chrysostom points out the salutary effects of this painful “gender role”: “I invest you with great labor, toil and difficulty [...] so that under pressure from these you may have continual guidance in keeping to limits and recognizing your own make-up” [John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1–17*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 74, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 244]. Likewise, Aquinas argues that the punishments were given “[w]ith regard to the body, to which pertains the distinction of sex, one punishment was appointed to the woman and another to the man. To the woman punishment was appointed in respect of two things on account of which she is united to the man; and these are the begetting of children, and community of works pertaining to family life...[and] just as it belongs to the woman to be subject to her husband in matters relating to the family life, so it belongs to the husband to provide the necessities of that life. In this respect he was punished in three ways.” [STh. II-II. Q. 164 a. 2]

<sup>208</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 18–45*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 82, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 3

<sup>209</sup> The Christian tradition sees this “method,” in which the forsaken natural returns as the enforced legal, as part of the very structure of Creation. See, for instance, Bonaventure: “Thus, what had become disordered through the forsaking of natural order became subject at once to judicial order: for this twofold ordering enfolds all things so strictly that whatever falls away from the first immediately sinks back into the second.” [Saint Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, trans. José De Vinck, vol. 2, *The Works of Bonaventure: Cardinal Seraphic Doctor and Saint* (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1963), 118]

reproduced by them, *can* be imitated by the man and the woman: they already share in animal nature as animated bodies. Though a full description of the Christian tradition on “nature” and “grace” exceeds our purposes, it will suffice to note that this subordination to the status of animals is not unnatural, as if God violently turns Adam and Eve into animals, and “changed their bodies into this mortal flesh.” Rather, the Christian tradition describes man as a being for whom grace is nature; he is kept from the natural mortality of his material body by a gift, a gift accepted by obedience to the one who gives it and discarded by disobedience.

When Adam and Eve strive to be “like God,” they strive to give themselves the gift of continued life rather than, by rejoicing in their status as creatures, continuing to receive that gift from their Creator, believing the words of the serpent, “you shall not die.” (3:4) From the standpoint of idolatry, this is the imitation of God who likewise “shall not die.” But from the standpoint of the real order of Creation, the attempt to continue one’s own life by way of activity rather than passivity (by strength, rather than weakness) can only be an imitation of inferior modes of biological continuity. The plant and the animal species are created beings which naturally “give themselves life,” but this occurs in and through the subordination of the individual to the species, an inferior mode of being. The human rejection of the gift of life, and the attempt to give himself life, simply *is* the imitation of these inferior modes of being, but because this imitation does not alter his nature, turning him into a species the individuals of which really *are* subordinated to their species, this imitation is experienced as ill-fit, painful, and humiliating.

The most obvious way in which human sexual difference becomes garmented in animal sexual difference is that it begins to participate in the logic of death. In a prelapsarian world, the “preservation of the human race” was not a legitimate goal of human “reproduction.” The human race was already preserved, by God, in his preservation of each individual unto eternal life. Thus, Aquinas argues that “although generation in the state of innocence might not have been required for the preservation of the species, yet it would have been required for the multiplication of the individual.”<sup>210</sup> This tersely describes sexual generation unaffected by scarcity, in which one generates in

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<sup>210</sup> STh., I. q. 98 a. 1

order to make more people, because they are very good, rather than to preserve a species threatened by extinction.

Once the man and the woman face the threat of death, a certain imitation of animal sexual difference becomes possible. They may now generate in order to preserve themselves from death. This participation in animal sexuality is a divine punishment, not as an extrinsic rebuke, but as the only possible mode of sexuality that a human being who receives his life directly from God but rejects this in an attempt to give himself life, can experience. Ephrem describes God as slaughtering animals before them: “Why would beasts have been killed in their presence? Perhaps, it was...so that by the death [of the animals] Adam and Eve might see the death of their own bodies,”<sup>211</sup> And Augustine asks, “what could more clearly signify the death that we experience in our body than skins which we get from dead animals?”<sup>212</sup> Like the anti-androgynous reminders of male and female separation, present in the command that each turn toward their unique, determinate matter (the dust and the man), so the threat of death enforces, as by a law, the acknowledgment of twofoldness that was given as a gift from the beginning. Death-haunted, man must reveal and acknowledge that he is “male and female,” and thus not God, if the human family is to survive. The gift that is rejected returns as a law that is enforced.

Through law, God safeguards man, in a juridical and remedial way, from his idolatrous desire to appear as man-alone. This is a good point of departure for understanding the Augustinian argument that, after the Fall, the man and the woman “were completely naked, interiorly deserted by the grace which they had offended by pride and arrogant love of their own independence. Casting their eyes on their bodies, they felt a movement of concupiscence which they had not known.”<sup>213</sup> Genital arousal follows after sin, not because genital arousal is itself evil, but because man, having failed to maintain the gift of sexual differentiation must now receive arousal as a law: “When they forfeited this condition, then, their bodies contracted that liability to disease and death which is present in the flesh of animals—and thus also that motion of the genitals

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<sup>211</sup> Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works*, 121-122

<sup>212</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 127–128.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

which stirs in animals the desire to mate, and so ensures the birth of young to take the place of those which die.”<sup>214</sup> Genital arousal can be described as a sign of disobedience, in which man finds “his own members emulating against himself that very disobedience which he had practiced against God,”<sup>215</sup> but this disobedience is legally prescribed to serve the purposes of procreation, , to reveal the sexual-differentiation that idolatry would hide and so rebuke the myth of primal androgyny in our very flesh.<sup>216</sup> Likewise, a Jewish tradition held that menstruation was a part of the punishment of the woman: “In that way she brought about [Adam’s] death and, as it were, shed his blood, and the law prescribes: *Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed* (Gen. 9:6). That is why woman’s blood is made to flow.”<sup>217</sup> Considered merely as a flow of blood, menstruation is a *tit for tat* punishment, but considered as the “other side” of the ovulatory cycle, menstruation is the subordination of man and woman under the imitation of the “periodic sexuality” of the higher animals, for whom the genital organs are typically hidden and who do not copulate outside of “mating periods.” As genital arousal moves the male and female towards the revelation of sexual difference as if by an external, legal agent, so the female fertility cycle, typified in menstruation, does the same. Augustine argues that, prior to wishing to be like God and so beyond sexual difference, man deliberately obeyed the command to be fruitful and multiply. After disobeying God, he can no longer obey deliberately, but must, at least in part, *submit* to the law, which now operates coercively through “ardent or wanton incentive”.<sup>218</sup> God achieves in man that one-flesh union of

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid. See also: *Rabbeinu Bahya*, Bereshit 4:1:1 “After Adam had realized that he had been expelled from Gan Eden, that death had been decreed for him, and that he would not live indefinitely, it became necessary for him to have sexual relations with his wife in order to assure himself of children for posterity.”

<sup>215</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “A Treatise on the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin,” in *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes, vol. 5, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 251.

<sup>216</sup> Thus the tradition describe our body of death as being for the prevention of pride, as in Gregory Nazianus: “Or, is it his will that we, who are a portion of God and have our source in heaven above, should always look to him as we wrestle and fight against the flesh and that the weakness to which we are harnessed should serve to impress upon us our true worth, lest we disdain our Creator out of pride and an inflated sense of our own importance? that we may know that we are at once most exalted and most humble, earthly and celestial, ephemeral and immortal, heirs of light and fire—or of darkness—depending on which way we turn? Such is our hybrid nature which, in my view at least, takes this form so that whenever we feel exalted because of our likeness to God’s image, we may be brought down because of our clay” [Gregory Nazianus, *Select Orations*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Martha Vinson, vol. 107, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 43–44].

<sup>217</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Noach 1:3

<sup>218</sup> Aquinas, quoting Augustine, STh I. q. 98. a. 2

male and female that man sought to shirk in his idolatrous bid for primal androgyny. He does this by clothing man in the skin of animals—by subjecting the man and the woman to a body haunted by death, which strives against death through periodic and situational arousal, which the man and woman now experience as a law commanding them to reveal themselves in their sexual difference and to procreate new individuals.<sup>219</sup> That man experiences shame in his genital arousal and revelation is a sign that the man and woman do not *become* animals. If they did, subjection to a law would not irk them. If they became animals, death would not haunt them, and the successful reproduction of the human species would obliterate the terror of personal death. If they became animals, there would be no hope of redemption beyond the law, in which the command to be fruitful and multiply is obeyed in freedom rather than submitted to in apparent necessity. Rather, they are clothed *as* animals, participating in animal sexual differentiation without being reduced to it, in order that they might ascend, by grace, to the abundant logic of human sexual differentiation.<sup>220</sup> Ashamed that they must be coerced into learning that it is not good for man to be alone, this very shame is the evidence that they are capable, by grace, of learning the lesson. As Augustine argues:

For although “man being placed in honour abideth not; and being without understanding, is compared with the beasts, and is like them,” yet the resemblance is not so absolute that he becomes a beast. There is a comparison, no doubt, between the two; but it is not by reason of nature, but through vice—not vice in the beast, but in

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<sup>219</sup> It is in this way that human sexuality is associated with a descent to the life of the beasts, not, as is so often erroneously presumed, because it is somehow more bodily than other acts, but because it is subjected to a coercive law as a safeguard against a prideful reason which would overcome all sexuality: “Beasts are without reason. In this way man becomes, as it were, like them in coition, because he cannot moderate concupiscence. In the state of innocence nothing of this kind would have happened that was not regulated by reason, not because delight of sense was less, as some say (rather indeed would sensible delight have been the greater in proportion to the greater purity of nature and the greater sensibility of the body), but because the force of concupiscence would not have so inordinately thrown itself into such pleasure, being curbed by reason, whose place it is not to lessen sensual pleasure, but to prevent the force of concupiscence from cleaving to it immoderately.” [Aquinas, STh. I q. 98.a 2]

<sup>220</sup> “[I]n our bodies, that is to say, in what God has made, all was honourable and well-pleasing, there yet accrued in the intercourse of male and female what caused shame, so that their union was not such as might have been in the body of that unimpaired life, but such as we see with a blush in the body of this death.” [Augustine of Hippo, “On Marriage and Concupiscence,” in *Saint Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes, vol. 5, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 289]



nature. For so excellent is a man in comparison with a beast, that man's vice is beast's nature; still man's nature is never on this account changed into beast's nature. God, therefore, condemns man because of the fault wherewithal his nature is disgraced, and not because of his nature, which is not destroyed in consequence of its fault.<sup>221</sup>

## 11. The redemption of Eve

Throughout the Christian tradition, the woman is considered as the weaker of the two sexes. This, for Augustine, was why she was tempted first; the serpent "making his assault upon the weaker part of that human alliance, that he might gradually gain the whole, and not supposing that the man would readily give ear to him, or be deceived, but that he might yield to the error of the woman."<sup>222</sup> But if "weakness" is fundamental to the being of woman, it cannot be a kind of deficiency, lest we render the original creation deficient and God's declaration of "very good" something less than the truth. Rather, the original woman is "weak" because, in her sexual difference, she reveals the constitutive weakness of man, his insufficiency and his need of the other to be, to be who he is, and to be what he is. The first "help" she gives to man is the realization that he, like her, is constitutively in need of help. This primary, prelapsarian weakness of the woman is not something deficient in woman vis-à-vis man but a light shining on the murkiness of the human condition and revealing it as most fundamentally created: given, contingent, and from God.<sup>223</sup> To describe women as "the weaker sex," in this context, can only be to describe women as the revelation of the goodness of created weakness, a weakness that only appears as a deficiency when idolatrously, enviously, and ridiculously compared to the strength and sufficiency of the Creator.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Augustine, "A Treatise on the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin", 254.

<sup>222</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 272.

<sup>223</sup> Likewise, weakness, understood as insufficiency, is a prerequisite for the actualization of the intellectual operation, both metaphysically (passive to reality) and linguistically (every word implies a passive listener).

<sup>224</sup> This primary meaning does not negate the more humdrum observation that, all other things being equal, women are often physically weaker than man; rather, it transforms this relative physical weakness into a sacramental reminder of man's constitutive weakness as one who receives himself from God.

Just as the Fall is a fall from sexual differentiation into the illusion of androgyny, so it is a fall from constitutive weakness into the illusion of self-sufficient strength. The original sin is a perversion of power: Adam and Eve “sinned by coveting God’s likeness as regards his own power of operation, namely that by his own natural power he might act so as to obtain happiness. Hence Augustine says that the woman’s mind was filled with love of her own power.”<sup>225</sup> Adam and Eve would be “like God,” but not through participation. Rather, Eve would have divinity as a result; Adam would “put forth his hand and take” (Genesis 3:22) godhood rather than receive it as a gift. Were the tree to have the effect that the serpent said it would, man’s new, divine state of being would always be referable back to himself as an effect of his own action and a result of his own choice. He would have appeared as his own creator. This “self-founding” would have obliterated that constitutive weakness whereby man, in wondering who, what, and that he is, rejoices to find that he is constituted by another—that he is primordially *helped*. Of course, were the fruit to have had this effect, man would not have become “like” God, retaining his essential humanity while elevating its operations to new, divine heights. Rather, insofar as being-created and thus being-helped is constitutive of what it means to be human, to eat of the tree could only mean death, the end of the human as such, and thus, “in the day you eat of it you shall die.” (2:17) To want to exist beyond help is simply to want to be something other than a human being, and, if it were possible to become “like God” in this sense, it could only be through annihilation.

This is the specific tragedy of the first woman: that she who gave Adam a world envied the Creator of the world; that she who actualized the human intellectual operation desired to possess the divine intellect; that she who was to protect man from idolatry made man’s first idol; that she, the helpmate of man and the sacramental sign of man’s nature as a “helped one” acted so as to not need help, but to have the “self-founding” strength of God; that, though the woman “protected the first-formed father of the world when he alone had been created [and] delivered him from his transgression” (Sirach 10:1-2) still, “the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” (Timothy 2:13-14) This, and not some unenlightened sexism, forms the basis of the emphasis on the woman as the source of sin throughout the Scriptures: “From a woman sin had its beginning, and

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<sup>225</sup> ST. II-II. Q. 163 a. 2

because of her we all die.” (Sirach 25:24) Unlike the myths, in which the woman is bemoaned for inaugurating the condition of human weakness, the Scriptures bemoan the first woman for denying the “very good” condition of human weakness in and through shirking her own vocation as the sacramental sign of man as a being whose “help” is from the Lord.

Joan O’Brien suggested that Eve of the Genesis text was originally a deity, one who suffered the “Near Eastern pattern of demoting mother goddesses,” a pattern evident in the name of Pandora, meaning “Having All Gifts,” and her evident pre-existence as an earth goddess, the Giver of All Gifts.<sup>226</sup> Eve’s epithet “Mother of All the Living” seems to indicate another once-goddess, now a mere mortal, albeit one with an awkwardly ambitious title that subsequent traditions must labour to explain. O’Brien speculates, in a feminist vein, that the change may have been the result of the increasing power of patriarchal priesthoods, who emphasized male, protector gods over female, life-giving gods in order to sanction their own political power.

The evidence is too slight to affirm or deny the claim. If it is true, it would certainly fit with the polemical nature of Genesis, though not quite in the way O’Brien speculates. The verse, “The man gave his wife the name ‘Eve,’ because she was the mother of all the living” (Genesis 3:20), arrives *after* the narrative of the Creation, Fall, and Punishment, suggesting that the events are meant to explain, in part, *why* she has such a name. If the name solely and exclusively meant that Eve was to bear the world’s first children, as many of the Church Fathers reasoned,<sup>227</sup> it does seem like an odd place to mention it, as opposed to, say, incorporating it within Adam’s initial rejoicing over the woman as “flesh of his flesh,” which follows after Adam’s naming of the animals and includes his decision to call her “woman.”<sup>228</sup> But if we take Eve as the one who would be “like God” over and against her vocation as the embodiment of man’s limit, then the location of the

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<sup>226</sup> O’Brien, Joan. “Nammu, Mami, Eve and Pandora: ‘What’s in a Name?’” *The Classical Journal* 79, no. 1 (1983): 35–45.

<sup>227</sup> “[T]hat is to say, she is the source of all those who will come from her, the root and foundation of the future race. [John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 18–45*, 4.]

<sup>228</sup> Indeed, the location of the verse lead some of the Fathers to consternation, as when Augustine argued that the verse means the opposite of what it seems: “she is the mother of the living, because the life lived in sins is habitually called death in the scriptures”. [Saint Augustine, *On Genesis*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, vol. 13, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 92.]

verse makes sense, as does Eve's (arguably) divine name and honorific. The author demotes a Near Eastern goddess precisely because Eve, in her transgression, desired to become a goddess; the author transforms a divine title into a quotidian description given by her husband, precisely because Eve, in her pride, *did* seek to become the Mother of All the Living, that is, a self-founding, self-sufficient, androgynous usurpation of the True God, and was punished by being subordinated to her husband.

To argue that the Genesis text sounds like it *once* contained a now-demoted female divinity is to make an unsolvable mystery of what appears rather plainly, namely, that the Genesis text is *on the face of it* concerned with demoting a would-be female divinity. Given Genesis's work of demythologization, by which idolatrous claims about man and God are taken up into Israelite theology and used against themselves,<sup>229</sup> it is more likely that the text deliberately takes up the title of a Near Eastern goddess in order to show the extent of Eve's idolatry, than that the text contains the fossil of a previous tradition, unscoured by a redactor. It is not clear which goddess, exactly, the biblical Eve might demote. Because of their similar status as females who give birth, with help, to a labouring human race, Isaac Kikawada argued "that behind the character of Eve was probably hidden the figure of the creatress or the mother-goddess Mami [of Atrahasis], and that [...] Eve was an onomastic form derived from her title."<sup>230</sup> The Israelite people were quick to worship various mother deities of the surrounding nations—like the "Queen of Heaven" of Jeremiah 7:18 and 44:17-19. It should not surprise us that the same theology which demoted the Sun and the Moon to the status of creatures would likewise demote an earth goddess, of whatever name, to serve as the image of the earthly mother of the human race. As God's punishment of Adam and Eve's androgynous sin subjected them to their unique, differentiated origins—"dust" (3:19) and "husband," (3:16) respectively—so Eve's punishment subjected her to that weakness and need for help which, in her undiminished glory, she would have shown forth, in splendour, as the very glory of man. As "the law of the flesh" reveals man and woman in their sexual difference, as if by force, so the woman is subjected to the pain of childbirth, a

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<sup>229</sup> See II.4 above for a richer treatment of this claim.

<sup>230</sup> Kikawada, Isaac M. "Two Notes on Eve." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, no. 1 (1972), 34

debilitating pain which reveals the woman to herself in her weakness, as if by force.<sup>231</sup> Arousal is called a “law,” because without it the human family would perish: Men and women must reveal themselves to each other in their sexually differentiated self-insufficiency or cease to be. Likewise, the pain of childbirth is a law: Women must undergo immense, particular instances of weakness or the human race will cease to be. In both cases, man can be said to become something like unto the beasts, insofar as those acts which were freely performed for the good of individuals (i.e., the creation of new individuals into a holy family) are now performed for the good of the species, which would otherwise die. In both cases, this subordination under garments of skin is a way of redemption; this newfound and painful “likeness to the animals” is a pedagogical reminder of the sexual difference and constitutive weakness that defines man as a creature rather than the Creator. Eve remains, to herself and to Adam, a sign of the very goodness of insufficiency, but while she once signified this “without shame” in the pleasure of paradise, she now signifies this in the moans of labour outside of the garden wall. Insofar as she signified creaturely weakness, the “mother of all the living” protected the “first-formed father from his transgression,” and so from death. Insofar as she envied God’s strength, she brought death upon the human race, and death forces her to do what she once freely did: to signify creaturely weakness with every child born.

Because of this, the Fathers of the Church saw the last words of Eve in the Bible as a sign of her redemption: “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.’” (Genesis 4:1) Eve realizes, in and through childbirth, that man cannot be “like God,” for man only ever comes to be “with the help of the Lord.” This recognition of weakness is simultaneously an emphasis on the unique manner in which God creates the person, as opposed to the animal: “Can the expression, ‘I have begotten a man-child through God,’ induce us to think of God as

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<sup>231</sup> “I will ensure, he is saying, that the generation of children, a reason for great satisfaction, for you will begin with pain so that each time without fail you will personally have a reminder, through the distress and the pain of each birth, of the magnitude of this sin of disobedience, and may not in the course of time allow the event to slip into oblivion, but may be enabled to realize that the deception was the cause of these ills. Hence ‘I will greatly aggravate the pain of your labor, in pain you will bear children.’ In this passage he refers to the pangs of labor and in that great distress there is no avoiding (144a) carrying the child all those months like some load, feeling each twinge of pain that is caused by that, the twitching of its limbs, and the unbearable pangs known only to those who go through the experience” [John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1–17*, 238–239].

an instrument? Certainly not. We are to understand here that God is the Author and Creator. Hence, Eve ascribed the work to God when she said: ‘I have begotten a man-child through God,’ so that we, too, in a similar situation, ought not to claim our succession to ourselves, but attribute it entirely to God.”<sup>232</sup> Childbirth is transformed into an anthropological catechism in the flesh:

[W]hen the expulsion from Paradise came, consider how much better and wiser she grew. For when she bare a son, she says ‘I have gotten a man through the Lord.’ She straightway flew to the master, who before this had despised the master, and she neither ascribes the matter to nature, nor puts the birth down to the laws of marriage, but she recognizes the Lord of Nature, and acknowledges thanks to Him for the birth of the little child...The woman suffered expulsion from Paradise, but by means of her ejection she was led to a knowledge of God, so that she found a greater thing than she lost.<sup>233</sup>

According to Augustine, “[a] man is God’s work; but carnal concupiscence (without which, if sin had not preceded, man would have been begotten by means of the organs of generation, not less obedient than the other members to a quiet and normal will) is not of the Father, but is of the world.”<sup>234</sup> But within the logic described above, carnal concupiscence is not merely an unfortunate new mode of living with which the man and woman must suffer, rather, the profound “distance” established between the “cause” (unwilled arousal and painful childbirth) and the effect (the unique, rational being) of human procreation demands that we look for another cause beyond the evident material cause; demands that we do not mistake procreation for the reproduction of the animal and plant species. Weakness punitively separates the “world” from the “Father” and so saves

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<sup>232</sup> Ambrose, *Hexameron*, 360.

<sup>233</sup> John Chrysostom, “Three Homilies Concerning the Power of Demons,” in *Saint Chrysostom: On the Priesthood, Ascetic Treatises, Select Homilies and Letters, Homilies on the Statues*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. T. P. Brandram, vol. 9, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 180–181.

<sup>234</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “On Marriage and Concupiscence,” in *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes, vol. 5, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 289–290.

man from being uncritically absorbed in the former, making it evident that he is created by God: “[W]ho can entertain a doubt on this point? Who can deny this statement, especially if he be a catholic Christian? A man is God’s work...”<sup>235</sup>

This, and not some kind of call to domestic submission, is the logic behind that “woman will be saved through bearing children” (1 Timothy 2:15). Painful childbirth is a weapon against idolatry, by which the woman continues in her essential vocation of celebrating that man is not God, though in a postlapsarian mode.<sup>236</sup> By bearing children in weakness, the woman repudiates the logic of animal and plant androgyny, in imitation of which we could, in a sense, “claim our succession to ourselves.” Instead, she lives out a constitutive weakness which reveals man, in his origin and in his continued existence, as constitutively helped. It is in keeping with the biblical narrative, then, that the *Life of Adam and Eve*, a popular apocryphal text composed between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century, describes Eve’s birth of Cain as kind of reversal of the narrative of Fall.<sup>237</sup>

In penitence, Adam and Eve separate from each other, Adam to the East and Eve “in the direction of the setting sun,”<sup>238</sup> mournfully re-enacting the sexual division they had once enjoyed in Paradise where “to [Adam God] gave the eastern portion and the northern, and to [Eve], the western and the southern.”<sup>239</sup> Eve calls out to God, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, help me,”<sup>240</sup> where, in Eden, she had sought to be her own help. She calls out to Adam—“Is there none among the birds, who would go to him and tell him, ‘Come, help Eve, your spouse.’”<sup>241</sup>—where, in Eden, she had once separated from him in her pursuit of divinity. Adam hears her tears, and, fearing that “the serpent has fought with her again,”<sup>242</sup> finds her, where once he lost her to the serpent, and at her

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> If the man and the woman are attentive to this sign, however, the woman still protects the man from idolatry, for neither can look upon the pain of childbirth and conclude anything but that we are weak, insufficient, relationally-defined, creatures who receive their existence from another.

<sup>237</sup> Anderson, Gary A., and Michael E. Stone, eds. “The Life of Adam and Eve: The Biblical Story in Judaism and Christianity.” Adam and Eve Archive. University of Virginia, 2022. <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/anderson/>. *The Life of Adam and Eve* comes in many language versions, each with unique contributions to the story. Stone and Anderson have combined them into a synoptic presentation. My references to this archive will cite the language version and text citation the editors provide.

<sup>238</sup> “The Life of Adam and Eve,” Georgian language version, 18.1

<sup>239</sup> Armenian version, [32]7.3b

<sup>240</sup> Latin version, 19.2

<sup>241</sup> Georgian version, 19.2

<sup>242</sup> Latin version, 20.1a

entreaty, he who once accused her to the Lord prays for her to the Lord. “And behold, twelve angels”<sup>243</sup> descended from Heaven, a repetition of the “twelve angels” who guarded Adam and Eve in Eden, and whose ascent once occasioned the Fall, as Adam remembers: “at the moment of their ascent, the serpent deceived your mother and caused her to eat of the tree, for he had seen that I was not with her any more than the angels.”<sup>244</sup> Reunited with her husband and the angelic powers, Eve, who brought death, is saved from death. Eve, who took the fruit into her body in order to be like God, is now touched by Michael, whose name means “Who is like God?” Eve, who was cursed and kept out of Eden by an angel, is now called blessed by an angel: “Michael was standing to her right and touched his face to her chest and said to Eve: ‘Blessed are you, Eve, on account of Adam, for his prayers and supplications are great. I was sent to you that you might receive our help. Arise now and prepare yourself for birth.’”<sup>245</sup> The pain of childbirth briefly restores Eden and “she brought forth a son who shone brilliantly.”<sup>246</sup>

## Chapter III: The political theology of sexual difference

### 1. The sign of the woman

Thus far, we have explored the meaning of gender as it is given within a tradition of biblical interpretation, a tradition opposed to the “gender identity” model described in chapters I and II. The gender identity model posits as the natural body what the Bible posits as the body constructed through idolatry (the androgynous body), while the Bible posits as natural what the gender identity model posits as contingently constructed by human power (the male or female body).

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<sup>243</sup> Georgian version, 21.1

<sup>244</sup> Georgian version, [33].2

<sup>245</sup> Latin version, 21.2

<sup>246</sup> Latin version, 21.3a



Within the Genesis text, the woman is established as a sign in the words God speaks to the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:15) The serpent is the one who seduces mortal men into trying to be “like God.” The woman is the one who, as a sign and sacrament of man’s twofoldness, gives testimony to man’s “not being God.” The first man serves as a sign of creaturely insufficiency to the woman as well, as is clear in the post-Fall punishment, “he shall rule over you” (3:16). But, in the order of salvation history, it is the woman who “helps” and delivers man from the threat of idolatry— “neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” (1 Corinthians 11:8) This does not mean that particular men may not perform the work of the woman, any more than it means that particular women may not neglect it. But within the Bible, as within any social order that develops from its logic, when men defeat idolatry, they do so under the sign of the woman, in objective imitation of the mother of all the living.

Both man and woman protect each other against the transgression of idolatry, but the woman is a *Realsymbol*; a particular, historical person who becomes a sign against all idolatry, not as an abstraction from her real, historical condition, but because of it. Hans Urs Von Balthasar uses the term to describe the Apostle Peter’s enduring presence in and as the Church’s official structures.<sup>247</sup> For him, *Realsymbols* are not so much moral ‘examples’ (how could Peter’s denial be that!) as prototypes...forming the Church through history. Eve is a *Realsymbol*, not as an ahistorical idea, as if we might speak of her as the abstract “woman” and then judge particular women insofar as they conform or stray from the ideal, but as a person whose life and action become a source of imitation and warning within the concrete story of our creation and salvation: “subsequent theology may derive valid principles from [*Realsymbols*] but may not stray far from these concrete evangelical origins without becoming abstract and therefore untheological.”<sup>248</sup> In this sense, to say that all women are “daughters of Eve” is not to say that they are repetitions of a type, but they do imitate their mother, and in a threefold sense. First, because Eve is given as the prelapsarian woman, she is imitated in the way all saints are imitated within the history of salvation: as already having attained to a communion with God that all

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<sup>247</sup> Balthasar, Hans Urs Von. *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1986) 148, 199

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 148

seek—“be imitators of me,” says Paul “as I am of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1) Secondly, because she is embodied as female, because she takes a differentiated, procreative, bodily shape and capacity, the particular communion she enjoyed with God which is further imitable by those who share in the same differentiated, procreative, bodily shape and capacity. Finally, particular women are actual descendants of a mother who was actually appointed to help an actual man escape idolatry: particular women continue to signify the creaturely status of man in the manner that a daughter continues the “work” and life of her mother, for better or worse, whether she would or no. As the Petrine Office includes within it the temptations to worldliness face by its prototype, Peter, so the office of womanhood includes the same temptations faced by Eve, as it includes her glory—that she realizes and shows forth, in her differentiated flesh, the human family’s creaturely status. Thus, Tertullian could say to his female contemporaries, “do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age,”<sup>249</sup> considering women in their embodied and historical, rather than ahistorical, essence.

It is can be misleading to say that the woman is a “sign” of the man’s creatureliness, for she *is* his creatureliness; she “causes” it, not, as in the myths, as one who mortalizes the actually divine androgyne who enjoys some life apart from her, but by the very fact of being created with him. Any attempt to delineate the individual essence of the woman, apart from the man, and apart from the real order of history, presumes a creation other than the Biblical narrative describes: the creation of a real, original family.

Because the woman is created with the particular purpose of helping man rejoice in their shared creaturehood, others may imitate and participate in her work. Indeed, the story of the Fall is one in which the particular purpose of the original woman is suppressed and denied both by the man and the woman. As we have seen, this denial is never really possible. At most, it amounts to a continuous violence waged against the woman which prevents her from subjectively appearing as that gift by which the male is male and so revealed as constitutively dependent, weak, and relational. But the capacity to freely suppress the meaning of the woman reveals a distinction between the being of

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<sup>249</sup> Tertullian, “On the Apparel of Women,” in *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 4, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 14.

the woman, which simply is as it is created to be, and the signification of the being of the woman—which may or may not signify. This latter sign of the woman may be taken up by others: men may signify the non-divinity of humanity; laws may enforce its recognition; even dissertations may lay it out, though a little didactically. But in taking up the banner of the woman, one does not thereby negate her necessity, as if she could be replaced by the slave who whispered, “remember you are a man” into the ear of the victorious Caesar. Rather, the signification of the non-divinity of man can occur through no other path than that of reminding him of his sexually differentiated status.

Man is not created abstractedly, as “not divine,” “differentiated,” and “who he is in and through another.” Man is created historically: as a family, a marriage of a first man and a first woman. This original creation is what is real; the abstractions—“not divine” etc.—are true propositions about that original creation. Man is not “male and female” because he is “not divine,” rather, we know that man is “not divine” because he was created “male and female.” There is no sign of man’s non-divinity, then, that is not dependent for its signifying power on the original creation of the man and the woman.

A “sign of the woman” is, in its strictest sense, always remedial. If man had not sinned, then his originally differentiated creation would never have needed to be “signified” by anything other than itself; anything other than the original marriage which, in truth, was not strictly a matter of “signifying” creaturely status but of being it, enjoying it, and festively living it.

Once the man and the woman reject their unique male-female constitution to be “like God” then the “help” that original woman is to man can appear (falsely) as something extrinsic to her; a “help” she may or may not give, rather than a truth of their created being. Within this distance, anything may help attain the recognition “that man is not God, and it is very good,” doing, as it were, the “work” of the original woman.

For the purpose of delineating the biblical meaning of sexual difference, we will limit our discussion of the signs of the woman to those remedial helps given like the original woman, that is, given explicitly by God to display by way of reminder of the glory of the male-female creation, a glory suppressed by idolatry.

We have already seen the first “sign of the woman,” a sign called the “law of the flesh” and signified by the “garments of skin.” This participation of man in the logic of

animal sexuality is a remedial gift of God for the achievement of that one-flesh unity and the revelation of man's creaturely differentiation, reminding man by punishment of the glory he enjoyed by nature. The Genesis narrative contains a pattern in which the sign of the woman is rearticulated and hidden in new laws: rearticulated, in that man is never left to his idolatry; hidden, in that the sign of the woman, spurned in its original, personal, and freely given formulation, returns as a *command* to reveal creaturely sexual difference. New signs of the woman are mandated as the significance and efficacy of the old signs are destroyed by new, idolatrous bids for primal androgyny. Within the Genesis account, mankind's desire to be "like God" always takes the form of a rage against whatever "sign of the woman" currently suppresses man's envy for divine self-sufficiency. But the remedial woman always contains the original woman as its *raison d'être*. The basic narrative is as follows: Garments of skin are given after a rejection of the original woman; a shortened life-span is given after the rejection of the meaning of the garments of skin; nationhood is given after the rejection of the meaning of the shortened life-span is rejected; circumcision is given after the meaning of nationhood is rejected, the law of Moses is given after the meaning of circumcision is rejected; Jesus Christ is given after the meaning of the law of Moses is rejected.

Again, disobedience of a remedial law is disobedience of whatever laws it was made to rearticulate; rage against the current sign of the woman does not exclude rage against every other sign, and the man under the law of Moses is no less under the law of a shortened life span and the law of flesh. Each new sign of the woman, even as it differs on account of the different idolatries it seeks to destroy, can nevertheless be described as one continuous gift, or, perhaps more clarifyingly, one continuous battle waged against the myth of primal androgyny. This is not an exhaustive theology, as if no other story could be told about the narrative of salvation. Rather, this is a political theology that takes as its conceptual limitation the struggle between two descriptions of man as either male and female or androgyne. The goal of the rest of this chapter, then, is to discuss each sign of the woman within the exegetical tradition, with a specific focus on the ways in which God's punishments of his people's idolatry, and the covenants he makes with them in order to restore them to right worship, recapitulate and take up the vocation of the original woman in her proto-salvific relationship to the original man.

## 2. The shortened life-span

The story of the Flood is a repetition of the story of the Garden, though the quest for divine androgyny and its subsequent punishment back into creaturely differentiation is more obscure than it is in the actions of Adam and Eve. The story begins “[w]hen men began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose.” (Genesis 6:1-2)

Much ink has been spilled over this verse, the “sons of God” alternatively referring to the line of Seth or fallen angels,<sup>250</sup> but we are now in a position to offer another interpretation. The sin of the “sons of God” is not simply a sin against custom, but one performed in such a manner that leads to the appearance of divinity, of being a “son of God,” not as an Israelite might describe himself,<sup>251</sup> but as a Pharaoh might have described himself.<sup>252</sup> This is evidenced in what follows, that God responds to man’s apparent wickedness with the deliberate intention of reaffirming that man is not divine, but “flesh”: “My spirit shall not dwell in man forever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.” (6:3) Rashi argues that the plain sense of this verse describes God’s extension of mercy: “For 120 years I will be long-suffering with them, and if they repent not I shall bring a flood upon them.”<sup>253</sup> But another interpretation, well-expressed by the 13th century commentator, Hezekiah ben Manoah, describes God’s limitation as a weapon against the illusion of living forever. Longevity, Hezekiah argues, risks being mistaken for divinity: “these people lived untroubled lives of tremendous length, so that they could easily have been confused with children whom G-d Himself had sired.”<sup>254</sup> He imagines God reasoning with himself, saying, “Seeing that he was not meant to live

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<sup>250</sup> For a patristic description of the argument, see Augustine, *City of God*, 15.23

<sup>251</sup> Rabbi Joshua said: The Israelites are called “Sons of God,” as it is said, “Ye are the sons of the Lord your God” (Deut. 14:1). Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, Sefaria Community Translation, [https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei\\_DeRabbi\\_Eliezer\\_22:7](https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_DeRabbi_Eliezer_22:7)

<sup>252</sup> See Collins A. Y., Collins J. J., “The King as Son of God” in *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures* (Eerdmans, 2008) 1-6. “The titulary of the Pharaoh, from the Middle Kingdom on, included the appellations Horus and ‘son of Re.’”

<sup>253</sup> Rashi on Genesis, 6:3:4

<sup>254</sup> Chizkuni, *Chizkuni on Genesis*, trans. Eliyahu Munk & Sefaria Community Translation (KTAV Publishing House, 2013) 6:2:1

forever anyways, he might as well have his normal lifespan shortened, as longevity did not inspire him to be loyal to his Creator. On the contrary, the illusion of living forever contributed to his feeling unaccountable to Me.”<sup>255</sup> Lactantius gives a similar argument: “God cursed the injustice of the previous generations, and lest the length of life should again be a cause of the fashioning of evils, He lessened the age of man a little with each succeeding progeny, and placed the term or measure at one hundred and twenty years, a limit which is not permitted to be passed.”<sup>256</sup> In the 1940’s, Emil Kraeling convincingly argued that “there is a serious objection to the ‘period of grace’ interpretation of any form; it is the statement ‘the days of *his* life shall be, etc.’...It is the individual of the species that must therefore be meant by the singular ‘the days of his life.’ A time limit on individual life and not a period of grace is implied!”<sup>257</sup>

It is a truism to say that the nearness of death punctures whatever pretence man has to divinity, reminding him that “he is but flesh.” (6:3) Throughout Scriptures, the presence of death ridicules the attempt to manufacture the appearance of divinity in human beings: “Will you still say, ‘I am a god,’ in the presence of those who slay you...?” (Ezekiel 28:9) and “I say, ‘You are gods...nevertheless, you shall die like men, and fall like any prince”” (Psalm 82:6-7) and so forth. There is justification, then, in reading the verse which describes the sons of God taking wives “as they chose” as a means of producing an appearance of divinity, to be pedagogically punished by an immanentizing of mortality, whether by coming flood or by a decreased life span.<sup>258</sup> This is, in part, the conclusion of

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<sup>255</sup> Chizkuni 6:3:3

<sup>256</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius: The Divine Institutes, Books I–VII*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Mary Francis McDonald, vol. 49, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 150. Hippolytus argues that 120 “is the number of the perfection of the life of man” [Hippolytus of Rome, “Fragments from Commentaries on Various Books of Scripture,” in *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, vol. 5, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 200].

<sup>257</sup> Kraeling, Emil G. “The Significance and Origin of Gen. 6:1-4.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 6, no. 4 (1947): 202

<sup>258</sup> The limitation of lifespan can be seen as polemical interpretation of Gilgamesh, Atrahasis, and associated myths: “When the gods created the first, primeval male and female human beings, they did not allot a life-span for them. This meant that everyone remained alive for centuries, continuing to reproduce until the earth was overcrowded. People died only when the gods were forced to relieve the pressure by sending, intermittently, plague, famine, or flood. Scholars now agree that damaged text near the end of the [Atrahasis] Epic refers to the gods’ decision to institute death as a normal end to human life...This late decision rectified the mistake the gods made in the initial creation of man.” [Stephanie Dalley, “Introduction,” in *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.] Obviously, the Genesis text is engaged in the same, antimythical polemic as

biblical scholar David J. A. Clines. Though he does not describe any causal link between “taking wives” and the *production* of the appearance of divinity, he argues that “it is not improbable that the author of this text in its final form should have understood [the sons of God] in reference to rulers of the primeval period who had belonged in part to the divine world... that the 'sons of God' were both regarded as rulers of ancient times, and traditionally ascribed divine or semi-divine origins.”<sup>259</sup>

Kraeling argues in a similar manner, though not concerning the “sons of God” of Genesis 6:1, who he interprets as unambiguously supernatural beings, but the mighty men, or “men of name,” of Genesis 6:4, born of the sons of God:

“But the individual man [who has a 120 year life span] is not the ordinary man of 6:1...who presumably reached only the four score and ten that the psalmist mentions and that Herodotus speaks of as the ultimate limit to which a (Persian) man might hope to attain, but rather the representative of the new humanity for which alone there was any prospect of exceeding such a terminus by its own vitality...They [the “men of name”] are a Western adaption of the Babylonian tradition of the antediluvian kings. For the possibility which here is rejected by Yahweh *a limine*, that men divinely sired should live immensely long lives, is an actuality there, where polytheism and a lower stage of religious ethics made it readily acceptable. J1 knows the theory but rejects it by letting his god Yahweh impose an upper limit of 120 years.”<sup>260</sup>

Genesis is engaged in its usual polemic, denying the human claims to divinity that formed the political structure of the nations to which Israel stood opposed.<sup>261</sup> Both the

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previously discussed in II.4, naming the wickedness of man, and not the carelessness of the divine, as the cause of the punishment.

<sup>259</sup> Clines, David JA. "The Significance of the 'Sons of God' Episode (Genesis 6: 1-4) in the Context of the 'Primeval History' (Genesis 1-11)." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 4, no. 13 (1979): 33-46.

<sup>260</sup> Kraeling, “Significance”, 202.

<sup>261</sup> This polemical work is the basis of the “sons of God” passage in its entirety (see fn. 217). Within the Gilgamesh Epic and the Enuma Elish the sexual *nature* of man, and not the perversion of that nature, is the cause of the Flood. Again, the myths blame the woman, considered as the one who makes man procreative and capable of fulfilling the command to be fruitful and multiply: “The land became great, the people multiplied...The god (Enlil) became disturbed by their gathering” (cited in Kraeling, “Significance”, 194) and so death is sent down. Human sexuality *as such* places man in enmity with the divine. Genesis

midrash and the patristic tradition almost unanimously interpret the “taking” of the daughters of men as a form of sexual iniquity.<sup>262</sup> According to the structure we have laid out in the first part of this chapter, we may consider the sexual iniquity before the Flood as a rebellion against the first form of the law, namely, the law of the flesh as signified by the garments of skin. After the Fall, God punished the man and the woman for their attempt at androgyny by the law of the flesh, which commands them to reveal themselves in the very sexual difference they denied by their bid for divinity. Submitted to this law of sexual arousal, sinful man cannot deny his creaturely insufficiency and need for the other; it wells up within him whether he would or not. Sexual perversion, then, is an attempt to deny the pedagogical meaning of this law; it is the effort to enjoy sexual arousal in manners which do not reveal man in his creaturely insufficiency, in manners that do not remind him that he is a “little less than a god.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues something akin to this when he describes “sexuality” as “a passionate hatred of any limit...an obsessive but powerless will for unity in a divided world.”<sup>263</sup> As discussed in II.7, the woman embodies man’s “limit.” It becomes, in her, an object of love. In the Fall, man sees his actual, limited, human nature as lacking in comparison to a potential, unlimited, divine nature that is denied to him, and so the object of love becomes an object of hate and a sign of failure, and the living sacrament of man’s creatureliness now appears as an obstacle to be overcome. Thus Bonhoeffer argues that “sexuality seeks to destroy the other person as a creature, robs the other person of his or her creatureliness, lays violent hands on the other person as one’s limit, and hates grace.”<sup>264</sup>

Taking Bonhoeffer’s point, we would argue that all lust posits and seeks to re-establish man as a primal androgyne by way of the destruction of the female. Unable to avoid its pecuniary aspect (that sexual arousal comes upon him with a necessity that results from the imminence of death) he attempts to ignore and suppress its pedagogical

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appropriates this narrative, arguing that it is not man in his created sexual difference but man in his wicked use of sexual difference who deserves death. This reaffirms what the story of the Fall already affirmed: that man in his procreative creatureliness is “very good.”

<sup>262</sup> “See how through this expression he indicates to us all their licentiousness; it was not through a desire to raise families that they set about this behavior but out of sheer lechery” [John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 18–45*, 74].

<sup>263</sup> Bonhoeffer, v. 7

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.



point. Sexual perversion is still a bid for primal androgyny, but unlike Adam and Eve, it is performed by a people submitted to the “law of the flesh”—thus it takes the foolish form of denying sexual difference in and through the ab-use of aroused, sexually differentiated flesh. The text does not clarify what kind of sexual perversion is used to obscure the sign of the woman and thus allow for the pretence to divinity that she would otherwise destroy. One interpretation is rape: “The Torah means that the very judges who should have meted out justice committed legal violence instead with the “daughters of man,” i.e., the common and therefore underprivileged people, by raping these women against their will.”<sup>265</sup> Another is sodomy and bestiality:

“The sons of God saw the human daughters.” These were the virgins.

“That they were fair.” These were the unmarried.

“They took wives for themselves.” These were the married

“Whomever they chose,” even including males and cattle.<sup>266</sup>

What is immediately relevant to these acts is not that they defy social norms, or even that they break any positive laws (as the law of Moses had not yet been given), but that they all have the power to produce the illusion that women are unnecessary; not essentially related to males in a mutual signification of creatureliness, but incidentally, if at all. It is an illusion, again, because all sexual perversion is only ever performed with and in reference to a sexual body, which is only comprehensible as being sexual in reference to the sexually differentiated other. But sexual perversion “bruises the heel” of the woman; rendering her (in pretence, if not in fact) into that which might also be male, might even another species—rendering her into something which is not constitutive of man’s being.

Gnostic myths which advocate for sexual union as a means of restoring an original androgyne make explicit and intellectual what is implicit in every act of lust, that, in envy for the divine, man must overcome the woman as his chief obstacle and limit. Scholars who advocate for the difference-eradicating myths of divine androgyny as an egalitarian replacement for Christianity’s difference-maintaining doctrine take as an invitation to

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<sup>265</sup> *Rabbeinu Bahya*, Bereshit 6:2:1–2

<sup>266</sup> Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Bereshit, Siman 33:1

harmony, unity, egalitarianism what is in fact an invitation to the destruction of the woman. Such scholars see, in gnostic, alchemic, kabbalistic, and romantic descriptions of man as an originally or spiritually unified human neuter, the possibility of the fulfilment or at least of a mythical “boosting” of liberal modernity’s aspirations toward gender egalitarianism, but they are largely deceived. The androgynous resistance and subversion of the doctrine “male and female He created them” does not only logically tend towards the destruction of the woman as a meaningful category—it often explicitly advocates for it. This dissertation cannot include a thorough investigation of the androgynous ideal as it takes shape in history as this or that religion, cult, mystery, or practice. Nevertheless, even a brief glance at the sources should temper the naïve praise of the androgynous ideal as a “message of freedom from unnatural social constraints [...] typified in the universal subject of gender divisions,” one which works to “articulate an alternate way of living on the earth, [...] a freer and potentially nonviolent way,” and which “practices and celebrates unity in egalitarian diversity,”<sup>267</sup> except insofar as such praise is willing to admit the price: the sacrifice of women.

There is an apparently egalitarian ideal expressed in logion 22 of the Gospel of Thomas: “when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female [...] then you will enter the kingdom.” But this bid for androgyny is not unto the destruction of the male, but of the female, as in the famous logion 114:

Simon Peter said to him, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life."  
Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may  
become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make  
herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."<sup>268</sup>

The Zostrianos commands the Sethian gnostic to “flee from the madness and the bondage of femaleness and choose for yourselves the salvation of maleness,”<sup>269</sup> the

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<sup>267</sup> Barber, Peter John. “The Role of the Androgyne,” 214

<sup>268</sup> Cited in Miroshnikov, Ivan. ““For Women Are Not Worthy of Life”: Protology and Misogyny in Gospel of Thomas Saying 114.” In *Women and Knowledge in Early Christianity*, edited by Ivan Miroshnikov, Ulla Tervahauta, Outi Lehtipuu, and Ismo Dunderberg, (Brill, 2017), 177.

<sup>269</sup> Quoted in Gilhus, Ingvild Sælid. “Family Structures in Gnostic Religion.” In *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, edited by Halvor Moxnes. (Routledge, 1997), 238

Valentians insisted on “destroying the works of the female” even as they claimed to unify the primal androgyne in their cultic “bridal chamber,” a fact which is only puzzling until we recognize that the gnostic androgyne is always a male androgyne, to which the female element is an obstacle and a darkness, as in the Sophia myths of the *Apocalypse of John*: “this sexual unity [of the gnostics] is not true unity; it is reconstituted masculinity: the female must become male.”<sup>270</sup>

Likewise, Elliot R. Wolfson argues, convincingly, that the apparent gender egalitarianism of Kabbalah is only a first movement within its mystical messianism, and that the marriage of the feminine and the masculine elements of divinity ends, ultimately, in the subordination and incorporation of the feminine into the masculine.<sup>271</sup> He uses the writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century mystic Moses Hayyim Luzzatto to exemplify what can be generally said of Kabbalah, in which “the image of heterosexual pairing is only appropriate in the first stage of the redemptive process in which the exilic condition of separation and fragmentation begins to be overcome. The consequence of the union, however, is the restoration of the feminine to the masculine,”<sup>272</sup> and not vice versa.

Here, Adam’s sin disrupted the divine intercourse of the feminine and masculine principles of God, exiling the divine Shekinah, “described as a mother, a bride, a

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<sup>270</sup> Macdonald, Dennis Ronald. “Corinthian Veils and Gnostic Androgynes.” In *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, edited by Karen L. King. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 284-5. This antifeminine bias appears to have formed the self-conception of many Gnostics who saw themselves as originating from another seed, i.e. not that of Eve. See Eszter Spät, cited in II.3. She goes on to argue:

Many of the Gnostic texts, and some of the heresiological reports of the Church Fathers, imply that Seth was not conceived in the “ordinary” way. Responsibility for his conception is attributed to some divine power, and in many accounts Eve seems to play almost no role. Manichaeans developed this notion in a different direction. While the Manichaean Eve is the mother of Seth in the physical sense of the word, by rejecting him and desiring his death she renounces all claims as his mother in the spiritual sense. The negative view Manichaeans take of Eve is also evocative of the Yezidis’ spurning the “corruptible female blood” of Eve. [Spät, Eszter, “Shahid Bin Jarr”, 48]

<sup>271</sup> “The conjunction of male and female, so central to theosophic kabbalah [...] is predicated on the reestablishment of the original androgynous state wherein the female aspect of judgment is contained in the male aspect of mercy. Such a view is reflected in the following description of primordial Adam found in the *Zohar*: “When the Holy One, blessed be He, created man He created him perfect, as it says, ‘God made man straight [...] ‘Man’: male and female, and the female was contained in the male; thus it is written straight.’ The perfect human form is one wherein the female is contained within the male. The union of masculine and feminine is predicated on the reintegration of the latter with the former” [Wolfson, Elliot R. “Woman—The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah.” In *The Other in Jewish Thought and History*, edited by Laurence J. Silberstein, Robert L. Cohn (New York University Press, 1994) 175.]

<sup>272</sup> Wolfson, Elliot R. “‘Tiqqun Ha-Shekinah’: Redemption and the Overcoming of Gender Dimorphism in the Messianic Kabbalah of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto.” *History of Religions* 36, no. 4 (1997) 291

daughter, a matron, a princess and a queen,”<sup>273</sup> from her divine husband. But their reunion is one in which the feminine is revealed as an eternal mode of the divine masculine: “for in truth the Nuqba’ [female] is made only to receive from the male and to overflow to the lower beings...for the perfection of the female is her unification with the male.”<sup>274</sup> The dominant image of the reunified masculine and feminine is the circumcised phallus, the corona of which represents the Shekhina, which can no longer be understood as a feminine element, but as a once feminine and now masculine element: “the feminine element...is itself part of this male anatomy.”<sup>275</sup> As Wolfston concludes, “heterosexual symbolism gives way to the monosexual ideal wherein the female itself is transmuted to the male in the form of the crown that sits on the head of the righteous, which is a symbolic depiction of the corona of the phallus. The disclosure of the latter [circumcision] is the ultimate mark of redemption, for it symbolizes the ontic restoration of the female to the male and the concomitant overcoming of gender dimorphism.”<sup>276</sup>

In an apparently different theory, Johnathan Cahana praises the Gnostics as proto-Butlerians, troubling the apparent fixity of the Jewish and Christian male-female construction by subversively “citing” ideals of male, father, mother and androgyne in their myths.<sup>277</sup> For Cahana, any apparently male-dominant androgyne is not to be taken as evidence that the Gnostics fit with the above-noted masculinizing trend, which couples a search for divinity with the transformation of the female into an obstacle to be overcome. Rather, this is to be understood as the Gnostics “poking fun”:

[T]he androgyny of Ialdabaoth does not seem to be realized in any meaningful way. Benjamin Dunning, for instance, mentions that while Ialdabaoth and his minions are said to be androgynous, “the masculine manifestation of each ruler is the primary actor”. Now [...] feminist critiques have long pointed out that ancient Jewish and Christian discourse on androgyny often seems to be a reinstatement of

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<sup>273</sup> Smith, Chani. “The symbol of the Shekhina: The feminine side of God.” In *European Judaism*, 19:1 (Autumn 1985), 44

<sup>274</sup> Wolfston, Tikkun Ha-Shekhinah”, 315

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 326

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 329 (Compare with III.11 below.)

<sup>277</sup> Cahana, Jonathan. “Gnostically Queer: Gender Trouble in Gnosticism.” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 41:1 (Febuary 2011) 24-35.

masculinism. Daniel Boyarin, for instance, argues that “the androgyne in question always turns out somehow to be a male androgyne”. It may be just be the case, therefore, that the gnostics noticed this long before modern scholars and were thus poking fun at their rivals’ idea of androgyny; for, indeed, Ialdabaoth, the god of the Jews and of (proto-orthodox) Christians turns out somehow to be a very male androgyne in their writings.”<sup>278</sup>

Cahana argues that when Jews and Christians describe an androgynous ideal, it turns out to subsume the female under a masculine image, but when the gnostics do precisely the same thing, they may be excused—they are making fun of Jews and Christians. He argues that the decomposition of the woman into a masculine androgyny is only the mode of the evil Creator of the Christians and Jews. As for the God of (at least some of) the Gnostics, “it is the ‘queer’ Barbelo. Although referred to as “she,” its gender is completely elusive: She became a womb for the entirety, for she was prior to all (others), (being) the mother-father, the first human, the holy spirit, the thrice-male, the three powers; the thrice androgynous name; and (was) the (most) eternal aeon among the invisible.”<sup>279</sup> The gnostics use these “subversive terms”<sup>280</sup> in order to overcome the boundaries of gendered language, argues Cahana. This, along with ritual sex acts odious to the Christians, amounted a way of resisting the falsely naturalized gendering of the proto-orthodox culture surrounding these proto-queer “Barbelites.”

This argument certainly describes contemporary queer theorists in relation to what they take to be Jewish and Christian orthodoxy, but it doesn’t quite rescue Gnosticism from the charge of that same orthodoxy, namely, that any effort to be like God comes at the expense of the woman. Barbelo is an emanation of a male Father deity, one which Cahana would diminish in importance as “ineffable and unknowable” in the *Allogenes*, still, the text refers to him as “He.”<sup>281</sup> And as for the queer Barbelo of the *Apocalypse of John*, a glance at the text immediately preceding the “subversive language” cited by

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<sup>278</sup> Cahana, Jonathan. “Androgyne or Undrogyne? Queering the Gnostic Myth.” *Numen* 61 (2014), 518

<sup>279</sup> Cahan, “Queering,” 30

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

<sup>281</sup> Turner, J. D., & Wintermute, O. S. (Trans.). (n.d.). *Allogenes*. The Nag Hammadi Library. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/allogene.html>

Cahana confirms that the “queer” divine androgyne is yet another the female subsumed into a greater masculine reality:

The Father is surrounded by light.  
 He apprehends himself in that light, [Which is the pure spring of the water of life  
 that sustains all realms].  
 He is conscious of his image everywhere around him,  
 Perceiving his image in this spring of Spirit  
 Pouring forth from himself.  
 He is enamored of the image he sees in the light-water,  
 The spring of pure light-water enveloping him.  
 His self-aware thought (Ennoia) came into being,  
 Appearing to him in the effulgence of his light.  
 She stood before him.  
 This, then, is the first of the powers, prior to everything,  
 Arising out of the mind of the Father  
 The Providence (Pronoia) of everything.  
 Her light reflects his light.  
 She is from his image in his light  
 Perfect in power  
 Image of the invisible  
 perfect Virgin Spirit.  
 She is the initial power  
 glory of Barbelos  
 glorious among the realms  
 glory of revelation.  
 She gave glory to the Virgin Spirit [male]  
 She praised him  
 For she arose from him.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> *The Secret Book of John: Annotated and Explained*, translated by Stevan Davies (Vermont, Skylight Paths Publishing) 2013 Second Digital Edition, 44

Cahana is certainly correct to note a common cause between gnosticism of antiquity and contemporary BDSM practices, which both operate as a “subversive gender technology that may help counter the dominant heteronormative discourse,”<sup>283</sup> but he is too hasty—in the case of either—to imagine that this occurs without the effort to obscure and destroy the sign of the woman. The Scriptures, for their part, condemn sexual perversion precisely as a preliminary rebellion against the sign of the woman for the sake of producing a false, androgynous, and idolatrous divinity. Thus, when the Scriptures describe sodomy as a custom of a particular people, the act itself is not so much the focus of narrative horror as the destruction of women that follows from it. Lot offers his daughters as a sexual sacrifice to the people of Sodom: “I have two daughters who have not known man: let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please.” (Genesis 19:8) The host of the Levite in Judges 19 offers his daughter and the Levite’s concubine to those “base fellows” who would “know” the Levite (Judges 19:22), saying, “Behold, here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do with them what seems good to you” (19:24) The men destroy the woman: they “abused her all night until morning” (19:25), when the Levite finds her dead on the doorstep.

The language “as you please” and “what seems good to you” describes the nature of sexual perversion. Sexual perversion refuses to allow sexual difference to guide arousal into the loving sexual act, that school in which the goodness of creaturely existence is enjoyed and affirmed. Rather, the punishment of unchosen arousal is guided, first and foremost, by the will of the male which interprets sexual difference according to its own lights, as it “pleases” him and “seems” to him, taking the woman, not as she is, but as he would have her.<sup>284</sup> Particular sexual perversions are not unified by the objects of their attractions, but by their common effort to destroy the significance of the woman, to have her as a non-signifying extension of the will or, what is the same, to have the pleasures of

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<sup>283</sup> Cahana, Jonathan. “Dismantling gender: between ancient gnostic ritual and modern queer BDSM” *Theology & Sexuality*, 18:1 (2012), 60

<sup>284</sup> For a contemporary analysis of the Levite’s concubine as “trapped in a world of men”, see Ansell, Nicholas, “This Is Her Body: Judges 19 as Call to Discernment” in *Tamar’s Tears: Evangelical Engagements with Feminist Old Testament Hermeneutics*, edited by Andrew Sloane (Pickwick Publications, 2012) 112–70.

the sexually-differentiated body magically detached from the one who renders and reveals the body as differentiated in the first place.<sup>285</sup> The Levite literalizes the act of the rapists: “he took a knife, and laying hold of his concubine he divided her, limb by limb, into twelve pieces, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel.” (19:29) What the Levite does by blade, the rapists did by night, rendering all but unrecognizable the sign of the woman as presented in the sexually differentiated body.

Again, Dietrich Bonhoeffer described this in reference to the shame of Adam and Eve: “Sexuality,” he argued, “is a passionate hatred of any limit...It is obsessive because it knows of a common human being from the beginning; it is powerless because in losing his or her limit a human being has finally lost the other person.”<sup>286</sup> Bonhoeffer argues that “sexuality” strives for a unity (a “common human being”) established, not in love, in which the two remain distinct, but by the destruction of other as a sign of one’s own limit: “Unbridled sexuality is therefore destruction.”

To speak of a destruction of difference in the pursuit of a “common human being” is to use a different language to describe the construction of the androgyne through rituals of sexual perversion or, what is the same, the use of arousal to suppress the sign of the woman. Obviously, this a reading of certain biblical “texts of terror” is informed by an intuitive sense of the meaning of the horror of rape and sexual violence which may not be a shared intuition. But if the account of the sons of God taking the daughters of men “as they chose” is to be taken as a reference to sexual perversion, God’s response of destruction, rather than instruction, makes sense. Sexual perversion chooses primal androgyny against all divine aid and assistance to do otherwise; blaspheming by refusing the help of the Lord as it is given in the body of the particular woman. Judith is raised up, not unto the edification but unto the destruction of those idolaters she describes as “strangers who had loosed the girdle of a virgin to defile her.” (Judith 9:2) Sodom is destroyed by fire and the Benjamites are destroyed in battle for the death of the Levite’s concubine. Those who would be “like God” against all help to the contrary are revealed in their actual weakness in a day of wrath, which tests the divine claims of security and power by an actual act of divine power, crushing the head of those who would

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<sup>285</sup> This does not at all indicate that women cannot initiate or participate in sexual perversions, only that, as a matter of history, this participation is a form of self-destruction.

<sup>286</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Creation and Fall”, v. 7



unreservedly act as serpents, edifying others by making an example of those who would invert the Scriptures, saying “it is good for man to be alone.” This account sheds light on a mysterious Jewish tradition which states that the waters of the flood came over the world in the form of a woman:

R. Huna said in the name of R. Idi: The verdict against the generation of the flood was not sealed until they wrote *gamika*... {i.e., marriage contracts} for males and cattle. For that reason the waters came over them in the form of a woman. Thus it is stated (in Job 6:18): “The ways of their course.” *These words may also denote ways of living*. “Turn aside.” Now “turn aside” must imply a woman, since it is stated (in Ruth 3:8): “Now it came to pass in the middle of the night that the man was startled. So turned he aside, and here was a woman.”<sup>287</sup>

### 3. Marriage as a tactic of non-divinity

Sexual perversion is the manner in which a generation subordinated to the law of the flesh continues the attempt to be “like God” in His divine sufficiency, using the divinely ordained and death-inspired stirring of their differentiated members in liturgies which aim at the destruction of the woman in her objective, signifying structure. The sexual practice of the Greeks, as discussed in Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*,<sup>288</sup> forms a useful example of a social body constructed around this active suppression of the woman, revealing the divine aspirations hidden in the “taking” of the daughters of men, and expressing as a particular philosophy that fear of women intimated in the Scriptures.

Vigdis Sønge-Møller, in tracing the origins of sexism in Western culture, describes the Greek philosophy of pederasty as inseparably linked with the absorption of women into the threefold object of a male citizens’ rule over “slaves, women, and children.” Sex with women was to be moderated in its excesses, not out of any recognition of the constitutive bind between the male and the female, but as an “attempt to impose some form and style

<sup>287</sup> Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Bereshit, Siman 33

<sup>288</sup> Vigdis Sønge-Møller, *Philosophy Without Women* (Continuum, 2002), 140.

on an activity that constitutes one of the areas in which the [male] citizen exercised his power and freedom.”<sup>289</sup> Marriage was not denied, but strictly regulated into a school of male mastery over what was inferior. Women were bound in status to a sexless, genderless social unit, determined by “passivity” as opposed to “activity,” a trait which had no necessary or essential bearing on their being female, but could be diffused and shared with male slaves and children. Sex with women was necessary for the reproduction of the species, but sex with boys was a “nobler form of desire,” insofar as it was apparently free of death and animal necessity. Sex with women involved birth and death, but sex with boys performatively enacted “male penetration, culminating in the ejaculation of semen, as sexuality’s sole concern.” Pederasty was a masculine regime of sexuality in which the Greeks institutionalized an androgynous love of sameness out of flesh marked by difference, a love in which “the potential for sameness and identity”<sup>290</sup> provided relief from the creatureliness apparent in sexual difference. Sønge-Møller argues that this performatively enacted destruction of the woman is the basis for subsequent Greek philosophy, in which “the homosexual – or pederastic – Eros, that which desires its equal, undergoes transformation to a philosophical eros, which desires absolute oneness, identity, and equality.”<sup>291</sup> If this narrative is correct, it marks out the manner in which the subordination of the woman, through sexual perversion, creates the illusion of primal androgyny, an illusion maintained by the subsequent tradition of philosophy in which the “female” is described, not as a unique creation, but as a “defective male,” a modification of nature’s fundamental tendency towards the production of the male form as its perfection.

The story of the Flood is the story of divine vengeance against the regime of sexual perversion: Because the sons of God sinned against women, they were destroyed under the sign of a woman. The ark is not incidentally a construction in which “male and female of all flesh,” (Genesis 7:16) “two by two,” (7:9) “you and your sons, your wife and your sons’ wives” (6:18) are saved from being reduced to the sameness of the waters. As sexual difference is protected by being garmented in animal life, so it is protected in the ark, a raft of sexual difference within a flood of androgyny, as mythically enacted in

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid, 149.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid, 152.

the sexual perversion of the generation before the flood and as signified in the flood waters, which are said to mingle as male and female: “Said rabbi Levi: the upper waters are masculine, and the lower waters are feminine, and they say to each other: “receive us! You are the creation of the Holy One and we are the ones He sent.” Immediately they receive them—that’s what is written, ‘the land will open’ [Is 45:8], like this female who opens for the male.”<sup>292</sup>

Unlike the waters, the ark was a separation of male and female into compartments, in which Noah “separated the males from the females of all which came to the ark when they came into the ark, as it is said, “And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons’ wives” (7:7). Verily the males were on one side.”<sup>293</sup> Actual sexual relations between male and female were forbidden until the world of sexual perversion has been destroyed: “Thus all the days that Noah was in the ark, Noah, his sons, and all who were with him were prohibited (literally: bound) from sexual intercourse.”<sup>294</sup>

The Christian father Julius Africanus notes that “they came out of the ark in pairs, as may be found, and not in the manner in which they had entered, viz., distinguished according to their species, and were blessed by God,”<sup>295</sup> indicating a vision of the ark as the production of “families” out of “species”: “So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives; and all the animals, all the birds, and all the crawling creatures that crawl on the earth went out of the ark by families.” (8:18) The ark, then, is a worthy symbol of marriage, not considered in its aspect as the primordial union of mankind, but as a node of creaturely resistance to androgynous regimes established in and through repeated iterations of sexual perversion: “For even in the beginning, when arrogant giants were perishing, the hope of the world took refuge on a raft, and guided by thy hand left to the world the seed of a new generation.” (Wisdom 14:6-7) Augustine

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<sup>292</sup> Bereishit Rabah 13.

<sup>293</sup> Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 23:11 Also, Ephrem: “[t]hose whom he had brought in *one by one* in order to maintain chastity on the ark, he brought out *two by two* so that they might *be fruitful and multiply in creation*. Even with respect to the animals that had preserved their chastity in the ark [God] said, “*Bring forth with you every animal that is with you of all flesh that they might breed on the earth and be fruitful and multiply on it.*” [Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works*, 142]

<sup>294</sup> Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Noah 17:1

<sup>295</sup> Julius Africanus, “The Extant Fragments of the Five Books of the Chronography of Julius Africanus” in *Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, vol. 6, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 131.

understood marriage to be that “state which makes good use of concupiscence,”<sup>296</sup> that is, good use of the law of the flesh. If, as we have argued, this law of the flesh is a remedial sign of the woman, then marriage is an institution which makes use of this sign in such a way that it signifies creaturely insufficiency.

#### 4. The immortal city as an androgynous body

Each remedially given sign of the woman contains the original woman and all her previous “signs” as a house, expanded, fortified and fixed over the years, nevertheless remains itself. Given this, we may expect that mankind’s postdiluvian idolatry would take the form of a rage against God’s rebuke of his prediluvian idolatry (the shortened lifespan); that this rage would include both the sexual perversion and the bid for primal androgyny which characterized mankind’s previous attempts to obscure the meaning of sexual difference, and that the remedial response of God will be to punish and institute a new “sign of the woman” which mercifully, though differently, gives man the “help” of the original woman: to rejoice that he is not God, but flesh and bone.

This is apparent in the story of the Tower of Babel, which follows immediately after the chronicles of Noah and his sons. As Augustine has it, repeating a Jewish tradition, the tower of Babel was erected to avoid the Flood which confirmed the limitation of man’s lifespan:

For after the flood certain proud men, as if endeavouring to fortify themselves against God, as if aught were high for God, or aught could give security to pride, raised a tower, apparently that they might not be destroyed by a flood, should there come one thereafter. For they had heard and considered that all iniquity was swept away by a flood; to abstain from iniquity they would not; they sought the height of a tower as a defense against a flood; they built a lofty tower.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “A Treatise on the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin” in *Saint Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes, vol. 5, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 251.

<sup>297</sup> Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John, 1–10*, Tractate VI, in *The Fathers of the Church Volume 78*, (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2010), 138. Rashi cites Bereishit Rabah 38:6 as describing the same logic:

The tower is erected in defiance of a past punishment, and as a transgression against the new, penal, sign of creaturely insufficiency: the shortened lifespan. A remarkable passage from the midrash tradition describes their pride as a simultaneous rejection of the life-limit of one-hundred and twenty years and a rejection of the penalty of death imposed on Adam:

They had been witness to the fact that G'd had decreed death on Adam, while they perceived themselves as physically powerful and enjoying a much longer life span than the 120 years G'd appeared to have decreed...They planned to scale heaven while alive and well in order to overcome the impediment to this imposed upon them by their mortality. Their principal aim was to overcome the decree issued against Adam which made all of them mortal also. All of their planning in building the Tower was designed to achieve immortality. The reason G'd had to scatter them was because they planned to nullify His world order.<sup>298</sup>

In sexual perversion, man fakes the pre-Pandoran bliss of the myths and obscures the mortalizing sign of the woman by using his sexually differentiated flesh within liturgies that do not require the one who sexually differentiates his flesh. Living under the law of a shortened lifespan, man cannot easily produce the illusion of personal divinity; instead, he seeks to participate in the social immortality of the city. The sin of Babel is the subjugation of the particular person, who dies within one-hundred and twenty years, for a city which does not seem to die, but surpasses the limited life of men.

As in the Garden, the illusion of sufficiency can only be created through the destruction of those signs of creaturely differentiation, whereby, like the earth and the sea, man is revealed as being constitutively dependent on the other to be who and what he is. For Adam and Eve, this was achieved through a direct denial of sexual difference; for the generation of the flood, the denial inherent in sexual perversion; for this generation of the dispersion, the denial of the particularity of the individual. This is expressed in a

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<sup>298</sup> “Another explanation...they said, “Once in every one thousand six hundred and fifty six years (the period that elapsed from the Creation to the Flood) there is a heaven-shaking, just as there was in the days of the Flood. Come. then, and let us make supports for it...” [Rashi on Genesis 11:1:2]

<sup>298</sup> *Rabbeinu Bahya*, Bereshit 11:4:1–8.

medieval description of the building of Babel, that “when a brick would happen to fall down and break, all would lament and weep over the great loss. But when a man would fall down and be killed, no one would take the least notice of his death.”<sup>299</sup>

The physical city is valued over the individual men who built it; the truly worthy and living thing becomes Babylon, the work of human hands, a general, neuter “it” and a “them” rather than the particular “he’s” and “she’s” who make it up. This “them” transcends any of the particular people who constitute it, and so it is a “them” which appears to transcend sexual difference and death. Because of this, it is taken for granted that the desire of Babylon to “make a name for ourselves” (11:3) is the desire to construct a god:

This “name” was the idol that was to be placed in the tower. They hoped that on account of the grandeur of the tower and the city this idol would come to be recognized universally as the supreme deity. In this way the king of the city would achieve dominion over the entire world.<sup>300</sup>

The Scriptures mock the idolatrous city as one that pretends to achieve in its social architecture what man cannot achieve in his differentiated particularity: the divine quality of being alone.<sup>301</sup> Isaiah prophesies against the “virgin daughter of Babylon” (47:1) by describing her in the image of Eve, who would be “like God” by acting alone:

Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures who sit securely,  
who say in your heart,  
“I am and there is no one besides me...”

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<sup>299</sup> *Sefer HaYashar* (midrash) trans. Edward B.M. Browne, New York, 1876, Public Domain.  
[https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer\\_HaYashar\\_\(midrash\)](https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_HaYashar_(midrash)) Book of Genesis, Noach, 14

<sup>300</sup> Sforino, “Sforino on Genesis,” *Yalkut, Sifsei Chachomim Chumash*, (Metsudah Publications, 2009) 11:4:2. This repeats a talmudic interpretation: “It is taught in a *baraita*: Rabbi Natan says: All of those factions intended to build the tower for the sake of idol worship. It is written here: “And let us make a name for us” (Genesis 11:4), and it is written there: “And make no mention of the name of the other gods” (Exodus 23:13). Just as there, the connotation of “name” is idol worship, so too here, the connotation of “name” is idol worship.” [Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, Daf 109a:6, The William Davidson Talmud, <https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin>] Also: “This expression, MAKE A NAME FOR OURSELVES, is nothing but an expression of idolatry” [Midrash Tanchuma Buber Noach, Siman 28].

<sup>301</sup> “This is the exultant city that dwelt secure, that said to herself, ‘I am and there is no one else.’” (Zephaniah 2:15)

You felt secure in your wickedness,  
 you said, “No one sees me”;  
 your wisdom and your knowledge lead you astray,  
 and you said in your heart,  
 “I am and there is no one besides me” (Isaiah 47:8–10)

As the original woman is foiled in her androgynous bid for divinity by the revelation of her sexually differentiated nakedness, so the idolatrous city is foiled by a revelation of its nakedness: “strip off your robe, uncover your legs...Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your shame shall be seen.” (47:2–3) Nakedness, here, is the mortalizing revelation that the city, despite its pretensions to immortality, can and will be destroyed: “disaster shall fall upon you...and ruin shall come on you suddenly.” (47:11)

The construction of a deified city requires the reduction of its sexually-differentiated members to the status of “bricks”—parts of a whole which transcends and outlives them.<sup>302</sup> Here, sexual difference is obscured, not by being eradicated within the particular person, but by being reduced to a mere means by which that which is not sexually-differentiated, the city, receives its immortal life. To overcome the sign of the woman, as it is given in the shortened lifespan, the people construct a permanent, immortal name for themselves, replacing weak, sexually differentiated flesh for strong androgynous flesh which indefinitely reproduces itself into the future. In this, they redescribe their sexual difference as animal sexual difference, which exists for the sake of its species. As we have seen, Aquinas argues that because “in things corruptible none is everlasting and permanent except the species, it follows that the chief purpose of nature is the good of the species; for the preservation of which natural generation is ordained,”<sup>303</sup> a principle which could be easily applied to the intentions of the city of Babel: In men and women none is everlasting and permanent except the city, it follows that the chief purpose of nature is the good of the city; for the preservation of which natural generation is ordained.

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<sup>302</sup> We see an intimation of this technique of idolatry levelled by the immortal kingdom of Egypt, under its god-king, Pharaoh, who would reduce the Israelite people to the status of “bricks,” rearranging through population control and slave labor.

<sup>303</sup> STh., I q.98 a.1 resp.

Babel, then, is a mechanism by which the sign of the woman is obscured by the degradation of human sexual difference into the appearance of animal androgyny, in which “male” and “female” exists secondarily, for the sake of that which is neither male nor female. From this perspective, we can better understand the horror that the Lord seems to have over the homogeneity of Babel: “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do...” (Genesis 11:6) This sameness is taken, in the thought of Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, to indicate a uniform way of life: “The explanation of ‘people’ is that they all follow one custom.”<sup>304</sup> It likewise indicates a uniformity of thought and purpose: “But here what happened is that all thought the same thing, and this came to be the problem of the settlement.”<sup>305</sup> Uniformity is proper to individual animals, which reproduce their common kinds, but it appears unnatural in the free human being, who is a unique and particular creation of God. Again, Aquinas argues that, unlike human beings, “all animals of the same species operate in the same way...every swallow builds its nest, and every spider spins its web, in the same manner,”<sup>306</sup> but the destruction of difference in human society, beginning with the destruction of sexual difference, is only attainable by a kind of violence: “If they finish the tower they will come to a second thought, to prevent by force other thoughts than this one. And this is a thing [that brings] killing, and violent destruction of the settlement...”<sup>307</sup>

The reduction of a people to the homogeneity of the reproducing animal species leads to the suspicion that the construction of Babel is not merely the common enterprise of an idolatrous mass, but that same mass in relation to one who wields dominion over them. Just as it is the nature of the animal to be uniform in custom and subordinated to its

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<sup>304</sup> *Haamek Davar on Genesis*, 11:6:1. Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Haamek\\_Davar\\_on\\_Genesis](https://www.sefaria.org/Haamek_Davar_on_Genesis)

<sup>305</sup> *Haamek Davar*, 11:1:2

<sup>306</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles* II Ch. 82 p. 2

<sup>307</sup> *Haamek Davar*, 11:6:3 The bestial nature of the citizens of Babel seemed evident to at least some of the Christian commentators: “[T]hey lived like savage and cruel creatures, destroying natural reason and the germs of thought and civilization in man’s soul by the excess of their self-chosen wickedness, giving themselves over entirely to all manner of iniquity, so as at one time to corrupt one another, at another to kill one another, and again to eat human flesh, to venture on battles with God and on battles with giants celebrated among all men, even to plan to fortify the earth against heaven, and by the madness of a perverted mind to prepare war against the supreme God Himself” [Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History, Books 1–5*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Roy Joseph Deferrari, vol. 19, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 43].



species, so it is the nature of the animal to be under the dominion of man. The reductive logic of Babel would provide the ground necessary for the illusions of idolatry: if men are as animals, then the one who has dominion over men does not appear as a man amongst men, but as existing on a metaphysically higher order within the hierarchy of being: a god. It is no surprise, then, that many Jewish and Christian exegetes deduced, from the fact of Babel's homogeneity, the presence of an idolatrous king of Babel: Nimrod. In the Clementine Homilies, Nimrod is not simply one god-king among many, but one "who chose, giant-like, to devise things in opposition to God. Him the Greeks have called Zoroaster. He, after the deluge, being ambitious of sovereignty, and being a great magician, by magical arts compelled the world-guiding star of the wicked one who now rules, to the bestowal of the sovereignty *as a gift* from him."<sup>308</sup> Jerome argues that "Nimrod, son of Cush, was the first to seize despotic rule over the people, which men were not yet accustomed to; and he reigned in Babylon, which was called Babel."<sup>309</sup> Augustine, commenting on Nimrod's epitaph, "a mighty hunter before the Lord," (Genesis 10:9) argues "[a]nd what is meant by the term "hunter" but deceiver, oppressor, and destroyer of the animals of the earth? He and his people therefore, erected this tower against the Lord, and so gave expression to their impious pride; and justly was their wicked intention punished by God, even though it was unsuccessful."<sup>310</sup>

It is precisely by the subjugation of the many people into a single, uniform mechanism, operated by the king, that the king appears as divine, relative to the degraded state of his people. Babel clarifies the social nature of idolatry, in that divinity is sought, not merely by the would-be god over and against an enslaved mass of people, but by the people who would participate in their own subjugation, sacrificing their differentiated particularity in order to construct an immortal city in which they participate.

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<sup>308</sup> Pseudo-Clement of Rome, "The Clementine Homilies" in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: The Twelve Patriarchs, Excerpts and Epistles, the Clementina, Apocrypha, Decretals, Memoirs of Edessa and Syriac Documents, Remains of the First Ages*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Thomas Smith, vol. 8 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 275.

<sup>309</sup> Jerome, Hebrew Questions on Genesis, 10–10, quoted in Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*.

<sup>310</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, 16.4.

## 5. The sign of the serpent

Thus far we have discussed the “sign of the woman,” as it is remedially given to those who would be “like God.” But the woman is only established as a sign in and through the declaration that she exists in fundamental enmity with the serpent, who encourages what her sexually differentiated being discourages: envy for divinity. It is fitting, then, to speak of the specific modes in which the sign of the woman is suppressed (in sexual perversion, the immortal city, and so on) as so many signs of the serpent. But throughout the Scriptures, the typical manner in which a person fulfils the promise of the serpent is to act as a god-king, of whom Nimrod is traditionally considered the first. It has been all but established, within the field of archaeological research, that the kings of Ancient Near East were considered gods, sons of the gods, or at least participants in divinity to some greater extent than those over whom they were kings.<sup>311</sup> It is one of the primary works of the Scriptures to reveal the mechanism by which kings appear in this manner, given that “no king has had a different beginning of existence; [and] here is for all mankind one entrance into life,” (Wisdom 7:5-6) namely, “the womb of a mother...the seed of a man and the pleasure of marriage.” (7:1-2) The answer it gives has already been suggested: rulers appear divine by a false and contrived levelling of the ruled, an artificial “lowering” of man’s unique, differentiated status to the androgynous reproduction of the animal, relative to which the ruler appears superhuman. This act occurs through violence, specifically the amassment of property and the enslavement persons into a singular mechanism of rule, and the pretence that the resulting power comes from the king’s person rather than the subjugated mass, a pretence achieved through the mediation of an idol.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> See “The King as Son of God” in *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, John J. Collins (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>312</sup> See Giorgetti, Andrew. “The ‘Mock Building Account’ of Genesis 11:1-9.” *Vetus Testamentum* 64 (2014), 1-20 This reading of the Babel story coincides with Giorgetti’s argument that the narrative is a polemic mocking the “building accounts” of divine kings in the Near East. His argument is undeniable, especially with regards to the archeological evidence which shows that the reduction of a people to “one mouth” is a popular way of ending royal accounts of building projects, as representing “the subjugation of the various peoples to the authority of [...] kings, who saw themselves as kings of ‘all the world.’” [6]

The most obvious revelation of this means by which the king is divinized is found in the first book of Samuel, an explicitly demythologizing text. Here, the elders of Israel reject Samuel as their prophetic leader and ask for a king “like all the nations.” (1 Samuel 8:5) The people indulged this vision: “No! But we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all nations, and that our king may govern us and go before us and fight our battles.” (8:19-20)

The term “like all the nations” is idolatrous: “Let us be like the nations, like the tribes of the countries, and worship wood and stone.” (Ezekiel 20:32) The term “go before us” is the same Hebrew term used to describe the Israelites’ demand for the golden calf: “Up, make us gods, who shall go before us” (Exodus 32:1).<sup>313</sup> The term “fight our battles” has another direct use in the Hebrew Bible, when King Hezekiah describes the actions of God against the god-king Sennacherib, who boasted that “no god of any nation or kingdom has been able to deliver his people from my hand...How much less will your God deliver you out of my hand!” (2 Chronicles 32:15) “With him is an arm of flesh,” says Hezekiah, mortalizing the would-be god, “but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles.” (32:8) In rejecting Samuel for a king who will “fight their battles,” the elders of Israel apply to the king what Hezekiah will apply to God alone. By believing that one man really will “go before them,” the Israelite elders show that they are deceived, missing the real power of the many in awe of the one who counts and operates them as a mass. In short, their request to be like the nations is a request of the serpent, and Samuel is a resilient Eve: “God charges the people of Israel with opting, goodness knows how, to submit by preference to human yokes and to decline the kingship of God himself, despite his reigning over the ancients through holy prophets.”<sup>314</sup> This easy exchange of God for man indicates a pre-existing will to conflate the two, and so God tells Samuel: “they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds which they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you.” (1 Samuel 8:7-8)

<sup>313</sup> “R. Nehorai said: They sought a king only to lead them to idolatry...” (Sifrei Devarim, 156:6).

<sup>314</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 115, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 242.

God commands that Samuel demythologize the figure of the god-king by unveiling the mechanism by which he appears to “fight battles” for his nation. “[S]how them the ways of the king who shall reign over them” (8:9), he says, and Samuel does: “These will be the ways of the king. He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots; and will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties...” (8:11-12) That is to say, far from going before you, your sons will “run before his chariots,” and far from fighting your battles, he will count out and organize the entire nation into a technological mechanism orientated to fighting battles, with “some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.” (8:12) Nor is this conscription into a mass sexually differentiated: “He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.” The king will appear glorious insofar as the Israelites appear as exchangeable, stock: “you shall be his slaves.” (8:17)<sup>315</sup>

What follows is a description of a slave state; another Egypt that will lead to another occasion for Israel to “cry out” (8:18) to God for freedom. All society is managed, all labour is commodified, all productive property is amassed into the hands of the few. Man becomes like unto a god by amassing the labour and property of other men into a technology which he can activate at will—mediating the slavery of the people in such a way that they no longer recognize their own labour, property and skill at play in his mighty actions.<sup>316</sup>

This fulfils the promise of the serpent, but perversely. In Chapter III.9, we argued that the idolatrous man “must shift the goalposts,” redefining God as something less than He is in order to fake attainment of His divinity. As Eve could desire to be “like God” only

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<sup>315</sup> “The Word, testifying by the prophet Samuel to the Jews, who had transgressed when the people asked for a king, promised not a loving lord, but threatened to give them a self-willed and voluptuous tyrant, ‘who shall,’ He says, ‘take your daughters to be perfumers, and cooks, and bakers,’ ruling by the law of war, not desiring a peaceful administration.” Clement of Alexandria, “The Instructor” in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 278.

<sup>316</sup> This idea, that considering men as units is a necessary precondition for appearing as a god finds its support in the various descriptions of the Gentile kings that surrounded and beset the Jewish people. In Judith, Nebuchadnezzar is described as a God: “Who is God except Nebuchadnezzar?” (Judith 6:2). He deploys his forces, counted “to the number of one hundred and twenty thousand foot soldiers and twelve thousand cavalry,” (2:5), a mass which he operates as a power of his own person: “What I have spoken my hand will execute” (2:12).

insofar as she believed the lie of the serpent, that God was a competitor of man, so, going forth from the Garden, man becomes “like God” insofar as God is rearticulated as being like man; the strong one in a society of weaker others. This seems to be the description of pagan “gods” within Scriptures: Paul is called a god by the inhabitants of Malta because he is bitten by a viper without suffering harm (Acts 28). Herod is called a god because he delivers a powerful oration (Acts 12:22). Joseph risks being treated as a god because he saves Egypt from famine: “Fear not,” he says to his brothers, “for am I in the place of God?” (Genesis 50:19) Insofar as God is known as being simply “over man” as a greater power is to a lesser, man may become “like God” by the amassment of that same power. At the same time, the actual amassment of that power over men, and the appearance of the king as one who saves a society from its fear by that very amassment, is a social condition in which the proposition that “God is that which is over man” becomes plausible. This is because, even as man is not God, it is quite true that God is known *through* man, who is his image. The distortion of that image that occurs in the reduction of a people to slaves and their leader to an operator of a social mechanism is a false education as to the nature of God.

## 6. The production of omnipresence

The god-king is a social construct that operates through the suppression of real sexual difference into the appearance of an androgynous body, operated by the king. The construction of this social body cannot occur except by actual violence against the woman, in her actual and remedial forms, which always reveal it as false. If women are real, rather than modifications of a primarily sexless unit, then man cannot be an exchangeable unit. Rather, he is an irreducibly twofold creation, metaphysically incapable of and resistant to all attempts at undifferentiated and homogenous governance.

It is no surprise, then, that the Babylonian rage against that womanly sign of a limited lifespan was, at one and the same time, a sin against sexual difference, specifically against the commandment given to the original man and woman, to “fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28): “[T]heir principal sin was in not fulfilling G’d’s basic directive to be

fruitful, to multiply, and to populate the whole earth, not just a small valley.”<sup>317</sup> As Adam and Eve believed the lie of the serpent, that they existed alongside God as the possible objects of comparison and envy, so the people of Babel “felt that if they were to obey G-d’s command ‘to fill the earth,’ this would contribute to their becoming ineffective in competition with G-d.”<sup>318</sup> If androgyny is a human tactic for competing with God, considered in his divine sufficiency, “staying in one place” is a human tactic for competing with God, considered in his omnipresence. As Aquinas argues, “[t]o be everywhere primarily and absolutely, is proper to God.”<sup>319</sup> Babel fakes the omnipresence of the mortal king by a violent reduction of the world into a single city in which the king is said to be present. The logic of procreation wars against this illusion of mortal omnipresence, in that it tends to “fill the earth,” spreading out new, unique families into the land.<sup>320</sup> As a people grows, anyone who would seek to be present to the whole must increasingly rely on intermediaries (whether idols or ministers) to re-present the king. This development of a mechanism of extended presence is, in itself, a sign of creaturely insufficiency, for only God governs through intermediaries “not on account of any defect in His power, but by reason of the abundance of His goodness; so that the dignity of causality is imparted even to creatures.”<sup>321</sup>

The idolatrous king, on the other hand, is one who strives to hide this creaturely “defect in his power.” Here, a minister cannot do the king’s will according to his own plan, lest he reveal as false the basic claim of idolatrous kingship, which always pretends that labour, property and activity proceed directly from his power: “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” (Daniel 4:30) Rather, such an intermediary must act as a “hand” to a divine

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<sup>317</sup> Rashbam on Genesis 11:4:1. Again, “G’d’s whole purpose was to fill the earth with people. The sin of wanting to remain together in one location was almost as serious as outright heresy...” [Or HaChaim, *Or HaChaim on Genesis*, trans. Eliyahu Munk, (KTAV Publishing House, 1998) Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Or\\_HaChaim\\_on\\_Genesis](https://www.sefaria.org/Or_HaChaim_on_Genesis), 11:1]

<sup>318</sup> *Chizkuni on Genesis*, 11:4:2

<sup>319</sup> STh., I q.8 a.4 resp.

<sup>320</sup> “For ourselves, we have no manner of doubt that to ‘increase and multiply and fill the earth’ in obedience to the blessing and command of God is the very mission which God gave to marriage as He instituted it from the beginning and, so, before the fall. That is why He made the bodies of the two sexes, male and female, so manifestly different” [Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, 14.22]. This “spreading” is the god-king Pharaoh’s object of fear: “But the more [the Israelites] were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad,” Exodus 1:12.

<sup>321</sup> STh., I q.22 a.3 resp.

“head,” identically repeating the king’s will and intention, lest he reveal the truth: that he acts in his own power, according to his own will and plan, and so that the king needs him—and so that the king is not divine. Only by admitting that he is not divine is the king freed to reveal himself as weak; to entrust to others that which he cannot do himself and for which he needs the unique plan and mediation of friends and obedient servants.

Babel attempts to overcome this sign of weakness, forbidding that procreative “scattering” which necessitates increasing representation of royal power through intermediaries: “Therefore they sought to ensure that no one would leave their society. And one who veered from this uniformity among them was judged with burning.”<sup>322</sup> The image of the ascending Tower is archetypal in this regard, for it is a kind of growth without diversification, a multiplying which does not fill the earth, but climbs into heaven; each new “level” utterly dependent on its singular, man-made foundation, and so knowable and controllable as a singular project of the king.

Geographical uniformity, enforced by violence, deifies the mortal king, making him appear omnipresent within its actually limited space. Babel’s homogeneity of language serves the same end, but in and through an illusion of omnipotence. The people of Babel “are one people, and they all have one language” (Genesis 11:6), and this unity of language is understood as a unity of thought, equally enforced by violence as Babel’s geographic unity: “And since the opinions of people are not identical, they feared that people might abandon this philosophy and adopt another. Therefore, they sought to ensure that no one would leave their society...”<sup>323</sup> This unity of language and thought facilitates the ability of the ruler to move his social body with all the felicity of a natural body, as his arm of flesh. Command, with its threat of punishment and loss of reward, requires a homogeneity in the reception of the command if, by it, a ruler will appear divine before his people, and a people will participate in divinity by subordinating themselves to the king and his city. Diversity destroys this possibility: The more that a ruler, in order to rule, must alter his commands in accordance with a diversity of modes

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<sup>322</sup> *Haamek Davar*, 11:4:3.

<sup>323</sup> *Haamek Davar* 11:4:3. This same midrash gives an explanation of the description of Babel as “one people” as a reference to a unity of custom: “The explanation of “people” is that they all follow one custom [minhag], as it is written later on Gen. 28:3 in the explanation of ‘and you shall be a congregation of peoples’” [*Haamek Davar* 11:6:1].

of reception in which the ruled live and think, the less he appears as a divine head over a body, and the more he appears as a creature, whose sovereignty depends on the understanding and obedience of the ruled; a limited, relational sovereignty which must learn and obey particular ways of life, language, and thought in order to be understood and obeyed at all.

The king who would identically transmit his will into the androgynous social body does not need ministers, or mediators, but statues and mute signifiers; monuments and idols of the king that re-present his presence in a fixed and unwavering form. Thus Samuel, in warning his people of the ways of the kings of the nations, warns them that they are in danger of idol worship (1 Samuel 12:21), and indeed, the king God gives them “set up a monument for himself” (15:12). The Book of Wisdom describes this need for the illusion of permanent presence as a precondition for idolatry as such:

When men could not honour monarchs in their presence, since they lived at a distance, they imagined their appearance far away, and made a visible image of the king whom they honoured, so that by their zeal they might flatter the absent one as though present. Then the ambition of the craftsman impelled even those who did not know the king to intensify their worship. For he, perhaps wishing to please his ruler, skilfully forced the likeness to take more beautiful form, and the multitude, attracted by the charm of his work, now regarded as an object of worship the one whom shortly before they had honoured as a man. (Wisdom 14:17-20)

## 7. The family against the god-king

All idolatrous claims to sovereignty are, at base, dependent on the multiplication of new individuals who form the subjugated mass by which rulers appear divine and by which a city appears as an immortal neuter, over and above its reproducing and dying members. Just as, for the sake of the survival of humanity, the man and the woman are compelled, by the law of the flesh, to reveal themselves in their creaturely insufficiency,



so, for the production of the divine king and his immortal city, men and women must do the same. But this survival of sexual difference at the heart of the androgynous “arm of flesh” is always a lingering rebuke of idolatry.

Babel is a mechanism for the transformation of a human people into an animal species, and in this sense, it is an inversion of marriage and the image of Ark, which saves families out of a people reduced to the level of beasts.<sup>324</sup> Within the anti-Ark, individuals gather together to overcome their limited life span through the reduction of the family into a unit which reproduces an everlasting, non-differentiated kind. But Babel is always an appearance, performatively established, and at risk of being destroyed by that social order which lays claim to the original status of “nature.” Here, human beings are not reproductions of a kind but creations *ex nihilo*, gotten “with the help of the Lord.” Only animals are born with a set of instincts and behaviours which one can reasonably expect to be reproduced with each new generation. Human beings require education: they are initiated into a linguistic, social world, receiving law, language, and the customs of their society as a gift.

This means that the new child can only become a source of the king’s divinity insofar as the command and rule of the king is mediated through particular men and women: through the family. The new-born does not know how to be afraid of a punishment nor seek a reward nor speak a language by which commands can be understood. The supposed strength of the idolatrous king is, at base, weakness: a dependence on particular men and women to offer up their children to him, that is, to rear, educate, and initiate them into a mode of existence by which the command of the king is efficacious, by which they understand him, fear his punishments, and desire his rewards.

The family, then, always exists as a rebuke of idolatry, as the real source of its supposedly divine power and so as a power greater than it; as that without which the king has no mass to subjugate and no mass educated, by common language and custom, into that same subjugation. The divinity of the king waits on the offering of the family who chooses to live according to the uniformity of Babel, and this fearful self-offering of the family is in no way assured. New children are only brought into a social body of servitude in and through the simultaneous creation of *new* social bodies of power,

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<sup>324</sup> See III.3, and Augustine, *City of God*, 4.3

language, authority, and law—social bodies that are not identical to the order of the city under sovereign rule. Even a dutifully subjugated family, seeking to raise children for the immortality of Babel and the magnification of its king, can only do so by a unique family arrangement; a network of loves and loyalties that cannot possibly come from the king, precisely because they are developed *ad hoc*, in response to the unique and particular new-born child who cannot yet receive a command.

The medieval midrash *Sefer haYashar* tells the story of the life Abram, born under the dominion of Nimrod. Though the midrash is not ancient, it draws on a tradition present in the Talmud,<sup>325</sup> impressively describing the construction of mortal divinity through Babel and the destruction of mortal divinity in and through the weakness of the family.

Nimrod gains power by reducing others to servitude, and the midrash links the unity of his rule with the earth's unity of language: "Nimrod was the sole ruler over the earth, and over all the sons of Noah, and all were under his hand and advice. And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech."<sup>326</sup> Within this univocal world, Nimrod appears omnipresent through the use of intermediaries who reproduce his presence: "And then Nimrod placed officers over them..."<sup>327</sup> Likewise, Nimrod established the appearance of omnipotence by utilizing the love of parents for their children: he "took from their children hostages for security, that all would be servants unto him and unto his

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<sup>325</sup> "And Rav Ḥanan bar Rava says that Rav says: Our forefather Abraham was imprisoned for ten years, because he rejected the idol worship that was accepted in his land. He was imprisoned for three years in the city of Khuta, and seven years in Karddu. And Rav Dimi of Neharde'a teaches the opposite, that he was imprisoned seven years in Khuta and three in Karddu. Rav Hisda said: The small passage of Khuta, this is Ur of the Chaldeans." [Talmud, *Bava Batra*, Daf 91a:15, The William Davidson Talmud. Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Bava\\_Batra](https://www.sefaria.org/Bava_Batra)] Augustine takes up this tradition, in which Abram is called up and out of idol worship: The family of Terah, to which Abraham belonged, was the only one in which the worship of the true God survived, and the only one, we may suppose, in which the Hebrew language was preserved; although Joshua the son of Nun tells us that even this family served other gods in Mesopotamia. The other descendants of Heber gradually became absorbed in other races and other languages. And thus, as the single family of Noah was preserved through the deluge of water to renew the human race, so, in the deluge of superstition that flooded the whole world, there remained but the one family of Terah in which the seed of God's city was preserved." [Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, 16.12]

<sup>326</sup> *Sefer HaYashar*, Noach, 8. This tradition, which points to the violence which establishes a homogenous unity, is taken up by Augustine in his *City of God*, whose words on the linguistic unity of Rome could equally apply to Babel: "But the imperial city has endeavored to impose on subject nations not only her yoke, but her language, as a bond of peace, so that interpreters, far from being scarce, are numberless. This is true; but how many great wars, how much slaughter and bloodshed, have provided this unity!" [Augustine, *City of God*, 19.7]

<sup>327</sup> Ibid. This establishes the perpetual war of 1 Samuel's slave state.

brothers.”<sup>328</sup> Taking children from families allows Nimrod to construct a social body moved by fear, stimulating its various members into activity by the constant injection of threats against those whom they love, and so appearing as a superhuman head operating a singular arm of flesh. This strength is weakness, insofar as it depends on the love of a family, existing independently of Babylon and its king, in order for the threats of the king to provoke the action of his servants. Vampire-like, Nimrod’s pretence to divine power lives on the blood of children, and is obliged to allow the real love, loyalty, and society of a family flourish in order to procure it.

Abram is Nimrod’s opposite; the future father of a people destined to legally and actually limit man’s mortal grasp for divinity.<sup>329</sup> Nimrod is introduced as a strength which is weakness, but Abram is introduced in the womanly mode, as weakness which is strength; a new-born on whose blood the king relies. The astrologers of King Nimrod conclude that the sign of a large star swallowing four others, “cannot be otherwise but in reference to the child that was born unto Terah, that he will be great and that he will be increased and exceedingly multiplied, and that he will inherit all the earth, he and his children forever, and that he and his seed will slay great kings and possess themselves of their lands.”<sup>330</sup> In this specific sense, Abram arrives as one born of woman, embodying her sign. An interpretation of the Midrash Tanchuma associate Abram with the “little sister” (8:8-9) of the Song of Songs:

To whom does Scripture refer in this verse? It refers to Abraham at the time when Nimrod ordered that he be hurled into the fiery furnace. He was *little* because the Holy One, blessed be He, had not yet performed any miracles in his behalf. By why was he called “sister” (*ahot*)? Because he united (*iha*) all mankind (into a single brotherhood) before God, *Abraham’s mission was to teach the Oneness of God and the oneness of mankind*. just as one who tears a garment apart and then sews it together. Hence, he was called a *sister*.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> “The Torah tells us that G-d decreed that a person of the type of Nimrod had to arise in order for Avraham to demonstrate that one could prevail even against such mighty warriors who defied the Lord.” (*Chizkuni on Genesis 10:9:1*)

<sup>330</sup> *Sefer HaYashar*, Noach, 9

<sup>331</sup> *Midrash Tanchuma*, Lech Lecha, 2:1

Nimrod unites mankind into the unity of common servitude. Playing with the Hebraic sibilliance, the midrash argues that Abram unites mankind as a sister unites brothers into the “oneness” of a family. Nimrod makes Babel “one” by appearing as a god above them; Abram makes mankind one by teaching them about the true God, who is above them, not by artifice, but in truth. The new-born “little sister” is opposed to the god-king as his doom.

The prophecy of a child who will end an idolatrous rule is typical, showing up throughout the Scriptures in the Gospel of Matthew (2:1), Revelation (12:4), in the prophecies of Micah (5:2-4), and in a midrash on Miriam’s prophecy that “[i]n the future, my mother will give birth to a son [Moses] who will save the Jewish people.”<sup>332</sup> It is not merely the particular reality of the child destined to conquer that informs these prophecies: every new-born child, necessarily unassimilated to the structures of fear that produce mortal divinity, is a potential Moses unto Pharaoh and a Christ unto Herod. Fear of new-borns is structural to idolatrous kingship, expressing subjectively the objective dependence the king and his city have on the procreative family.

To destroy the child, Pharaoh orders the slaying of all Israelite boys.<sup>333</sup> Herod does the same with the innocents of Bethlehem. (Matthew 2:16) In the *Sefer haYashar*, Nimrod orders Abram’s father: “Give me thy son and we will slay him, and I will give unto thee his full value in silver and in gold.”<sup>334</sup> In his attempt to exchange the unique, unrepeatable value of Abram for an exchangeable sum, Nimrod reveals the method of idolatrous kingship, which, whether by census, conscription, or population control, always reduces the particular person to an exchangeable part of a total mechanism operated by the king. If people are exchangeable for sums, then, within the value-perception of the king, people are as exchangeable as the bricks which make up the city

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<sup>332</sup> Talmud, *Sotah*, Daf 11b:13

<sup>333</sup> “For on the day when Moses was born his astrologers said to him, “Today their deliverer has been born, but we know not whether he is born of an Egyptian father or of an Israelite; but we see by our astrological art that he will ultimately suffer misfortune through water”. Pharaoh therefore made a decree that day regarding the Egyptians also, as it is said here, “Every son that is born [ye shall cast into the river]”, and it is not stated “[every son] who is born to the Hebrews”. They (the astrologers), however, were not aware that Moses was ultimately to suffer misfortune through the waters of Meribah and not through the waters of the Nile.” [Rashi, *Rashi on Exodus*, trans. Sefaria Community Translation. Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Exodus](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Exodus), 1:22]

<sup>334</sup> *Sefer HaYashar*, Noach, 10

and the individual animals who reproduce their immortal kind. This exchange of the person for money is an exchange for that which the king, by nature, cannot control, to that which the king, by artifice, can: “[w]hat shall I do with all the silver and gold, after my son is dead?” asks Abram’s father, “For I shall have no one to inherit my fortune, and after I am dead the same gold and silver would revert to the king who gave it.”<sup>335</sup>

Abram is kept safe from Nimrod by a substitution: under the threat of death, Terah “hastened and took the child of one of his maid-servants, that was born unto him on the same day with Abram, and Terah brought the child of his maid servant unto the king, and received the value thereof.”<sup>336</sup> Abram is hidden in a cave. The god-king unwittingly seals his doom: his threat against the child hides him from the normal, habituating education by which he is assimilated into the social body operated by the king. Abram is hidden from the mechanisms of artificial omnipresence and omnipotence that rely on the representation of idols: “[T]he king, and all his servants, and Terah, and all his household, were the very first in those days among the worshipers of wood and Stone,” but “Abram the son of Terah grew up at that time in the house of Noah, but no man knew it.”<sup>337</sup> Here, Abram learns about the truth of God and the lie of the god-king, not by observing Babel, built unto the glory of Nimrod, but by observing the heavens above Babel, which the Babel would assimilate and conquer through its tower. By looking out of the city and into the world, Abram rebukes its pretence to being the whole world, an illusion achieved in and through disobedience to the command inherent in sexual differentiation—to fill the earth. Abram sees that primordial sign of differentiation, the sun and the moon, and concludes that neither can be God,<sup>338</sup> because each has a limited and particular domain of rule: “the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid. A son is the object and cause of a social order that is necessarily undetermined by a worldly power; a network of loves, loyalties, and identities that is developed in response to the gift of new life; a family through which any higher worldly power must be mediated in order to be made efficacious. Money, for its part, is the object and cause of a social order which *is* determined by worldly power, which alone can guarantee the efficacy of money within that social order and which never relinquishes its presence. The exchange offered to Terah, then, is an exchange of social worlds: the family for the state of the king.

<sup>336</sup> *Sefer HaYashar*, Noach, 11

<sup>337</sup> *Sefer HaYashar*, Noach, 12

<sup>338</sup> *Sefer HaYashar*, Noach, 13 “And when the morning dawned the sun again rose in his glory according to the law, as on the day before, and moon and stars vanished before the rising of the sun. And Abram saw the change and he wondered greatly at the things which the Lord had created in the earth. And Abram thought a great deal over what he had seen, and he finally concluded, saying unto himself: Now, neither of these can be God...”

the night.” (Genesis 1:16) Rather “all of them are servants of the one invisible God, who is the ruler of heaven and of earth, of the sun, and of the moon, and of the stars also.”<sup>339</sup> Here, Abram is educated by the primordial demythologizing logic of the original creation, as opposed to the mythologizing logic of Babel, with its deification of a mortal king.

As we have argued, the new, mortal attempt to fake divinity comes as a rebellion against the new, legal sign of the woman which, like the original woman, instructs man in the truth of his mortality: the limited lifespan. In and through a transgression against the fruitfulness of sexual difference, man seeks to reduce his life to the replication of that which outlives him—the immortal city—escaping the strictures of mortality by descending to the mode of animal existence. We subsequently argued that, far from being an act of idolatry *apart* from idolatrous kingship, the appearance of the immortal, androgynous “we” of the city depends upon the tyranny of idolatrous kingship, which both causes and “realizes” the descent of the people into their newfound, exchangeable, animal status by taking up an apparently natural dominion over them: managing their reproduction and enforcing their transgression of the command inherent in sexual fruitfulness, to “fill the earth.” The family, for its part, appears as a place of natural resistance to this idolatrous mechanism: it reveals the immortal city as physically dependent on its reproduction, it tends to fill the earth apart from the univocal world of the immortal city, and it remains the only means of mediating the homogenous “truth” of Babel to new citizens. The family must be brought into the service of the king, destroyed as an original source of social life and reinvented as an office and an extension of his sovereign rule, as a mere part of the immortal city, one which does not mediate its world according to an original, undetermined, and unique gift of social life, but (as far as is possible) repeats the commands of the king and his city identically, mutating itself into an idol that re-presents the presence and power of human rule.

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

## 8. Child sacrifice as a god-producing mechanism

The Scriptures link the reign of idolatry with the destruction of the family. The Book of Wisdom describes idolatry as an idiocy which enters the world “through the vanity of men” in which “at the command of monarchs graven images were worshipped.” (Wisdom 14:16) This is not merely a theological error, but the inauguration of a social order which descends from the king, obscuring the family as the true, original source of social order: The life of the idolater is marked by “pollution of souls, sex perversion, disorder in marriage, adultery, and debauchery.” (14:26) And “whether they kill their children in their initiations, or celebrate secret mysteries...they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure.” (14:23-24)

Throughout the Scriptures, killing children is not some strange custom that happens here or there. It is the archetypal practice of the nations; essential to them as their kings; defining them most intensely in their difference from Israel: “he even burned his son as an offering, according to the abominable practice of the nations” (2 Kings 16:3).<sup>340</sup> The reform of Israel back into accordance with the law of Moses necessitates the destruction of the practice: The reforming Josiah “defiled Topeth, which is in the valley of the sons of Hinnom, that no one might burn his son or his daughter as an offering to Molech.” (23:10) The degree to which Israel apostatizes, shirking the law of Moses and seeking mortal divinity, is the degree to which it approaches the custom of child sacrifice, which serves as a limit-mark and a sign of the complete rejection of the Lord’s order of legal limitation:

They despised his statutes, and his covenant he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They went after false idols, and became false, and they followed the nations that were round about them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them. And they forsook all the

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<sup>340</sup> “But they mingled with the nations and learned to do as they did. They served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan” (Psalm 106:35–38).

commandments of the Lord their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Asherah, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings...<sup>341</sup>

Child-sacrifice answers the need that the idolatrous city and its king have for the families which constitute them to offer themselves up, that is, to conform to the illusion that families, rather than being the source of Babel's divinity, exist under it. By destroying the child, mothers and fathers act *against* the natural love which binds them to their offspring in a manner undetermined by the social mechanism of fear, and act *for* the order that descends from the king, submitting to "the command of monarchs" in their strength over and against the command to love and cherish that proceeds from the child in its weakness. This is a founding act.<sup>342</sup> Precisely because it is unthinkable from within the social order of the family, in which the child is given as unique and irreplaceable, the act of killing a child subordinates the social order of the family to the social order of the god-king. In effect, it *must* be true that particular persons are in fact exchangeable and merely reproduce the immortal city, if the act of killing a particular person is to be justified, rather than appearing as a horror and a violation of nature. The lie of mortal divinity is "made true" by a reverse action: through violence, families are forced to act *as if* people are the replaceable parts of an immortal city, as animals under the dominion of the king. Once the act of child-sacrifice is performed, only the supposed truth of the immortal city can justify the goodness of the act: the child must really have been only an animal reproducing its species; a replaceable part making up the greater whole; a brick within the edifice, Babel. Likewise, the king must really have been divine, or in the service of divinity, rather than a man.<sup>343</sup> If not, "parents who murder helpless lives" (Wisdom 12:6)

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<sup>341</sup> This passage may be seen, in the light of what we have learned, to "track" the method by which the Jewish people continue to attempt to appear in the guise of divine androgyny, an increasingly bloody and ridiculous war against the Lord's gift of the woman—against his "statutes" (the law of Moses,) his "covenant" (the sign of circumcision) and his "warnings" (the flood, the dispersal of Babel)—in and through the use of idols and the destruction of the family through child-sacrifice.

<sup>342</sup> The two books of Kings are especially instructive here, in that they describe a slide into greater and greater apostasy that culminates in acts of child-sacrifice, which, not incidentally, are crucial in the founding of cities: In [Ahab's] days, Hiel of Bethel built Jericho; he laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his first-born, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub," (1 Kings 16:34).

<sup>343</sup> This argument draws from a traditional Christian argument that the crimes of the gods are examples for men. Usually, this is expressed as giving license to men, "[f]or if they who are called their gods practised all these things which are written above, how much more should men practise them—men, who believe



stand revealed, kings appear as tyrants, and cities show themselves sepulchres. Child-sacrifice gives, to the entire social body, the urgent necessity that the myths be true, and in this sense, it serves as the last offense against the God of Israel; the mark of a qualitatively final apostasy, in which the human conscience does its very best to seal off the truth of God and the goodness of man's insufficiency by a violent bloodletting, one which disrupts and negates the revelation of the family and proclaims, with all the force of bloodguilt, that the human person is a being ordered to a mundane horizon and the magnification of a mortal king.

This is why the Book of Wisdom describes the act of marriage-destruction, child-killing, and the worship of man-made gods as an "ungodly custom, grown strong with time...then kept as a law" (Wisdom 15:16). Child-sacrifice exponentially increases its truth-making power as it practiced by more and more citizens, and as it is passed from generation to generation: the more the act is performed, the more socially devastating the revelation that it is performed for the sake of a lie, a revelation which increasingly condemns, not just this or that individual, but entire families, cities, and nations as murderers. Myths grow exponentially believable.<sup>344</sup>

The Scriptures present the Lord of Israel as having nothing to do with child-sacrifice: "They have built altars for Baal in order to burn their children in the fire as sacrifices. I never commanded them to do this; it never even entered my mind." (Jeremiah 19:5) While this is easily taken as a figure for moral repulsion and abhorrence, our previous analysis shows that is also the motivation *for* child-sacrifice: to act, as explicitly as humanly possible, against created nature, and so to live as a society which has "never even entered" into the mind of God: to become men-alone, acting within a private domain utterly foreign-to and sealed-off from their Creator and his commands. In the midrash tradition, Babel has

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that their gods themselves practised them." [Aristides, *Apology*, 269] We simply want to argue that this relationship is efficacious the other way around, that is, if men have practiced them, how much more likely are they to believe that the gods have done the same; better still, how much more willing are they to believe that those who command the practice have the superhuman authority to do so?

<sup>344</sup> Again, the fact that child-sacrifice is "kept as a law" points to the ambiguity of the idolatrous king, who may well seek the illusion of mortal divinity as a Nebuchadnezzar, Sennacherib, or an Antiochus Epiphanes, but, because he is man and not a god, ends up as a servant of the production of this mortal divinity: making and enforcing the law of child-sacrifice with the same guilty necessity as the parents who practice it. Eventually, the explicit "command of monarchs" becomes a law extrinsic to them, obeyed for the good of the order of the whole idolatrous state. The "command of monarchs" becomes a command given to monarchs, as in when, faced with defeat, "the king of Moab...took his eldest son who was to reign in his stead, and offered him up for a burnt offering upon the wall" (2 Kings 3:26-27).

an idol at its peak, which seeks to kill God, and a furnace at its heart, which seeks to kill men.<sup>345</sup> This dual attack against creation and Creator is descriptive of all idolatry, for by burning men in the furnace which makes the bricks of the city, one metaphysically degrades the entirety of creation, making a world which the maker of the world never thought of: an immortal city, in which men are animals, and so in which those with dominion over them appear as more-than-men—as gods—and so in which the true God is irrelevant; a needless addition to a complete metaphysical hierarchy that ends with powerful men. Abram, the father of the Jewish people, is not merely to be understood positively, as the one who responds to God in faith, but negatively, as one who escapes the regime of child-sacrifice and sees the insufficiency of the city by looking out into the original, demythologizing creation. Jerome writes that “[T]he patriarch—the first to receive a promise of Christ—is here told to leave the Chaldees, to leave the city of confusion and its *rehoboth* or broad places; to leave also the plain of Shinar, where the tower of pride had been raised to heaven.”<sup>346</sup> According to Ramban’s commentary, Scripture “does not say, ‘that took thee from Ur of the Chaldees;’ instead it says, that brought thee out, meaning that He brought out a prisoner from the dungeon just as in the verse: that brought thee out from the land of Egypt.” “Ur” is taken to indicate fire throughout the Jewish tradition.<sup>347</sup> Abram is miraculously saved from being thrown into the furnace, and addresses Nimrod by revealing the truth of God, the goodness of creaturely insufficiency, and the essentially unique status of man, who is created uniquely and directly by God, and so cannot, by nature, be treated as a mere means to the reproduction of the immortal city:

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<sup>345</sup> “But from here we have a hint to the issue of what obviously was happening before the tradition saying that they threw Avraham Avinu into the fiery furnace: they did not make the furnace for this need [of bricks], rather this was the fiery furnace (in Daniel, see Dan. 3:6) done for the need of [burning] people. And the Text is informing that this furnace was for the need of the city and the tower, and from this we understand how big and deep was this furnace, and from this furnace Avraham Avinu was saved” [*Haamek Davar*, 11:4].

<sup>346</sup> Jerome, “The Letters of St. Jerome,” in *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, vol. 6, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893), 60.

<sup>347</sup> Ramban, *Commentary on the Torah by Ramban (Nachmanides)* trans. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Pub. House, 1971-1976) Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Ramban\\_on\\_Genesis](https://www.sefaria.org/Ramban_on_Genesis), 11:28

“According to Nachmanides G’d referred to the time commencing with His saving Avram miraculously from the furnace of Nimrod.” [*Rabbeinu Bahya*, Bereshit, 15:7:1]

And when the king and all the princes and the servants saw Abram delivered from the midst of the fire, they came and bowed down before Abram. And Abram said unto them: Do not bow down before me, but bow down before the Lord of the universe who hath saved me from this fire. It is he who hath created the soul and spirit of every son of man and who formed the body of everyone, and that God will deliver from all danger, those that fear him and trust in his goodness.<sup>348</sup>

## 9. The castration of the god-king

As we have discussed, the construction of a social body of fear relies on the destruction of difference; on a homogeneity by which a command, with its concomitant threat of punishment, can be univocally transmitted to and understood by the whole society. Social differentiation, rooted in the original, sexually differentiated creation of man, renders all rule into creaturely rule: that is, the degree to which a command must be translated into the unique language, custom, tradition, and idiom of particular peoples and families in order to be understood and obeyed is the degree to which it cannot appear as divine, creative, and indicative of a natural dominion over other men, operating the social body with the felicity by which God said “let there be light” and there was light.<sup>349</sup> The punishment of Babel, which is divided by tongues, is a punishment of differentiation. God achieves, by force, the scattering, diversification which would have been achieved, in peace, through the logic of sexual difference: “it is for their own good that they be

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<sup>348</sup> *Sefer HaYashar*, Noach, 25

<sup>349</sup> This argument is identical to St. Thomas Aquinas’ argument that just rule, as opposed to tyranny, takes as its end the production of virtue in those who are ruled. Virtue, precisely in order to be virtue, cannot be a univocal repetition of and submission to a command, but must freely and analogically participate in the right reason of the ruler in the particular and distinct mode of the ruled. “According to Thomas, law is an external principle of *human* action, and human action is rational and voluntary. Only human action leads to virtue. What this means is that for a command to be a law properly speaking, the receiver of the law must receive it into his practical reasoning as if it was his own conclusion. He must receive the “imprint” of the right reason of another as if it were his own. This means that it is not transferred in a univocal manner through power and submission, but in an analogical manner through authority and obedience. The reason of the ruler is participated in within the mode of the ruled. This is what obedience is and it is only possible through the love and knowledge of rational creatures.” [Andrew Willard Jones, “The Priority of Peace,” *Communio* 48.1 (2021)]

scattered.”<sup>350</sup> Augustine describes this punishment as a disruption of the efficacy of command: “As the tongue is the instrument of domination, in it pride was punished; so that man, who would not understand God when He issued His commands, should be misunderstood when he himself gave orders.”<sup>351</sup> The commands of the king no longer work; they meet a heterogeneous society rather than an arm of flesh. The punishment of Babel, then, is simultaneously a revelation of the manner in which families are natural nodes of resistance to idolatry; fruitful, scattering, and diversifying bodies of love which demand the condescension and mediation of all human power. Had the human race been obedient to the commands of sexual difference, no god-king like Nimrod could have arisen among them. They would have naturally established geographically and linguistically diverse customs which, by definition, could only be efficaciously ruled by a king who would also consent to obey those customs, speaking his will according to the mode of the particular family, and thus revealing himself as fundamentally dependent on them for his power.

Given this analysis, the punishment of “dispersal” simultaneously specifies the particular kind of king capable of administering justice within diversity: not the one who reduces man to animals in order to attain an easy dominion, but the servant-king, the one who humbles himself before the particularity of the families and social orders whose good he seeks.<sup>352</sup> The legal limitations of royal authority will ultimately mandate this new kind of kingship for the Israelite people, and, while it exceeds the scope of our study, Jesus Christ will expand this model as fitting for his universal Church: “let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the one who serves.” (Luke 22:26) But the nations of the dispersal must be understood as fundamentally remedial social

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<sup>350</sup> Jerome, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome (1–59 on the Psalms)*, ed. Hermigild Dressler, trans. Marie Liguori Ewald, vol. 1, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 383.

<sup>351</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 313.

<sup>352</sup> Within this perspective, it is worth considering the tradition that holds Nimrod to be, not merely a monarch, but humanity’s first monarch, thus establishing a worldwide model of kingship for Israel to reject, justifying Israel’s self-perception as unique within a world of nations and god-kings. See, for instance, Ramban’s comment: “The correct interpretation appears to me to be that Nimrod began to be a ruler by force over people, and he was the first monarch. Until his era there were no wars and no reigning monarchs; it was he who first prevailed over the people of Babylon until they crowned him...This is what Scripture intended when it said, *And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel...and Accad...and Shinar*” [*Ramban on Genesis 10:9*].

groups; not as diverse families, economies, and polities suddenly created by God, but social bodies which merely avoid the evil which the immortal city and its king directed against the family. Augustine describes this new grouping, in which “each man retired from those he could not understand, and associated with those whose speech was intelligible; and the nations were divided according to their languages, and scattered over the earth as seemed good to God, who accomplished this in ways hidden from and incomprehensible to us.”<sup>353</sup> That is, unlike the peaceful, unified web of multiplying, earth-filling families which could only establish their particular customs within a whole society of people doing the same, growing in relation to others even as they grew in difference, the nations remedially instituted by God are instituted in their particularity in and through the exclusion of other nations: men gathered according to their newfound similarities, precisely because they could not gather according to their newfound differences: “One asks for a brick and the other brings him lime: the former therefore attacks him and splits open his brains.”<sup>354</sup> These nations are marked by war, not as something incidental to their constitution, but as something essential: nations are social bodies which attain, by continuous war against others, the difference and resistance to idolatrous kingship which families would attain by nature; the diversity that comes through peace returns as the diversity of discord: “For once the tongues became discordant through pride, and then of one became many tongues.”<sup>355</sup>

This remedial resistance which war directs against the amassing pride of idolatrous kingship is, obviously, a limited resistance: the Scriptures understand the nations as idolatrous nations organized under god-kings. The nation limits the effects but does not end the practice by which persons are reduced in their metaphysical meaning to animals reproducing their species. Nevertheless, the warring of multiple kings, following after the Babel narrative, must be understood as something better than the peace of Babylon under its singular king. Seeing Babel’s progress, the Lord says: “Behold, they are one people,

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<sup>353</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 16.4

<sup>354</sup> *Rashi on Genesis 11:7:4* A commentary on Rashi’s interpretation makes the argument that war and violence must be presumed if we are to understand the dispersal into the nations: “For if they stopped building simply because one could not understand the other, why did they scatter? They could live together despite not understanding one another. It must be that they started fighting...” [Sifte Chakhamim, trans. Sefaria Community Translation. Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Siftei\\_Chakhamim](https://www.sefaria.org/Siftei_Chakhamim), Genesis 11:7:3]

<sup>355</sup> Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 138.

and they all have one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” (Genesis 11:6) It is this lack of impossibility, this seamlessness between proposal and act, attained by the construction of a homogenous body of fear, which war corrects: the attempt to build an enclosed world of human power will ever after meet the resistance and violence of multiple, constitutively opposed attempts at doing the same thing.

God destroys the vain attempt to be like God by allowing many attempts, relativizing anyone who would appear “like God” to appearing “like a god.” God exchanges an idolatrous monotheism for an inefficacious and fragile polytheism, and the idolatry of the nations is rendered impotent precisely insofar as it is commanded to be diverse. Now the very meaning of the “godhood” which man would usurp is further removed from the Godhead: gods now war with each other, compete, lose, and die, and man’s attempt to be “like God” is penally subordinated to an attempt to carve out a little power, over a particular place, for a time. The effect of the dispersal is present in the subsequent critique of idolatry, namely, the mockery of the gods of the nation as essentially defeatable and bound by a particular people, and so essentially unlike the God of Israel.<sup>356</sup> Likewise, God relativizes any immortal, everlasting city with the mortalizing and temporalizing presence of other cities, constitutively orientated towards the destruction and enslavement of their neighbours, and thus incapable of maintaining the delusion of being “alone,” a fact which, as we have seen, the Scriptures mock resoundingly.

The nation, then, does the woman’s work, remedially providing the differentiating deliverance from transgression that Eve provided to the first-formed father of the world. As fallen humanity falls further from this original goodness, developing more intricate denials of creaturely insufficiency and building more costly pretences of primal androgyny, this remedial sign also serves as a reminder of previously established original signs. The nation can be rightly called a remedial family; it is also, rightly, a reiteration of the shortening of man’s life, insofar as it establishes the would-be self-sufficiency of the idolatrous nation in war, and so facing death, removing whatever tenuous illusion of immortality it manages to foster. The nation is also, then, a remedial garment of skin,

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<sup>356</sup> “For the Lord is a great God, and a great king above all gods.” (Psalm 95:3)

insofar as, within each nation, the fear of death necessitates the revelation of its fundamental dependence on sexual difference: within the nation, particular men and women, must reveal themselves in their nakedness, their fundamental need for help, in order for the nation to exist at all. The language of the Scriptures is a fitting complement to this interpretation, in that the nations of the earth are usually, though not exclusively, described as so many women: as “daughter Israel,” “daughter of Babylon,” “daughter of Egypt” (Jeremiah 46:24), and so forth.

## 10. The family in the form of a nation

At this point, to describe the family as a “sign of the woman” seems too obvious to merit a discussion: The family, considered as the fundamental social unit in and through which the social world is mediated to its new members, is a work of particular women even as it is a possibility inaugurated by the gift of the original woman to the original man. Because it is the place in which God’s creation of new individuals takes place, it is likewise the place in which man’s creaturely insufficiency is most intensely given: here, the “law of the flesh” is institutionalized, and the curse of painful childbirth reveals man’s constitutive weakness at every turn. More basically, marriage realizes and the truth of the original creation, that the male is only what he is and through the gift of the female, and that the female is only what she is in and through the gift of the male, a fact celebrated and sacramentally recapitulated in the free gift of self by which a wife becomes what she is in and through a husband becoming what he is in a mutual self-giving which protects humanity from the idolatrous desire to be like God, who “is His own eternal happiness”<sup>357</sup> and needs no other to be who he is.

Babel apes divinity by suppressing this “sign of the woman,” turning the family into the mere means by which the city is reproduced, and so conflating human sexual

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<sup>357</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “Reply to Faustus the Manichæan,” in *St. Augustin: The Writings against the Manichæans and against the Donatists*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Richard Stothert, vol. 4, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 274.

difference with animal sexual difference, in which the female, like the male, is reduced to a secondary modification of a fundamentally sexless species for the sake of that species' reproduction. As in the garments of skin, God limits this attempt to build an undifferentiated social body by enforcing differentiation, this time through confusion, achieving by discord the resistance to idolatry that humanity was supposed to achieve by being created male and female and filling the earth. The human family is dispersed into nations and so into inefficacious polytheism, a thousand Babels under a thousand Nimrods, castrating each other's pride.

But Abram is called forth from the sacrificial furnaces of Nimrod; set apart as a sign of the abiding possibility of a social order established otherwise than another immortal city under a god-king; as the father of a family rather than a ruler over men. Abram contains, as a flask of perfume, the scent of mankind's original unity.<sup>358</sup> This unique unity is signified, for Augustine, in his maintenance of the original, unified language of humanity, Hebrew: Abram does not come from "the Confusion" but from the unity that preceded it.<sup>359</sup> This unity proceeds and grows according to the logic of sexual difference and the family, rather than the logic of androgyny and the construction of an immortal city. Where Nimrod stays put, Abram moves. Where Nimrod places man and his city at the top of hierarchy, Abram follows the Most High to the detriment of establishing any city. Where Nimrod forbids anyone diversifying and mortalizing his power and rule by leaving his domain, Abram obeys the commandment given to the original man and woman, to fill the earth: when his flocks and that of his cousin, Lot, grow beyond their common use of the land (Genesis 13:6), Abram does not enslave his weaker cousin into his service, nor engage in the practice of population control, rather, he insists on the priority of peace: "Let there be no strife between you and me" (13:9). He, though a

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<sup>358</sup> "Rabbi Berekhyah said: to what was Abraham our father similar? to a flask of balsam-tree juice close with a tight lid, placed in a corner and its fragrance was not emitted. When it was moved, its fragrance was emitted." [Beresheit Rabah 39:1]

<sup>359</sup> "We are induced to believe that this was the primitive and common language, because the multiplication and change of languages was introduced as a punishment, and it is fit to ascribe to the people of God an immunity from this punishment. Nor is it without significance that this is the language which Abraham retained, and that he could not transmit it to all his descendants, but only to those of Jacob's line, who distinctively and eminently constituted God's people, and received His covenants, and were Christ's progenitors according to the flesh... it [Hebrew] survived in the family of him whose name it took, and that this is no small proof of the righteousness of this family, that the punishment with which the other families were visited did not fall upon it..." [Augustine, *City of God*, 16.11]



“prince” (23:6) bows to the diversifying logic of the family, allowing for the separation and the subsequent weakening of individual power (and strengthening of social power) that Nimrod forbids.<sup>360</sup>

As a member of the world after the dispersal, this unity appears in the form of the nations: that is, as one people among many, with one language among others, united by the exclusion of other peoples, nations, and their tongues. But Abram’s secret is that he, and by extension the familial “nation” which he fathers forth, does not exist as a nation composed in and through the exclusion of others, but as a nation *for* others: God promises that “by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.” (Genesis 12:3) While, as a unity in the form of a nation, the children of Abram will engage in war, that is, in the remedial prevention of the idolatrous slave-state, Israel is ultimately not reducible to war.<sup>361</sup> Rather, Israel keeps safe and contains within itself a foundation of peace, and a link with the original unity of man, which it offers all other nations to join. As the man and the woman cannot be thought of separately, so the nations cannot be thought of apart from Israel, nor Israel apart from the nations. The dispersal into nations and the call of Abram are properly considered as two parts of one event: the creation of nations reduces and limits the notion of divinity to the national god, but this limitation is also the very means by which God seeks to order the nations back to a social order of peace: the call of Abram is simultaneously the condescension by which God acts according to this degraded mode of divinity: as one who competes, wars, and defeats the gods of the other

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<sup>360</sup> Abram gives Lot the choice of where, precisely, to “fill the earth,” and takes the lesser land when Lot chooses the best. (13:10) While the Jewish tradition emphasizes Abram’s humility and generosity, this should not be understood as a humility that is out of proportion with justice, rather, as we have argued, it is precisely the nature of creaturely rule, as opposed to divine kingship, to be subordinate to the particular, diverse customs which it serves: ultimately, the family is either offered up to the king, or the king offers himself up for the family, and Abram is an icon of the latter path, while Nimrod, with his furnace, images the former.

<sup>361</sup> King David, Israelite’s “man of war” and “man of blood,” is nevertheless taken, within the Christian tradition, as figuring the original unity of the world: “One might see in this from the beginning the mystery which was prophesied, what the Spirit is showing through the indication of the singers. For to each leader seventy-two singers were assigned. That was the symbol of the plan of God for all humanity from the beginning, since the tower [of Babel] was built by faithless men who were all of one language, and who derived from seventy-two nations. When a righteous wrath was visited upon them, a division of their tongues was brought about and, since they had no understanding of each others’ language, they were driven out by the Spirit and formed a dispersion. Thirty-two nations derived from Ham, twenty-five from Shem, fifteen from Japheth, a total of seventy-two. The blessed David, in the Spirit, sought to show their completeness when he assigned seventy-two men to each leader of the singers for the praise of God, prophesying thus that in the last times “every tongue” should glorify God.” [Theophilus, *Theophilus to Autolycus*, 108]

nations. Abram is the father in the guise of a king; head of a family in the guise of a nation, following the Most High God in the guise of a god, and those defeated by or converted to this king, nation, and god find themselves, whether they would or not, under the auspices of the Most High, glorifying creaturely weakness over and against the pretensions of human strength.

As Israel can contain the “law of Moses” and yet fail to obey it, so the father of the Jewish people can contain the truth of God, the unity of peace and the uniqueness of servant-kingship, and yet abandon all three. To the extent that Abram is called to realize the logic of sexual difference and family in his rule, Abram is also tempted to abandon this logic for the “ways of the king”; to become another Nimrod; to bear a nation, not according to the promise of God, but “like unto the other nations”; that is, to amass of persons and property in order to operate a homogenous social body through the stimulus of fear. The one called forth is always tempted to go back, and Jewish legends make the temptation of Abram explicit. In the Beresheit Rabbah we read that the King’s Valley received its name “because all of the idolaters became unanimous, cut down cedars and built a great stage, and brought [Avraham] there to raise him up, and they said praises before him...They said to him, “You are our king! You are our prince! You are our god!” He said to them: “The world does not lack its King, nor does it lack its God.”<sup>362</sup> Within the Scriptures, this temptation is expressed in the story of warring kings that follows the dispersal of a unified humanity into nations.

The Sefer HaYashar describes Nimrod, once king over all the earth, in a new, remedial position of impotence; as one among many: “At that time Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, sent to all the kings around him, to Nimrod king of Shinor who was subjected to him in those days...”<sup>363</sup> Nimrod fights in order to defeat the king of Sodom, who had joined with other kings in rebellion against the rule of Chedorlaomer. When the King of Sodom is defeated, Lot is taken captive “for he had settled in Sodom.” (14:12) Abram moves to rescue Lot. The text of Genesis describes Abram as entering into battle with the kings of nations, but not *as* a king of the nations. The kings fight for dominance; Abram fights for his family. The armies of the kings are invisible; they fight “four kings against

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<sup>362</sup> Beresheit Rabah 42:5

<sup>363</sup> *Sefer HaYashar*, Noach, 25

five” (14:9), and the means by which they fight are collapsed into the king, whose victories and defeats appear as the victories and defeats of a single man: “the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar, went forth and engaged them in battle in the Valley of Siddim.”<sup>364</sup> (14:8) Abram’s army is visible, warriors “born into his household, numbering three hundred and eighteen.” (14:14) The kings derive their power by the subjection of their armies, but Abram derives his power from the unity of friendship, a unity of love and loyalty which precedes from family, from “Mamre the Amorite, kinsman of Eshkol and Aner, these being Abram’s allies.” (14:15) This difference is made most clear in the defeated King of Sodom’s request to Abram, “Give me the persons, and take the possessions for yourself.” (14:21) Since persons constitute the king in his power, Sodom must have them in order to remain king. But Abram does not simply reject taking both the persons and the possessions of Sodom, he rejects them precisely because they would represent an accumulation and amassment of wealth and power which has its source in the nations and their mode of kingship, rather than in the multiplying, filling logic of sexual difference: “I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, ‘It is I who made Abram rich.’” (14:23) Rather, he distributes the spoils to the families on whom his strength relies: “For me, nothing but what my servants have used up; as for the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre—let them take their share.” (14:24)

Abram, then, is the one who definitively rejects the ways of the king, the immortal city, and their peculiar mode of attempting to be “like God.” Rather, Abram, the “little sister,” embraces and subordinates his power to the family as a sign of the original woman, that is, as a source of order and peace which affirms the “very goodness” of weakness, glorifies man’s not being God, confirms him as a being in constitutive need of help, and protects him from the transgression of idolatry. This trust in God’s original, demythologizing creation merits his becoming the father of Israel, as opposed to a king. Because he rejects the amassments of Sodom, God says to Abram, “Fear not, Abram, I

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<sup>364</sup> This literary collapse of soldiers into the body of the king is a typical style of ancient Egyptian depictions of battle, in which a singular Pharaoh destroys a multitude of enemies. See Joachim Śliwa, “Some Remarks concerning Victorious Ruler Representations in Egyptian Art,” in *Forschungen und Berichte*, Bd. 16, Archäologische Beiträge (1974): 97–117.

am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.” (15:1) Abram seems to understand this reward to be for his refusal to participate in the social order of pagan kingship, to accept the rewards of war,<sup>365</sup> insofar as he immediately questions how God will give him a nation by way of the family, now that he has rejected a nation by way of amassment: “O Lord GOD, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless, and the one in charge of my household is Dammeseck Eliezer!” (15:2)

This description of Abram, as the one tempted to be like Nimrod, helps to make sense out of the obscure story of Abram and Sara in Egypt, in which Abram, fearing that the Egyptians will kill him in order to enjoy the beauty of his wife, has Sara say that she is sister, and she is taken into the house of Pharaoh. Our labour up to this point has provided us with the conceptual tools with which to interpret this story.

## 11. Circumcision as a remedial sign of the woman

The family is a natural node of resistance to idolatrous rule. Kingship which relies on the subjugation of others in order to attain a false appearance of divinity must disrupt the family as an original source of peace, reconstituting it as a unit of animal reproduction of an immortal city and so of the glory of its king. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, is about this business. Abram assumes that, if it is known that he is Sara’s husband, the Egyptians will kill him and take Sara as a wife of the king. The story literalizes the animosity which idolatrous kingship must have for the family: the married woman is, by definition, unavailable to the command of the king. In her status as “wife,” she is who she is in and through her husband, and both attain to their identity through mutual self-gift, within a social world that does not rely on the king for its being or content.

Lust for the married woman seems to be driven by a colonizing impulse; it is fuelled, not simply by the beauty of the woman, but by an anger and a hatred of the unique world of the family, of the peace of a husband and wife which simply does not need the fear of

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<sup>365</sup> This is also an interpretation of the Midrash Tanchuma Buber: “You have refused a reward of flesh and blood. See what a reward is prepared for you with me. Thus it is stated (in Gen. 15:1): YOUR REWARD SHALL BE VERY GREAT,” Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Lech Lecha, Siman 17:7.

the idolatrous king to constitute its unity, even as the idolatrous king *does* need its love in order to have people to subjugate, in order to mediate his commands to the whole society, and in order to produce the goods, loyalties, and loves by which the threat of punishment and reward is made efficacious—in order, in short, to be “like God.” This is why tyranny is not incidentally associated with lust, as if the Deuteronomic limitation, that an Israelite king “shall not amass wives for himself,” were a check on a merely possible abuse of power, rather than the legal destruction of a particular tool of idolatrous kingship, which is established in and through the destruction of families.<sup>366</sup>

Within the midrash tradition, Sara, who is “seen” and “taken” by the Pharaoh, is compared to the daughters of the generation of the flood, who are “seen” and “taken” by the sons of God.<sup>367</sup> While the generation of the flood attempted to destroy the differentiated meaning of the sexual act, Abram expects the king of Egypt to destroy the family, killing Abram and so fictitiously reducing Sara to a possible possession of the King and an extension of his will, lustfully parrying the rebuke of idolatry present in her existence as the wife of another. The *Sefer HaYashar* has Abram saying, “I do greatly fear the Egyptians, lest they might kill me and take thee away, for verily there is no fear of God in that place,”<sup>368</sup> and indeed, the lustful hatred of the family is, at the same time, a hatred of God and his creation, for, as argued, the demythologizing, diversifying, love-based logic of the family was part and parcel of the original creation of man, “male and female.”

But Abram does fear the threat of the king, and so he tells Sara to achieve in fiction that destruction of their exclusive unity that the murderous king would achieve in fact: He tells her to pretend he is not her husband, but her brother, “and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s palace.” (12:15) This act of Abram has led to a split in the commentary tradition, between those who would justify his action as prudent given the circumstances, and those who would argue that Abram transgressed.<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> See, for example, my discussion on Esther and “harem” in chapter IV.7.

<sup>367</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Balak 2:1

<sup>368</sup> *Sefer HaYashar*, Lech Lecha, 5

<sup>369</sup> The former almost always argue that Abram had some unrecorded divine assurance that Sara would be safe from rape, as when Augustine argues “the husband, in perfect assurance of the chaste attachment of his wife to himself, and knowing her mind to be the abode of modest and virtuous affection, called her his sister, without saying that she was his wife, lest he himself should be killed, and his wife fall into the hands of strangers and evil-doers: for he was assured by his God

The medieval commentary of Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, citing the “view of Nachmanides” argues that even Abram’s duress fails to justify his actions:

This was an inadvertent sin committed by Avram; it caused the eventual exile in Egypt of his descendants. It was certainly a grave sin to cause his wife to sin on account of his own fear of being killed. He should have demonstrated faith in G-d that He would save him as well as his wife. He committed another sin when he left the land of Canaan on account of the famine. He should have demonstrated faith in G-d that He would make sure he would not die from hunger. On account of this sin his descendants were enslaved by Pharaoh.<sup>370</sup>

The possibility of transgression gains weight within the context described above, in which Abram is the one rewarded for his non-participation in the methods of idolatrous kingship. It would be difficult not to compare Abram’s later refusal to take “so much as a thread” from the King of Sodom with his request to Sara to “say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you” (12:13) and his subsequent enrichment by the King of Egypt: “And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels.” (12:16) This apparent contradiction has put commentators on the defensive, arguing that “[e]ven though Avraham did not want to accept gifts from the King of Sodom (later on), here he was

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that He would not allow her to suffer violence or disgrace.” [Augustine, “Reply to Faustus the Manichæan,” 285] But even Augustine admits that “[s]ome people, not scoffers and evil-speakers like Faustus, but men who pay due honour to the Scriptures, which Faustus finds fault with because he does not understand them, or which he fails to understand because of his fault-finding, in commenting on this act of Abraham, are of opinion that he stumbled from weakness of faith, and denied his wife from fear of death, as Peter denied the Lord. If this is the correct view, we must allow that Abraham sinned; but the sin should not cancel or obliterate all his merits, any more than in the case of the apostle.” [Ibid.] John Chrysostom seems to take this moderating approach when compares Abram to the man forced to take a usurious loan, participating in an evil design through necessity, giving up his thanks to the lender as Abram gave up his wife to the king: “Since Abraham too, contriving how his plan might take with the barbarians, did himself give up his wife to them; not however willingly, but through fear of Pharaoh. So also the poor man, because thou countest him not even worth so much money, is actually compelled to be thankful for cruelty,” [John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Gospel according to St. Matthew,” in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. George Prevost and M. B. Riddle, vol. 10, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 350.]

<sup>370</sup> *Rabbeinu Bahya*, Bereshit 12:13:1

forced to accept the gifts or they would have realized that he was Sarai's husband,"<sup>371</sup> or that it is "quite inconceivable that Avram wanted to use his wife as a pimp uses a prostitute."

Even though we read...that Avram, in the event, experienced many financial favours as the man whose consent was sought to have his sister as someone's wife, this is something he had not counted on at all. In fact, we know how unwilling Avram was to accept people's favours when he turned down the spoils of war which were not a gift to him but his due as he had fought that war. Had he not been in Pharaoh's country and been afraid to reject these gifts, he would most certainly not have accepted them. Avram was not interested in acquiring more wealth than G'd had seen fit to grant him.<sup>372</sup>

But it is not so much a contradiction in Abram's behaviour, rather, both Sodom and Egypt present Abram with the same temptation: to participate, however remotely, in the ways of the king, replacing the order of the family with the order of the king. Abram will not, through greed, offer his family up to the king of Sodom, but he does, through fear, offer up Sara, and so his family, to the king of Egypt. Just as Abram is rewarded for refusing to participate in the methods of idolatrous kingship, he is punished for giving in to his fear and offering up his family to a king of the earth. It is my contention that circumcision is Abram's punishment; a remedial "sign of the woman" given to the one who, however fearfully and however unwillingly, would deny the family.

As God brought the Flood upon those who, through sexual perversion, would deny the reminder of creatureliness present in their sexually differentiated flesh, so God brought division upon those who, through the unified city, would deny the reminder of mortality present in the human family. Because this act divides mankind into nations, it is

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<sup>371</sup> Tur HaAroch, *Tur on the Torah*, trans. Eliyahu Munk (Lambda Publishers, KTAV Publishing House, 2005) Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Tur\\_HaArok](https://www.sefaria.org/Tur_HaArok), Genesis 12:16:1

<sup>372</sup> *Radak on Genesis*, 12:13:2. See also Sifte Chakhamim, Genesis 12:13:1: "Why did he later reject gifts from the king of Sedom? There he said, 'Neither a thread nor a shoelace! I will not take anything of yours,' although the wealth was rightfully due to him, since he took it from the four kings. If so, he surely would not want outright gifts, for it is written (*Mishlei* 15:27): 'He who hates gifts will live.' An answer is: Avraham wanted only a small gift, for it says in *Berachos* 10b, 'One who wishes to benefit from others may do so, as did the Prophet Elisha.' This means one may take food, drink and lodging."

simultaneously the act by which the demythologizing work of God, given to all mankind in the original creation, is given to a particular people, namely, the children of Abraham.

From this point onwards, a peculiar family, Abram and Sara, promised to be multiplied into a nation, are made the peculiar object of God's remedial gift of the original woman.<sup>373</sup> God chooses to protect a particular nation from the transgression of idolatry, for the sake of the whole world. Thus, even while the dispersal into nations is a remedial sign of the woman, in that enforces the natural differentiation which limits man's pretensions to being like God, this division itself does not complete the work of the woman: national division is an antagonist to idolatry, but it is not a "helpmate" in rejoicing in creaturely insufficiency. The warring nations still believe that it is good for man to be alone, they are merely prevented, by war, from enacting that state. They are still idolatrous; still oriented towards amassing the illusion of androgynous strength, even as they are revealed, by their neighbours, as fundamentally weak.

In his gift of the original woman, God does not merely (negatively) suppress idolatry; he gives the woman to man for both to (positively) rejoice that they are bone and flesh. Abram fathers a nation which, even as it engages in the suppression of man's idolatrous pretensions through victory over the nations, also, by virtue of its unique relationship with the one true God, provides the possibility of the conversion of the nations. Indeed, Israel is orientated to towards the conversion and salvation of the nations, as the book of Isaiah says, "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind." (Isaiah 42:6-7) And again,

the mountain of the house of the Lord  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
and peoples shall flow to it,  
and many nations shall come, and say:  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,

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<sup>373</sup> Thus, for instance, the Psalmist boasts, "He proclaims his word to Jacob, his statutes and laws to Israel. He has not done this for any other nation; of such laws they know nothing" (Psalms 147:19-20) As we will see, the laws of which the other nations "know nothing" are given precisely as another Eve (Sirach 24:23-29), to save man from the transgression of idolatry.



to the house of the God of Jacob;  
 that he may teach us his ways  
 and we may walk in his paths.” (Micah 4:2)

Israel enters into the impotent, frustrated war for sovereignty as a particular nation with a particular god, but unlike all the other nations, her victories do not give glory to man, revealing the success of a mechanism of amassment which produces the appearance of divinity through the subjugation of humanity. As we will see, by being forbidden to behave like all the other nations, her victories give glory to God, with whose help she conquers. To be defeated by Israel is not to be defeated by a bigger, stronger, amassment of human power, a defeat which would confirm the logic of idolatry even as it suppresses its totalizing effect. Rather, to be defeated by Israel is to be defeated by a woman, by weakness, and so to have one's gods defeated by God who is not an artifice of human power: “For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.” (Micah 4:5)

It is the call of Abram to be the father of a nation within the dispersal of the nations, which completes the “sign of the woman,” that is, which constitutes nationhood as a helpmate, given by God, by which man may rejoice in his creaturely insufficiency. From this perspective, the call of Abram is the remedial creation of a new Eve as a gift to Adam divided in the many nations; Israel is the woman who reveals to the nations the creaturely status which they rejected at Babel, and which they continue to reject in their idolatry. As Adam is cast into a deep sleep, one which reveals him in his mortality, in order to receive the woman as his help, so a “deep sleep fell on Abram, and behold, a dread and great darkness fell on him” and the Lord promises that his people will become slaves in Egypt and, after four hundred years, “to your descendants I give this land.” (15:18). Adam wakes to Eve, who helps him rejoice in his being a creature. Abram is made into a New Eve in and with his wife Sara: they are the family, promised to become a great nation, one which is to do for the other nations what Eve was to do for Adam, namely, protect them from the transgression of idolatry.

When Abram offers up his wife to the king, for fear of death, he obscures the uniqueness of their purpose. He does not fulfil God's covenant, that “by you all the

families of the earth will bless themselves,” rather, he participates in the mechanism by which the kings of the earth obscure the sign of the woman, giving his wife up to the harem of the king.

The dispersal of the nations and the call of Abram saves the family from its subordination under the child-sacrificing regime of Babel. Abram and Sara are a singular unit of weakness and differentiation among a multiplicity of nations striving for homogenous strength; they are nation of peace orientated towards the conversion of the other nations constituted by war; they retain the original language of Eden and live as walking, breathing evidence of its original social order—of that differentiated peace indicated by God’s creation of “male and female” over and against the confused peace of attempted homogeneity and sovereign rule.

Abram and Sara are to the nations what the original woman is to the original man: protection from the transgression of idolatry. They are *the* family, not in the sense that there were no other families after the dispersal, but insofar as they were made into a nation which is always also a family; that proceeds from and extends the peace of the family as descendants of one father, rather than a nation which receives its power and unity by subordinating the family *to* the nation.

For Abram to deny his marriage to Sara obscures the family’s mission to the nations. It is obscuration of the family as a sign of the woman, in and through an obscuration of the status of the particular woman, Sara. Sara becomes an exchangeable good, offered up for the king, rather than Abram’s wife, unavailable for the use of the king in his own construction of an immortal city, in which all sexual difference is a utility for the production of his divinity. By ceasing to appear as a familial nation; by saving his individual life by sacrificing his family to the god-king; Abram appears to participate in the erasure of the woman which produces the appearance of divinity in man.

Those who would subordinate the differentiated peace of Sara and Abram to the sovereign rule of the god-king, dissolving her into a wife of the king, are punished in their genital organs:

Our sages clearly did not understand matters in this way and believed that seeing that these two kings both had evil intentions G’d countered their evil intentions by

forestalling the harm they were about to do and effectively smiting them by disabling the respective organs with which they were going to commit their sin. The sages of the Talmud understand our verses literally.

Having mentioned the verses concerning the incident of Abraham and Abimelech, the Gemara explains other related verses. “For the Lord had obstructed [atzor atzar] all the wombs of the house of Abimelech” (Genesis 20:18). Rabbi Elazar says: Why are these two obstructions [atzor atzar] both stated? One is stated with regard to a man, that semen will not be discharged, and two are stated with regard to a woman, that semen will not be discharged from her, and that she will not give birth.

This is also based on 1 Chronicles 16:21: “He allowed no one to oppress them; He reproveth kings on their account.”<sup>374</sup>

God reproves kings on account of the family, as set apart in Abram and Sara. It is fitting, then, that God should reprove Abram, insofar as he sacrifices the family, by smiting his genital organ. While the kings of Egypt and Gemara are afflicted so that they will not rape Sara, Abram is marked in his genital organ after participating in the “ways of the king.”

Circumcision is a sign of God’s covenant with Abram, a covenant by which Abram rejects the ways of idolatrous kingship by living as the father, and not the king, of a multitude of nations; worshipping the Most High God, and not the mortal divinity of the nations; unifying the world as a family, that fruitful, multiplying, differentiating node of resistance to idolatry which constantly reveals man to himself in his creaturely goodness, constitutive weakness, and need for help. If God rewards Abram’s rejection of idolatrous kingship with promises of land and fertility, (15:1) it stands to reason that he would punish him for participation in idolatrous kingship, saying, as in his covenant with Solomon, “When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men.” (2 Samuel 7:14) Because Abram commits iniquity, he is chastened with circumcision. Circumcision marks Abram as one who, unlike the

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<sup>374</sup> Talmud, *Bava Kamma*, Daf 92a:11–14, The William Davidson Talmud, Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Bava\\_Kamma](https://www.sefaria.org/Bava_Kamma)

idolatrous nations, walks before the Lord (17:1) If God desires that the “covenant be in [Abram’s] *flesh* an everlasting covenant,” it is because the covenant made in Abram’s *heart* has not been “everlasting” on Abram’s part, but has already been subject to backsliding, fear, and participation in the national mode of idolatrous kingship rather than in the original mode of familial peace.

Circumcision is a remedial sign of the woman, a legal proscription given unto Abram who, as the father of a salvific, familial nation, is supposed to be a sign of the woman unto the androgynous nations, but who shirks this vocation out of fear. Circumcision is a permanent sign which persists in the flesh even when Abram does not persist in faith; it remains even when he stumbles in walking before God by walking in the footsteps of the god-kings. Adam received the original woman through a cut in his side; Abram and his descendants become signs of the woman through a cut in their loins. Adam was cast into a deep sleep and received the one who revealed him as insufficient through the removal of his rib; Abram was cast into a deep sleep to receive the covenant and was later given a remedial sign of his insufficiency through the removal of his foreskin. The difficulty of understanding why circumcision is given to Jewish men, but not to women, even though both belong to the covenant, should not surprise us here. Circumcision is given to men, and not women, precisely because it is a sign of the original woman who was given to the original man, and not vice versa; a sign which gives the same “help” as the original woman, though, of course, in a remedial mode.<sup>375</sup>

The creation of Eve from the rib of Adam does not merely teach us that man and woman share a common nature. It also teaches us that the creation of man is not the creation of a complete whole to which the woman is added extrinsically. Instead, the creation of the woman is simultaneously an act of creation which “finishes” the man: because she is what she is, he is what he is, and there is only the finished creation “man”

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<sup>375</sup> In this context, we can better understand the claim of Justin Martyr, that “the inability of the female sex to receive fleshly circumcision, proves that this circumcision has been given for a sign, and not for a work of righteousness. For God has given likewise to women the ability to observe all things which are righteous and virtuous; but we see that the bodily form of the male has been made different from the bodily form of the female; yet we know that neither of them is righteous or unrighteous merely for this cause, but [is considered righteous] by reason of piety and righteousness,” Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 206.

in and through the finished creation “woman.” For this reason, the Christian tradition has consistently seen the removed rib of Adam as being always already *for* the creation of the woman. As Aquinas puts it, “[t]he rib belonged to the integral perfection of Adam, not as an individual, but as the principle of the human race; just as the semen belongs to the perfection of the begetter, and is released by a natural and pleasurable operation.”<sup>376</sup> The manner in which woman is created reveals the purpose for which she was created, for, if the man is only created in and through the creation of the woman, then man is not “like God,” who needs no other for his perfection. The creation of Eve from the rib of Adam serves to protect both from the idolatry of the myths.

The removal of the foreskin does for sinful man what the removal of the rib does for the sinless man: it reminds him that he is not complete, “like God.”

As is known to those that understand, the completion of the form of man comes with the removal of this foreskin which is extraneous...Through circumcision God “wanted men to complete the creation of his body, as He did not create him complete from the womb; [so as] to hint to him that just like the completion of the form of his body is through him, so [too] is it in his hand to complete the form of his soul, by refining his actions.”<sup>377</sup>

This remarkable medieval commentary suggests that the foreskin is given as something extraneous, and then ordered to be removed, as a way of teaching man that he is not complete, or perfect, but must complete and perfect himself. The parallel to the creation of woman is obvious: The removal of the rib is “a natural and pleasurable operation,” because to need the other to be oneself is the proper mode of being for a creature. The removal of the foreskin is a painful operation, teaching that creaturely insufficiency man should have known by nature in and through a law. Abram, by participating in idolatrous

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<sup>376</sup> STh., I q.92 a.3 ad 2. See also Ephrem of Syria, “Then [Moses] said, *male and female He created them*,<sup>99</sup> to make known that Eve was inside Adam, in the rib that was drawn out from him. Although she was not in his mind she was in his body, and she was not only in his body with him, but she was also in soul and spirit with him, for God added nothing to that rib that He took out except the structure and the adornment. If everything that was suitable for Eve, who came to be from the rib, was complete in and from that rib, it is rightly said that *male and female He created them*.” [Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works*, 94]

<sup>377</sup> *Sefer HaChinukh*, Mitzvah 2:1-2, trans. Sefaria Community Translation. Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer\\_HaChinukh](https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_HaChinukh)

kingship, risks forgetting the lesson of the rib, namely, that man is not like God, but is only complete, as man, in a paradoxically constitutive incompleteness. Therefore, God mercifully gives Abram a remedial sign of the woman, commanding him to make himself incomplete in his flesh in order to be complete within the covenant; reliving the truth of his created nature in the guise of the law. The Midrash Tanchuma gives words to the Holy One, who commands Abram to circumcise himself, which could serve as a rebuke of every pretence to divinity man musters up:

Abraham began to wonder. He said to himself: “Surely, until now I have been whole in body, but if I circumcise myself I shall be incomplete. There are five prepuces, four in a man and one on a tree. The prepuce of the ear, as it is written: *Behold, their ear is uncircumcised* (Jer. 6:10); the prepuce of the heart, as it is written: *Remove the obduracy of your heart* (Deut. 10:16); the prepuce of the tongue, as it is said: *Of uncircumcised lips* (Exod. 6:12); the prepuce of the flesh, as it is written in this verse: *Ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin* (Gen. 17:1). If I should circumcise any one of these prepuces, my organs will be incomplete.” The Holy One, blessed be He, asked him: “Why do you believe that you are whole?”<sup>378</sup>

Because it is a sign of the woman, circumcision also signifies the creatureliness denied in the act of sexual perversion, which would use the sexually differentiated body as if the woman did not signify man’s status as one who is not “like God”—as one who needs the other to be who and what he is. The Bereishit Rabbah argues that “from the place where it is recognized whether [one is] male or female—from there we circumcise him,”<sup>379</sup> or, as the medieval commentator Radak puts it: “It was to be the area of the body where the

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<sup>378</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecha, Siman 16:3 This midrash, however, goes on to make an argument which, while not contradicting our own, does little to serve it: “The Holy One, blessed be He, asked him: “Why do you believe that you are whole? In fact you lack five limbs. Before you were circumcised, your name was Abram: The *alef* in your name is one, the *bet* two, the *resh* two hundred, and the *mem* forty, and that totals two hundred and forty-three. However, Man’s limbs total two hundred and forty-eight. Circumcise yourself and you will be whole.” After he was circumcised, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Him: *No longer is your name Abram; henceforth it will be Abraham* (ibid., v. 5). He added a *heh*, which equals five, to his name, making a total of two hundred forty-eight, corresponding to the number of limbs in the human body. Hence Scripture says: *Be thou whole*.”

<sup>379</sup> Bereishit Rabbah 46, quoted in Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?* (University of California Press, 2005) 98

difference between the sexes was most notable.”<sup>380</sup> By emphasizing sexual difference, circumcision wars against the idolatrous effort to deny the sexual difference which man is commanded to reveal by the law of the flesh. This is seen in Radak’s commentary, which holds that the reason circumcision was a mark on the penis, and not some other part of the body, was to fight against sexual perversion:

...although there are other symbolic acts which are signs of the covenant and the obligation to keep the laws of the Torah, such as the phylacteries, the fringes, the Sabbath, etc., this symbol is by far the most potent one, the only one to be performed on one’s body. The other “signs” are only a reminder. This is the only such “sign” to be performed on one’s body. Seeing that this is so, The Torah chose to select the reproductive organ of the male, seeing that most of the sins one commits are somehow related to this organ and involve misuse of that organ. It is the organ, which, unless handled with care, is apt to allow the bestial party of the human being to come to the surface, thereby weakening the aspect of our nature which wishes to cling to godliness. When looking at that part of one’s body one reminds oneself automatically that G’d has forbidden Jews to engage in recreational sexual activities, in mating with partners which the Torah has forbidden in the interest of purity, etc.<sup>381</sup>

Circumcision marks, in the flesh of a people chosen to be unlike the nations, the very point of sexual difference which the nations must deny in order to indulge the illusion of mortal divinity. Circumcision is thus a weapon against idolatry. There is a fitting connection of images that plays between circumcision and the *protoevangelium*, in which God promises that the seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent. Insofar as it is an instrument of sexual perversion by which man denies his differentiated nature and attempts to be “like God,” the penis is serpentine; insofar as it painfully reinforces man’s differentiated nature, circumcision is the work of the woman who crushes the head of the serpent. Within the Jewish tradition, it is likewise fitting to speak circumcision as a

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<sup>380</sup> Radak on Genesis, 17:10:4

<sup>381</sup> Radak on Genesis, 17:11:2

certain microcosm of the decapitating, hanging, and crushing of the heads of the god-kings by the women of Israel, who personify the remedial modes of the original protection of man from idolatry: “The organ which is cut [in circumcision] is one that radiates feelings to all parts of the body of the person concerned. This is why it is called, ‘head of the whole body’ in *Negaim* 6,7. This is why this organ was chosen to serve as a demonstration of self-sacrifice and why someone who undergoes circumcision is considered in the eyes of G-d as if he had sacrificed his entire body on G-d’s behalf.”<sup>382</sup> Likewise, many are explicit in associating the act of circumcision as a destruction of not merely lust, but of the pride prerequisite for idolatry, as in Philo’s interpretation:

But the divine legislator appoints circumcision to take place in the case of the male alone for many reasons: the first of which is, that the male creature feels venereal pleasures and desires matrimonial connexions more than the female, on which account the female is properly omitted here, while he checks the superfluous impetuosity of the male by the sign of circumcision. But the second reason is, that the material of the female is supplied to the son from what remains over of the eruption of blood, while the immediate maker and cause of the son is the male. Because therefore the male supplies the most indispensable part in the fact of generation, God deservedly represses his pride by the figure of circumcision, but the material or feminine cause, as being inactive, does not display ambition in the same degree.<sup>383</sup>

Circumcision is given for the repression of pride. The Jewish people, distinguished by this mark of the covenant, are forever marked in the flesh to be a living rebuke to the political theology of the nations, who pridefully seek to produce mortal divinity in and through a denial of the original creation of man as male and female. This sign of the woman, carved on the body of the man, emphasizes what is already true of the sexually differentiated body, that each makes its mark on the other in a mutual revelation of human creaturely existence, and it is thus that Christian theology wields circumcision as a

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<sup>382</sup> *Rabbeinu Bahya*, *Bereshit* 17:13:2

<sup>383</sup> Philo of Alexandria, “The Midrash of Philo,” 17:10, [https://www.sefaria.org/The\\_Midrash\\_of\\_Philos](https://www.sefaria.org/The_Midrash_of_Philos)



potent symbol against the pride of this world: “And so we are trained by God for the purpose of chastising, and (so to say) emasculating, the world. We are the circumcision—spiritual and carnal—of all things; for both in the spirit and in the flesh we circumcise worldly principles.”<sup>384</sup>

Throughout the Scriptures, man appears “like God” by the denial of difference; a denial born of the fear that springs from envy of God; a denial that would, in order to violently quench fear, amass all ownership and power within a singular, centralized point and operate a subjugated society as a singular, androgynous extension of human power. This is the fundamental difficulty the biblical model has in assimilating itself to the gender identity model, as to any model which posits the undifferentiated “human” as the primary object of a gendering power. From the perspective of liberalism, it is a move towards liberation, but from the perspective of the Scriptures, it is the necessary condition for the production of a subjugated mass orientated towards the appearance of mortal divinity. The Old Testament tells of our apparently tireless attempt to produce a god within the context of God’s actually tireless attempt to frustrate our efforts, a story which has culminated, thus far, in God’s production of a unique, familial, nation; arrayed against all possible gods; its males marked in the flesh with a sign of the woman.

Circumcision served as a mark of Jewishness, “like the stamp on the skin of a slave identifying him as belonging to a certain master,”<sup>385</sup> not in addition to its significance as a “sign of the woman,” but because of it: Jews are a people whose sexual difference is “marked” to underline, to all the nations, that man is not “like God” and that this fact is “very good.” Because of this, the “part” became an icon of the “whole,” and those belonging to the family-nation of Israel considered themselves “the circumcised” while those belonging to the nations became “the uncircumcised.”<sup>386</sup> Any repetition of the original idolatry of Adam and Eve was now also an apostasy against this sign of the covenant, circumcision, an apostasy which was always the act of becoming like the other

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<sup>384</sup> Tertullian, “On the Apparel of Women,” in *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 4, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 23.

<sup>385</sup> *Sforno on Genesis*, 17:11:1

<sup>386</sup> Consider also Esther’s combination of the “alien” with the “uncircumcised”: “I hate the splendor of the wicked and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien.”

nations, the uncircumcised: “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised but yet uncircumcised.” (Jeremiah 9:25)

This framework allows us to consider the law of Moses as a remedial circumcision; a specification of the precise manner the familial nation was to live in order to prevent the social construction of an androgynous social body; a detailed a way of life which would achieve, through habitual action, what circumcision was supposed to achieve through painful reminder; a law to effect the “repression of pride” that circumcision signified; and in this sense, a second circumcision given to a people whose slavery had suppressed the meaning of the “sign of the woman” carved into the flesh of their males. While an analysis of the Exodus narrative is beyond our scope, this much can be argued: The Israelites, like Sara in the house of Pharaoh, became slaves in Egypt through fear of death, absorbed into a nation under a god-king reigning under the insignia of the serpent.<sup>387</sup> Egypt was, in this sense, the greatest victory of the serpent against the woman; Babel rebuilt; a four-hundred-year smothering of Israel’s signification as a differentiated, womanly nation amidst all the nations of the earth, in and through the usual tactics of the serpent: child-sacrifice (Exodus 1:16), the reduction of the family to the reproductive unit and object of monarchical population control, the artificial limitation of the command to “fill the earth,” (1:10) the construction of idols, and so forth. That this national participation in uncircumcision manifested itself in disobedience to the particular command, that “[e]very male among you shall be circumcised,” (Genesis 17:10) while not necessary, is certainly fitting: as the law of the limited lifespan followed after a rejection of the law of the flesh, and as the law of nationhood followed after the rejection of the limited lifespan; and as the law of circumcision followed after Abram rejected the unique vocation to be a family amidst the nations, so it would make sense that the law of Moses followed after a rejection of the law of circumcision.<sup>388</sup> Evidence of this laxity is

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<sup>387</sup> The uacrus, an image of cobra standing upright on its tail, was a Pharaoh’s sign of deity and sovereignty. To contextualize the description of Moses as the one who confronts the serpent, see, John D. Currid, “The Egyptian Setting of the ‘Serpent’: Confrontation in Exodus 7, 8–13,” BZ 39/2 (1995), 203–24.

<sup>388</sup> Tertullian, at least, presumes that Moses had to give the precept of circumcision to the Israelite people once more: “For God, foreseeing that He was about to give this circumcision to the people of Israel for ‘a sign,’ not for salvation, urges the circumcision of the son of Moses, their future leader, for this reason; that, since He had begun, through him, to give the People the precept of circumcision, the people should not despise it, from seeing this example (of neglect) already exhibited conspicuously in their leader’s son. Tertullian, “An Answer to the Jews,” in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts,

displayed in the strange story of the “bridegroom of blood”: “At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched Moses’ feet with it, and said, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” (Exodus 4:24-25)<sup>389</sup>

Part of the Talmudic interpretation of this verse is that Moses neglected, or at least delayed, the circumcision of his son.<sup>390</sup> Rashi writes that the angel of the Lord which threatened to kill Moses “became a kind of serpent and swallowed him from his head to his thigh.”<sup>391</sup> There is, in this description, a powerful triptych that ties Israel, Moses, and the people of Israel into a single narrative. Through his neglect of the meaning of the original woman, the serpent threatened Adam with death; for his neglect of that sign of the woman, circumcision, a serpent threatens Moses with death; in and through the absorption of daughter Israel into the customs of Egypt, the serpent, Pharaoh, threatens the Israelite people with death, a cultural destruction literalized in the drowning of their male children.<sup>392</sup> As the suppression of the original woman is remedied by a sign of the woman, the garments of skin, so Moses’ suppression of a sign of the woman, circumcision, is remedied by a particular woman, Zipporah, wielding a stone knife against her son’s “garment of skin”; so the uncircumcision of the Israelite people is physically cut by their exodus from the kingdom of the serpent, and spiritually cut by the law of the Moses, carved into tablets of stone.<sup>393</sup> As the blood from the circumcision

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James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 3, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 153–154.

<sup>389</sup> For an overview of the story Propp, W. (1993). *That Bloody Bridegroom* (Exodus IV 24-6). *Vetus Testamentum*, 43(4), 495-518.

<sup>390</sup> “At the time that Moses our teacher was negligent about the circumcision...” Talmud, Nedarim, Daf 32a:3, *The William Davidson Talmud*, Retrieved September 29, 2021 from <https://www.sefaria.org/Nedarim>

<sup>391</sup> Rashi, “Rashi on Exodus” *Pentateuch with Rashi’s commentary* trans. by M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silberman (Metsudah Publications, 2009). Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Exodus,4:24:2](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Exodus,4:24:2)

<sup>392</sup> A single midrash presents both the idea that Pharaoh was signified as a serpent, and that God would take on the form of the serpent for the purpose of instructing Moses: At the burning bush, “[God] made Himself into a serpent before him [before Moses] to inform him [Moses] that just as the serpent twists deviously, so he [Pharaoh] would twist deviously against him [Moses].” See Marc Bregman, “God made Himself into a Serpent before Moses” A Unique Midrashic Tradition on Exodus Chapters III–IV (*Parashat Va-Era*) from an Early Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Genizah Fragment, Marc Bregman (Jerusalem, 2018) <https://hcommons.org/deposits/download/hc:18040/CONTENT/god-made-himself-into-a-serpent-before-moses-copyright-marc-bregman-2018.docx/>

<sup>393</sup> A twofold circumcision is described by Origen, first of removal from the worship and idolatry of Egypt, and the second a removal from the habituating law of Egypt, to which end another law, the law of Moses, was given: “For his first circumcision is where he cuts away from them the worship of idols and the

distinguishes Moses from the neglectful uncircumcised, and so the angel “let him alone,” (4:25) so the blood on the Israelite’s doorposts distinguishes them from the uncircumcised, the angel of the Lord passes them over (12:23). Within this story, Moses is thus established as a “bridegroom of blood,” a groom who exists because of a bride who has saved him, loosening the jaws of a serpent through the blood of her son. The image suggests what has been suggested from the beginning, that the woman is man’s protection from transgression and “help” out idolatry, and thus, in one, decisive action, Zipporah becomes a “daughter of Eve,” not by rote “nature,” but by a unity of vocation. But the event also begins a laborious construction of a new notion of kingship. Moses, the archetypical ruler of the Israelite people, is established as a bridegroom opposed to the serpent. The ideal ruler of Israel, developed through the age of judges and into the age of Davidic kingship, fills its Mosaic mold.

## Chapter IV: The Deconstruction of Kingship

### 1. Wedded to wisdom

This, the penultimate chapter of this work, lays out the implications that the above theology of sexual difference has for political theology, specifically when it comes to understanding the ideal form of political rule laid out within the Scriptures, in opposition to the forms of political rule that constituted the nations surrounding Israel.

The law of Moses is a sign of the woman which pre-emptively and legally crushes the head of the serpent by forbidding the Israelite king from using the primary techniques by which a king of the other nations would cull monolithic sovereignty unto himself, “that his heart may not be lifted up above his brethren.” The Deuteronomical limitations of

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fabrications of philosophical persuasion. But he carries out the second circumcision when he cuts off the habits and passions of the old man and the vices of the flesh. Then is fulfilled what is written in Joshua son of Nun, “Today I have taken away from you the reproaches of Egypt.” For a person carries around the reproaches of Egypt within himself who, though he is in the Church serving as a soldier under our general, Jesus, is nevertheless enslaved to Egyptian customs and barbaric mental inclinations,” Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1–5*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, vol. 103, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 158.

royal authority mandate that the king must not “multiply horses,” (Dt. 17:16) “wives,” or “silver and gold,” (17:17) preventing him from amassing a standing army, property, kinship bonds, and wealth.<sup>394</sup> He was to follow “all the words of this law and statutes” (17:19) which would forbid him from those explicit acts of idolatry by which a king is able to appear omnipresent among his people. The law checked the potential tyranny of the king,<sup>395</sup> and mandated that he neither usurp divine honours nor pretend to divine capacities. This form of this kingship is distinguished from the rule of the nations; it is a “circumcised” kingship; the rule of one subordinated to God, through the law. The strength of the king was entirely predicated on his continued obedience: “And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; behold, the LORD has set a king over you. If you will fear the LORD and serve him and hearken to his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well; but if you will not hearken to the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king.” (1 Samuel 12:13-15) In this sense, the law is a literalization and a codification of the woman; as Eve “helped” Adam who risked being taken as God, so the law “helps” the king who risks the same.

This connection helps us to understand several otherwise baffling passages from Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. The former links Wisdom with the law of God: she “came forth from the mouth of the Most High, the first-born before all creatures” (Sirach 24:3) and after praising herself “in the midst of her people” (24:1) the author says of her:

*All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God,*

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<sup>394</sup> The patristic tradition takes this external law of limitation as a type prefiguring the virtues by which every Christian circumcises his heart, decapitating the god-king within himself. The entire narrative of the Old Testament, in which the woman wars with the serpent, is fulfilled in the New, in which a woman (Mary) destroys a serpent (Satan) by her seed (Christ), a victory in which the Christian participates through the virtues this victory makes possible. Within the New Law, god-kingship is understood as a universal temptation, and thus the god-kings become the historical exemplars by which the Christian marks out his own pursuit of holiness. “And just as there was once, at least so legend tells us, a race of giants set apart from the rest of mankind, shall we too tower over these people like supermen, like the famous Nimrod or the race of Anak that once oppressed Israel, or those who provoked the flood that swept the earth clean?” Gregory Nazianzus, *Select Orations*, 56–57.

<sup>395</sup> STh., I-II q.105 a.1 ad 2: “He prescribed how the king after his appointment should behave, in regard to himself; namely, that he should not accumulate chariots and horses, nor wives, nor immense wealth: because through craving for such things princes become tyrants and forsake justice.”

The law which Moses commanded us  
 As an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob...  
 Just as the first man did not know her perfectly,  
 The last one has not fathomed her;  
 For her thought is more abundant than the sea,  
 And her counsel deeper than the great abyss (Sirach 24:23–29).

Wisdom, a divine creation, *is* the law of Moses. But she is also Eve:

Wisdom protected the first-formed father of the world  
 when he alone had been created;  
 she delivered him from his transgression,  
 and gave him the strength to rule all things (Sirach 10:1–2).

Without an understanding of the woman as the protector of the man from the transgression of idolatry, it is tempting to reduce this passage to a spiritual reading: that God infused Adam with the wisdom to know his place in the cosmic order. But because the Genesis account presents the woman as a genuinely historical type, spiritual meanings can be grounded in historical meanings. The woman really did protect the man from the transgression of self-sufficiency, which, by preserving him under the rule of God, gave him strength to rule himself and all creatures hierarchically beneath him with justice. Because of this, Wisdom can analogically contain the various meanings given in her feminine personification: The beginning, full measure, crown, and root of wisdom is “the fear of the Lord” (Sirach 1:14–20) This fear, which does not envy divinity, is given to Adam in and through Eve, who reveals his sexually-differentiated insufficiency. When Adam transgresses, the “fear of the Lord” is given as “garments of skin” which enforce the recognition of his creaturely status, and so on, up through history, until the apostasy of Israel is so great and the gift of God so merciful, that the original woman is given as a detailed law, a mechanism for the production of a social order free from idolatry, given to

the Israelites in the “the book of the covenant.”<sup>396</sup> The law of Moses is a remedial Eve; the pedagogy of the woman, mercifully given to those who rejected it.

The king, who keeps a book of the law which limits his rule, keeps it as another Adam, united to his lifelong spouse: “it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God.” (Deuteronomy 17:19) King David, who obeys this, sings of the law in spousal terms: the law is his “love,” (Psalm 119:97) “sweeter than honey to my mouth” (119:103).<sup>397</sup> Speaking of the law of Moses, which is the woman Wisdom, King Solomon exhorts monarchs to pursue wisdom<sup>398</sup> as a spouse given by God,<sup>399</sup> to live with her as companion in a restful house and to take her as a bride: “I loved her and sought her from my youth, and I desired to take her for my bride, and I became enamored of her beauty” (Wisdom 8:2).

To speak of the law as the bride of the king<sup>400</sup> is not an airy spiritualization of Eve, but an analogy rooted in the similarity of purpose that obtains between the creation of Eve and the gift of the Law: the protection of man from idolatry. Thus, in being wedded to her as the “law of Moses,” the Israelite king learns by didactic instruction what the first man knew in the immediate, joyful perception of the woman who revealed him in the very goodness of his creaturely status: that power and glory, for such a twofold creation, is to be found in a confession of weakness. The Wisdom of Solomon is an expression of the circumcised, woman-wedded kingship which rebukes the political theology of the

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<sup>396</sup> This expanding analogy continues into the Christian tradition: Wisdom is Mary, The Church, Creation as it exists in the mind of God, the infused virtue of faith, and it is, in every case, the protectress of the human race from idolatry; that which allows us to glory in the very-goodness of our creatureliness.

<sup>397</sup> Rabbeinu Bahya, Shemot 3:8:1 “Torah has been described as “good” instruction; (Proverbs 4,2) it has been described as “spacious” (Psalms 119,96). All the adjectives in this verse apply to Torah as if the Torah had written “to a land (Torah) which is good, spacious flowing with milk and honey” (compare Song of Songs 4,11).”

<sup>398</sup> To you then, O monarchs, my words are directed, that you may learn wisdom and not transgress. (Wisdom 6:9.)

<sup>399</sup> “I perceived that I would not possess wisdom unless God gave her to me—and it was a mark of insight to know whose gift she was” (Wisdom 8:21)

<sup>400</sup> The reason that our sages of blessed memory used a parable of a bride [with twenty-four ornaments] as representing [the twenty-four books], is that a woman who is not a bride does not wear the twenty-four ornaments, for if she does, people may suspect her of being a harlot. Similarly, one who is not a Talmudic scholar should not be “dressed” in the twenty-four books of Holy Scripture.” [The Netziv, *The Path of Torah: The Introduction to Ha’amek She’elah*, trans. Rabbi Elchanan (Urim Publications, 2009) Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Haamek\\_Sheilah\\_on\\_Sheiltot\\_d'Rav\\_Achai\\_Gaon, Part II 4:2](https://www.sefaria.org/Haamek_Sheilah_on_Sheiltot_d'Rav_Achai_Gaon, Part II 4:2)]

nations. True kingship is insistently mortal.<sup>401</sup> It exists, not as work of human hands, but as a gift of God. It is never “sovereign” in an absolute sense.<sup>402</sup> It rejects those who say, “let our might be our law of right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless” (Wisdom 2:11). Instead of producing divinity through oppression (Wisdom 2:10), amassment, or harem,<sup>403</sup> true kings are “servants of his kingdom” (Wisdom 6:4), a precise inversion of the god-kingship, in which the kingdom is the collective servant of the king, shrunk for the sake of his apparent height. For the circumcised king, the only reward of “strength” is a stricter inquiry into its use.<sup>404</sup> He does not rule over a mass but, as a father to a family, rules in obedience to the always differentiated status of the ruled.<sup>405</sup> Just as the idolatrous king, animating his androgynous social body, reinforces his idolatry by providing an image of God which reduces divinity to power; as that which is over men; so the Israelite king, serving a body he does not unify or bring into being, provides an image of God, as the one whose power over men is always, already, actively devoted to them in their weakness: “For thy strength is the source of righteousness, and thy sovereignty over all causes thee to spare all” (12:16).

## 2. Destroyed by women

Because, within the biblical tradition, the woman *means* something from the very beginning, it is impossible to view the various “signs of the woman” as anything but remedial gifts; destructions of the idolatry of primal androgyny which would have been achieved in the original unity of man and woman, and which is in fact achieved where particular men and women live in peace. When, like Zipporah wielding her knife,

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<sup>401</sup> “For no king has had a different beginning of existence; there is for all mankind one entrance into life, and a common departure (Wisdom 7:5–6)

<sup>402</sup> “For your dominion was given you from the Lord, and your sovereignty from the Most High.” (Wisdom 6:3)

<sup>403</sup> “But the prolific brood of the ungodly will be of no use, and none of their illegitimate seedlings will strike a deep root or take a firm hold. For even if they put forth boughs for a while, standing insecurely they will be shaken by the wind, and by the violence of the winds they will be uprooted.” (Wisdom 4:3–4)

<sup>404</sup> “For the lowliest man may be pardoned in mercy, but mighty men will be mightily tested.” (Wisdom 6:6)

<sup>405</sup> “Thou hast chosen me to be king of thy people and to be judge over thy sons and daughters.” (9:7)



particular women enforce or enact a remedial sign of the woman, they cannot help but fulfil the law they enforce in their person; cannot help *being* the one of whom the law is but a reminder. Thus, while a cursory glance at the political theology of sexual difference may imagine it as a series of abstract signs and prohibitions, intellectually interpreted unto the production of a non-idolatrous social body, the actual deconstruction of kingship largely occurs through particular women who reiterate the law in their unique acts of obeying and enforcing it. Throughout the Scriptures, the most typical manner that “the seed of the woman” bruises the head of the serpent is in the *actual* destruction of would-be god-kings by *actual*, Israelite women who crush, decapitate, hang, or otherwise destroy the *actual* head of the one who would pretend to divinity. As the Book of Sirach has it, they “[c]rush the heads of the rulers of the enemy, who say, ‘There is no one but ourselves,’” (Sirach 36:10) not as principles, but as persons.

The nameless “wise woman” from the city of “Abel of Beth-ma’acah” crushes the head of a would-be king precisely in and through an enforcement of the law. Her action is directed against “Sheba, the son of Birchi” (2 Samuel 20:1) who sets himself as a rival to David, “so all the men of Israel withdrew from David, and followed Sheba.” (20:2)<sup>406</sup> Within the midrash Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael, Sheba’s cry for rebellion is taken as a rejection of the God of Israel: Sheba says, “‘Each man to his tent (‘ohalav’), O Israel’” and “tent” is called “a euphemism (for “god” [‘elohav’]).”<sup>407</sup>

Joab, David’s commander, pursues this rebel to the city of Abel and lays siege to it when “a wise woman called from the city.” (20:16) She says: “They were wont to say in old time, ‘Let them but ask counsel, at Abel’; and so they settled a matter. I am one of

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<sup>406</sup> The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles considers this rebellion as one directed against the specific form of Davidic kingship. “It is plain that he could not endure to be under David’s government, of whom God spake: ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after my heart, who will do all my commands.’” [Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies*, trans. James Donaldson, vol. 7, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 450]

<sup>407</sup> Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael, trans. by Rabbi Shraga Silverstein, Chapter 15:7, Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Mekhilta\\_d'Rabbi\\_Yishmael](https://www.sefaria.org/Mekhilta_d'Rabbi_Yishmael) Another tradition holds Sheba prototypically responsible for the exile of Israel into pagan Babylon: “I brought you into the land of your forefathers and I gave you the Temple. I said to you: You will never be exiled from it. But since you said (II Samuel 20:1) ‘We have no part in David,’ I, likewise, said to you (Amos 7:17) ‘And Israel will be exiled from its land.’” [Sifrei Devarim, 320:6]

those who are peaceable and faithful in Israel; you seek to destroy a city which is a mother in Israel; why will you swallow up the heritage of the Lord?” (20:18-19)

This woman of wisdom is wise in the law.<sup>408</sup> A midrash to the biblical text clarifies that she accuses Joab, not simply of rashness, but of breaking the laws of warfare established in Deuteronomy: “Have you not read in the Torah,” where it is written, “When you draw near a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it.” (Deuteronomy 20:10) “Thus, was it not up to you to do so? [...] When he heard that, Joab became afraid and said: There is a requirement here.”<sup>409</sup>

Joab’s fear is understandable, for the city is described as both a “mother” and as belonging to God, a description which puts Joab in the shameful position of both lifting his sword against a woman, against his Lord, and, by neglecting to offer peaceful terms, against the law. Joab denies this by saying “far be it from me, far be it,” (20:20) a supplication that Rashi argues is made on his own behalf and on behalf of David who sent him: “Far be it from me, far be it from the king.”<sup>410</sup> Within this tradition, Joab and David must clarify that that they do not war as the idolaters do, that they are justified, for “Sheba is a man with a blemish, one who serves idols,”<sup>411</sup> and that he only comes to kill him, as the law stipulates<sup>412</sup>—not to destroy the city. Upon hearing this, the wise woman “went to all the people in her wisdom. And they cut off the head of Sheba the son of Bichri and threw it out to Jo’ab.” (20:22) Thus the woman, who represents wisdom and personifies the law, destroys the head of the serpent, saving David and Jo’ab from the threat of idolatry and condemning Sheba in his own.

This is not the first time a woman has personified the law to David for the sake of saving him from a kind of kingship that pretends to divinity. David intended to kill

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<sup>408</sup> A midrash to the book of Proverbs argues that the description of the good wife in Proverbs, who “opens her mouth with wisdom,” refers to her: “this is the wise woman who said (II Samuel 20:16), ‘Listen, listen! Please tell Yoav, ‘Come over here and I will speak to you,’ who saved the city with her wisdom; and this was Sarach the daughter of Asher” [Midrash Mishlei, trans. Sefaria Community Translation. Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash\\_Mishlei](https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Mishlei), 31:5

<sup>409</sup> Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Vayera, Siman 12

<sup>410</sup> Rashi, “Rashi on II Samuel” in *The Metsudah Tanach* series (Lakewood, N.J.) Retrieved September 29, 2021 from [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_II\\_Samuel](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_II_Samuel)

<sup>411</sup> Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Vayera, Siman 12

<sup>412</sup> “If your brother...entices you secretly, saying ‘Let us go and serve other gods,’...you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him, but you shall kill him,” Deuteronomy 13:6–9. Consider also: “Whoever sacrifices to any god, save to the Lord only, shall be utterly destroyed.” Exodus 22:20.

Nabal, the husband of Abigail, “and all who belong to him” (1 Samuel 25:22) in vengeance for his denial of provisions for David and his men. Abigail intercedes for her husband in a skilful rush of words which beg, flatter, but ultimately remind David that he is about to break the law: “Let my lord not regard this ill-natured fellow, Nabal...and when the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel, my lord shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause or for my lord taking vengeance himself.” (25:24–31) The law, in this case, is that forbidding vengeance: “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people,” (Leviticus 18:19) for “vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip.” (Deuteronomy 32:35) Rashi argues that Abigail’s prophecy that the Lord will make him a “sure house” (1 Samuel 25:28) meant that David was “[t]o be king over Yisroel. Therefore, let no evil be found in you. It is therefore not fitting for you to do anything contrary to the law, to spread evil talk concerning your kingship.”<sup>413</sup>

A king bound by the wisdom of Abigail, forbidden to take vengeance, is incompatible with kingship, understood in its typical, idolatrous fashion: as the amassment of power in and through the destruction of all threats of rival sovereignty. But just as the Israelite king, in being wedded to the law, was to be denied the primary techniques of amassment by which a mortal man appears divine, so he was denied those actions which belong to God alone, and in both cases by a woman—by the law and the wisdom of Abigail. That David seems to learn from Abigail seems evident in that, immediately after, David spares Saul’s life according to the logic of the law, saying: “As the Lord lives, the Lord will strike him” (26:10)

While a full biography is not possible here, the Scriptures present David as the prototypical Israelite king, which is to say, a bridegroom of blood; wedded to wisdom; prototypically limited by his marriage to the law of Moses; a king tempted to that unique transgression of idolatrous kingship, but saved, at the very precipice of sin and over its as well, by the actual and legal presence of the woman, who is his help in rejoicing in his

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<sup>413</sup> Rashi, “Rashi on I Samuel” in *The Metsudah Tanach series* (Lakewood, N.J.) [https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_I\\_Samuel](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_I_Samuel)

creaturely status: “Some boast of chariots, and some of horses; but we boast in the name of the Lord” (Psalm 20:7)

This choice, to be an androgynous god-king or a king helped by God, is put to David in the time of his greatest temptation: David is incited by the Lord to “number Israel and Judah,” (1 Samuel 24:1) or, as the same phenomenon is described in Chronicles, “Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to number Israel.” (1 Chronicles 21:1) As the woman desired divine knowledge, and thus envied God’s divinity, so David is tempted, not so much by the effectiveness of his army, but in the godlike knowledge itself: “Go number Israel...and bring me a report, *that I might know their number.*” (21:2) Joab, his commander, recognizes this, and argues against David’s satanism by pointing out its lack of practical utility: “Are they not, my lord the king, all of them my lord’s servants? Why then should my lord require this?” (21:3) If David is already assured that all of Israel will obey his command, what further use could it be to know them as a number? Such knowledge cannot add a single man to his fighting force.

David has used Joab to carry out such a reduction of the person to manageable stocks and chattel before: When he murdered Uriah the Hittite to hide his adultery with Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba, David defended this murder as the movement of exchangeable parts: “Thus shall you say to Joab, ‘Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another.’” (2 Samuel 11:25) Joab’s argument against David’s imitation of the kings of the nations is a reminder of the unique relationship between the Israelite king and his people, namely, as a shepherd and his flock, a scriptural image of the relationship Adam had to all of creation prior to the fall, as its “keeper” (shepherd) and tiller. “Are they not...all of them my lord’s servants?” (21:3) he asks. They are, but they did not become his servants in the manner in which they became the servants of Saul, that is, by electing a god-king who would “go before” them, becoming a “many” operated as the mechanism of a divine “one.” Rather, they approached him, declaring, “Behold, we are your bone and your flesh...The Lord said to you, ‘You shall be the shepherd of my people Israel.’” (2 Samuel 5:1-2)

In this twofold recollection of Eden, all the tribes of Israel look to David to shepherd them, precisely as a mortal man, related to them as their bone and flesh, a phrase which recalls the original sexual differentiation and nuptial relation of Adam and Eve,

distinguishing their relationship from the unitary, androgynous relationship of a king lording over an army that operates as his “arm of flesh” (2 Chronicles 32:8), an extension of his power. David’s repentance for the census by accepting his legally limited kingly role as a shepherd, rather than an amassment of military power: “Was it not I who gave the command to number the people? It is I who have sinned and done very wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done?” (1 Chronicles 21:16) Rather than considering the people as an extension of his power, he separates them from himself, declaring them innocent and himself, wicked. In this, he turns away from the full repetition of the original sin: He is tempted by Satan, he seeks divine knowledge, he transgresses the law, he apes pagan kingship, but when he is punished for his idolatrous bid he does not say “the serpent beguiled me,” rather, he confesses his sin. And so, while Adam and Eve are driven out of the garden by the cherubim and the flaming sword, the “angel of the Lord [with] a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem” (21:16) is turned back: “[H]e put his sword back into its sheath” (21:27) and David remains king over Israel.

### 3. Weak in power

Women are equated, in the book of Proverbs, with “those who destroy kings.” (Proverbs 31:3) Within the context of the proverb, this is a rebuke of sinful women who, by participating in the ways of the nation, destroy the uniquely limited Israelite king, drawing him away from his marriage to the law and enticing him to amass idolatrous power, as did the “seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines” (1 Kings 11:3) of Solomon. In reference to the kings of the nations, however, this proverb describes the woman in her original vocation: “Give not your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings.” (Proverbs 31:3)

As argued above, if man would be “like god,” he can only pretend to divinity by amassing the property and persons of others and operating them as a total mechanism, wielding the fear of loss to motivate them to act in accordance with his will. This illusion of divine power is, at the same time, a terrible weakness, as it can only be achieved by an immense *dependence* of the king: his power relies on the continued submission of his

subjects, who must be kept in a state of fear in order for the king's command to remain effective. Ultimately, the king serves as a priest placating the deity; the degree to which he attempts to cull divine worship, honour, and sacrifice to himself is precisely the degree to which he is obliged to offer sacrifice, honour, and worship to those on whose fearful devotion his divinity relies. Like his people, he lives in fear, constrained by the very mechanism by which his heart is lifted up above his brethren: he must maintain his army, count, and tax his people, control the economy, destroy rival sovereigns, constantly display the divinity of his regime in liturgy and proclamation, and so forth. The minor prophet Habakkuk reveals this movement by which the man who would be a god becomes as worshipper of the very mechanisms that would attain for him the appearance of divinity:

For you make men like the fish of the sea,  
like crawling things that have no ruler.  
he brings all of them up with a hook,  
he drags them out with his net;  
he gathers them in his seine;  
so he rejoices and exults.  
Therefore he sacrifices to his net  
And burns incense to his seine;  
For by them he lives in luxury,  
And his food is rich (Habakkuk 1:14–16).

This fear cuts both ways: A mechanism that moves insofar as it fears its mover is only powerful insofar as that mover continues to exist and to effectively inspire fear in and through the promise of reward and the fear of punishment. When Samuel reveals the customs of pagan kingship, which maintains a society-wide army through a control of all productive property and wealth, he warns the Israelites that “your wickedness is great, which you have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking for yourselves a king,” (1 Samuel 12:17) not merely because it is idolatrous, but because idolatry is a condition of weakness: the Israelite people risk turning “aside after vain things which cannot profit or

save, for they are vain,” (1 Samuel 12:21) Throughout the Scriptures, the woman is the one who reveals the weakness of power by revealing the relationship of abject dependence that characterizes states in which men appear as gods: a dependence of the god upon the machine and the machine upon the god.

In the story of Deborah and Barak, the Israelite people begin to follow idols, a sin for which God sells them “into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan,” who oppresses them through his commander, Sisera. Deborah, the judge of Israel, calls on Barak to deliver Israel through the power of God, who promises: “I will give Sisera into your hand.” (Judges 4:7) Barak responds with an act of trust in Deborah: “if you will not go with me, I will not go.” (Judges 4:8)

The God of Israel often shows apparent consternation over the habit of trusting military victory to “the hand of man.” The Law, as the remedial woman, proscribes the Israelite king from ever amassing the kind of army that would obscure the fact that “your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.” (Exodus 15:6) It limits the size, equipment, and techniques of the Israelite host, it proscribes the king from a too-accurate knowledge of its number, and it explicitly forbids that fear which would doubt God’s providence: “When you go forth against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them; for the Lord God is with you,” (Deuteronomy 20:1).

The Book of Judges describes Sisera as the object of idolatrous fear, an image of the god-king Pharaoh who with “nine hundred chariots of iron...oppressed the sons of Israel cruelly” (Judges 4:3). Barak’s fear and subsequent demand for the human assurance of Deborah breaks the law and risks treating men as gods, and so it inspires a prototypically womanly rebuke: “the road you are on will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman,” (Judges 4:9).

The woman forbids the glory that redounds upon a man in military victory; she prevents men from appearing divine in and through their successful operation of mechanisms fearfully ordered against scarcity. The “hand of the woman” reveals the mortality of the would-be god, a revelation given first to Barak, to save him from idolatry, and then to Sisera, to condemn him in his own. The battle literally separates Sisera from the technological source of his strength: “and Sisera alighted from his chariot

and fled away on foot,” (Judges 4:15) This separated state, in which the power of the ruler is revealed to have been constituted by an abject dependence upon his subjects, is the state in which the head of the serpent meets the heel of the woman. “Jael came out to meet Sisera...[s]o he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. And he said to her, ‘Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.’ So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him.” (Judges 4:18–19) Commentators generally agree that the gift of milk, which is later praised in the Song of Deborah,<sup>414</sup> is a trick to induce sleep, for Sisera is described as “lying fast asleep with weariness” (Judges 4:21) immediately after. Thirst, sleep, death, and sexual difference are all prototypical characteristics of man as opposed to God, and Sisera meets all four in the tent of Jael, who firmly mortalizes the would-be immortal by hammering a tent peg into his temple while he slept.

Jael quite literally “gives glory” to God instead of man, taking it from the one and passing it on to the other, for the simple reason that she is weak, and where a weak cause seems to achieve a great effect, we are naturally disposed to believe that the weak cause has been helped.<sup>415</sup> Thus, victory at the hand of the woman can be better understood. It does not simply mean shame for those who see women as physically weaker than men. Victory at the hand of the woman is victory at the hand of the one who, in her unfallen nature and in her redemptive submission to divine punishment, signifies mankind’s inescapable condition of being helped. To glory in the victory of the woman is precisely *not* to imagine a victory as achieved by a woman-alone or by a man-alone. Rather, to glory in a victory at the hand of the one who is helped is to destroy that idolatry by which man believes he helps himself; saves himself by his own devices.

When Deborah says “the road you are on will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman,” (Judges 4:9) she prophesies a literalizing of the

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<sup>414</sup> “He asked for water and she gave him milk, she brought him curds in a lordly bowl.” (Judges 5:25)

<sup>415</sup> This is Aquinas’ structural description of miracles, which are performed “since those things which are of faith surpass human reason, they cannot be proved by human arguments, but need to be proved by the argument of Divine power: so that when a man does works that God alone can do, we may believe that what he says is from God: just as when a man is the bearer of letters sealed with the king’s ring, it is to be believed that what they contain expresses the king’s will.” [STh. III. Q. 43.a. 1] Given this description, we may consider Israel as a nation uniquely and constitutively open to the miraculous, by virtue of living under the sign of the woman, and the nations of the world, for their part, as being constitutively closed to the miraculous, by virtue of living as the androgynous body of a god-king.



law of Moses: Jael enforces what the manifold legal limitations on military strength were designed to achieve; a pedagogical maintenance of the Israelite people as the ones helped by the Lord, and so handing over of all glory to God; and so the destruction of the human pride which is the condition for idolatry.

#### 4. Powerful in weakness

In the Book of Judith, Nebuchadnezzar is unequivocally described as a god-king: “the Great King, the lord of all the earth” (Judith 2:5) who operates “a multitude that could not be counted,” (Judith 2:20) an army which plunders, destroys, and burns “so that all the nations should worship Nebuchadnezzar only, and all their tongues and tribes should call upon him as god.” (3:8) Like all god-kings, this pretence of divine power is, in fact, weakness: it is dependent on other “men confident in their strength” (Judith 2:5). In commenting on this idolatry, Blessed Hrabanus Maurus calls Nebuchadnezzar the devil, “for ‘he is,’ as the Scriptures testify, ‘king over all the sons of pride.’”<sup>416</sup> True to the progression from the historical to the spiritual senses of Scripture, the devil’s method of aping divine power is one and the same as the human god-king’s: “the ancient enemy subjects a multitude of destroyers to his will by deceiving and overcoming them, then—attributing this to his own power, not by permission of divine judgment—his heart is elevated.”<sup>417</sup>

Nebuchadnezzar’s military mechanism allows him to indulge in the promise of the serpent, but his sovereignty is only realized insofar as his will is mediated, by fear, to his officers and commanders, down to the least of the soldiers who actually carry out his plan. This is the weakness of human power, that it relies on submission, and whoever would wield it is thrust into a fear of the disobedience of those whose submission constitutes his strength. It is not mere whim, but grave necessity, that causes Nebuchadnezzar to decide “that everyone who had not obeyed his command should be destroyed.” (Judith 2:3) This paradox of weakness in power is shown in that, while making Holofernes his “hand” (Judith 2:12) to ruin Israel, he must warn him, as if

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<sup>416</sup> Hrabanus Maurus, *An Explanation of the Book of Judith*, trans. Brian Glass 2020, 1:23

<sup>417</sup> Maurus, *Explanation*, 1:24

warning his own hand, against disobedience: “take care not to transgress any of your sovereign’s commands, but be sure to carry them out just as I have ordered you,” (Judith 2:13)

Maurus identifies Nebuchadnezzar with Satan and Holofernes with the “leadership of the nations who persecuted Christ’s Church, or even the very head of all the wicked, the son of perdition, ‘who opposeth, and is lifted up above all that is called God, or that is worshipped, so that he sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself as if he were God.’”<sup>418</sup> Holofernes participates in the artificial divinity of Nebuchadnezzar, even as he fears him, which, far from being an incomplete idolatry (as if the true god-king would be under no one) is proper to the weakness of idolatry, which is only ever established through the fear of the ruler for the ruled and the ruled for the ruler, uniting them into an artificial body, the unity of which approximates peace. Maurus argues that those who surrendered to Holofernes’ war machine represent those “holders of wealth, the powerful of the age, and lovers of earthly pleasures strive to reconcile with the wicked leader insofar as they might evade the risk of death and loss of coveted things,” and it is only by the omnipresent risk of death and loss emanating from the ruler, and the similarly omnipresent evasion of this risk, that ruler and the ruled remain joined in precarious unity.<sup>419</sup>

This empire of fear is arrayed against Israel, that is, against a kingdom legally prevented from those very conditions by which a man’s heart may be elevated “above his brethren” (Deuteronomy 17:20) and living under the sign of the woman, their historical and legal confession of weakness. From the perspective of idolatry, this social body is incomprehensible, an abdication of power, or at least an absurd refusal to amass power within a head which, through fear, motivates a hand of strength. When the “people of Israel had prepared for war and had closed the passes in the hills,” (Judith 5:1) Holofernes can only ask for a description of Israel within the terms of idolatry, attempting to understand the way that it mediates fear to its soldiers: “How large is their army, and in what does their power or strength consist? Who rules over them as king, leading their army?” (5:3)

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid, 2:6

<sup>419</sup> Ibid, 3:2

Israel's source of strength is the strength of weakness, articulated in the confession of Eve who begets a man "with the help of the Lord." Another sign of this strong-weakness is the woman who crushes the head of the would-be king, Abimelech, with a millstone. Abimelech sought kingship for himself directly after Gideon, judge of Israel, rejected kingship as idolatry: "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you." (Judges 8:23) The story of his destruction is one we might expect: Seeking to amass human power, to be man-alone apart from the remedial woman, Abimelech must animate a body of submissive power with the stimulant of fear: he "hired worthless and reckless fellows...and slew his brothers the sons of Jerubaal [Gideon], seventy men." (9:5) This establishes Abimelech in power, but only by the construction of a mechanism he is immediately forced to serve: "the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech" (9:23) Power founded in war is maintained through war, and Abimelech embodies the weakness of this power, literalizing what is true of every idolatrous king by going to war with his people. During the battles, "Abimelech drew near to the door of the tower to burn it with fire. And a certain woman threw an upper millstone upon Abimelech's head, and crushed his skull." (9:52-53) The remedial woman, abandoned by the idolatrous king, returns in person as a "certain" woman, who achieves by the destruction of the tyrant what the law would have achieved by his instruction, and what the woman did achieve for man in her original creation: the mortalization of the would-be god. This event is given a clear allegorical reading within the midrash tradition:

It is therefore stated (in Eccl. 5:1), "Do not be rash with your mouth.... for God is in heaven and you are on earth." For who would say that God is not in heaven and that people are not on earth? [Accordingly], Solomon has said, "Every time that the weakest of the weak is above, he defeats the warrior below." Go and learn from Abimelech (in Jud. 9:53), "But a certain woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and cracked his skull."<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Vayikra, Siman 7:1

This is the inverse lesson of the woman. She reveals that power is weakness, and, by the same motion, she reveals that weakness is power. The strength of Israel that Holofernes investigates is here: even as she lacks amassed troops or chariots, Israel is obliged to develop a unity that does not emanate, through fear, from a singular point which can be easily destroyed, as she does under Abimelech, who makes himself a head stimulating a body with fear which disintegrates after his death: “when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, they departed every man to his home.” (9:55) Rather, by calling on the name of the Lord as the “help” of Israel, the weakest of the weak are stronger than “the warrior below.” This strength is not provided extrinsically, as a miracle of divine intervention that operates apart from the actual organization and structure of the social body. Rather, as the woman really was lifted above Abimelech, so a faithful Israel really does attain to strength in the confession of its weakness and need of help from the Lord, for the God of Israel is present as both the good of and the help of each and every Israelite.

To fight for this good is not to be united by a merely private interest, by a fear of the punishment for disobedience mediated “down the ranks” from the god-king, through his commanders, unto his foot soldiers. To fight for this good is to fight for a good common to all. God is the head and help of each Israelite even as he is the head and help of the army as a whole. The death of a commander, a judge, or even a (faithful) king, is not the death of motivation, nor the disruption of this unity. The Israelite army has no human head that can be decapitated. Its help is the Lord, and the Lord cannot die. An army motivated by an immortal head fulfils the command not to be afraid, and this is a crucial reason for the insistence of the judges of Israel that the Israelites should not ask for a king “when the Lord your God was your king,” (1 Samuel 12:12) and why, even when a king is granted to the Israelites, he is granted as one bound to a law which would prevent him from appearing as the source of Israel’s unity rather than God.

An army under an immortal head fulfils the strange command of Deuteronomy, which would ban the fearful from fighting. A liturgy is prescribed here. First, the priest is to “come forward and speak to the people” (Deuteronomy 20:2) in order to remind them that they fight, not by their own strength, nor by the strength of their king, but as a people constitutively helped: “for the Lord God is he that goes with you, to fight for you against

your enemies, to give you the victory.” (20:3) What follows is a reduction of the size of the army, which ends in the order, given by the officers “What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go back to his house...” (20:9) Only once the army has been purged of fear, “commanders shall be appointed at the head of the people.” (20:9) The order of events is crucial: Those who command the army are only appointed to it *after* the military has been stripped of fear as a possible motivation for its actions, which bans the use of fear as the means by which the individual Israelite, and thus the whole army, is moved. This is unlike the “ways of the king” as described by Samuel, who “will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties,” not simply before a battle, but as an omnipresent extension of his will, “to plough his ground and to reap his harvest” (1 Samuel 8:12) in peace as in war. Within such a state, the army is moved by the commanders it is already habituated to obey. Under the sign of the woman, the Israelite army is only commanded insofar as it is already fearless in the help of the Lord. The weakness of the former’s “strength” is that the death of a commander is the death of the body that he motivates into action. The strength of the latter’s “weakness” is that the commands of the commander do not motivate action, only tactically direct it. There is a sound common sense here: to go to battle under the contingency of effective human power, as amassed in the hand of a prince or a commander, is to fight as one constitutively ready to flee once that human power is destroyed or otherwise deemed wanting, the effect of which is real, practical weakness. To battle under the assurance of divine power is to fight as one constitutively ready to die, that is, to fight without fear, the effect of which is real, practical strength.<sup>421</sup>

To be destroyed by a unity founded in a confessed, common need for help is shame to a unity founded in the amassment of strength through the deployment of fear. Thus Abimelech says “to the young man his armour-bearer...Draw your sword and kill me, lest men say of me, ‘A woman killed him.’” (Judges 9:54) This is precisely how Achior

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<sup>421</sup> Maurus speaks of this unity allegorically as the unity of the Church: “the enemy is not able to harm those for whom the perseverance of love and unity labors. Consequently, Paul teaches ‘to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.’ (*Explanation*, 4:13-14) Again, he defines Church-unity as the specific strength-in-weakness: “It is made known to all the persecutors of the Holy Church—who are obedient to the will of the devil as body members to the head—that believers in Christ fully resolve to oppose the evil ones with a faithful mind and they repudiate all the pride through which the adversaries especially strive to disrupt and conquer them.” *Explanation*, 5:2

answers Holofernes' question, "in what does [the Israelites] power or strength consist?" (Judith 5:3) He describes their power as one that exists in a womanly mode. It is a strength constituted by the rejection of "the gods of their fathers," gods of strength.<sup>422</sup> As long as they continued in their rejection of idolatry, which would ape divine self-sufficiency, "they prospered...[b]ut when they departed from the way which he had appointed them, they were utterly defeated." (5:17-18) Their strength was in the help of the Lord, who unifies them into a body able to sustain human loss without fear, and who fights on their behalf. Achior warns Holofernes against the shame of being killed by such a woman: "But if there is no transgression in their nation, then let my Lord pass them by; for their Lord will defend them, and their God will protect them, and we shall be put to shame before the whole world." (5:21)

Achior's description of Israel is immediately understood as a threat, not simply to the Assyrian army, but to the idolatrous theological claims that held it together. That "a people with no power or strength for making war" (5:23) might nevertheless be helped into victory is a denial of the existence and efficacy of divinity as it is constructed by sovereign power and submissive fear: "Who is God except Nebuchadnezzar?" (6:2) Holofernes asks, asserting the ways of the king and the body he animates as true power. "He will send his forces and will destroy them from the face of the earth., and their God will not deliver them—we the king's servants will destroy them as one man." (6:3) Thus the "one man," united by slavery to a human king, is asserted as more powerful than the one woman, Israel, united under God, their immortal head.

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<sup>422</sup> Augustine argues that, in particular, this refers to the god-kingship of Nimrod: "For in the book called Judith, when Holofernes, the enemy of the Israelites, inquired what kind of nation that might be, and whether war should be made against them, Achior, the leader of the Ammonites, answered him thus: *Let our lord now hear a word from the mouth of your servant, and I will declare unto you the truth concerning the people which dwells near you in this hill country, and there shall no lie come out of the mouth of your servant. For this people is descended from the Chaldeans, and they dwelt heretofore in Mesopotamia, because they would not follow the gods of their fathers, which were glorious in the land of the Chaldeans, but went out of the way of their ancestors, and adored the God of heaven, whom they knew; and they cast them out from the face of their gods, and they fled into Mesopotamia, and dwelt there many days. And their God said to them, that they should depart from their habitation, and go into the land of Canaan; and they dwelt, etc., as Achior the Ammonite narrates. Whence it is manifest that the house of Terah had suffered persecution from the Chaldeans for the true piety with which they worshipped the one and true God,*" Augustine, *City of God*, 16.13

## 5. Glorifying God

Idolatry tempts the woman Israel as it tempted the woman Eve. Faced with a threat of real or imagined scarcity, the first movement of idolatry is a perversion of the first movement of divine wisdom: fear of the Lord becomes the fear that God does not help. Trust in the lord who helps becomes trust “in princes, in mortal men in whom there is no help.” (Psalm 146:3) As shown in our discussion of the Israelites demand for a king, Israel tends to fall to the temptation to live as slaves under a god-king in response to the threat of nations who seem to gain their prosperity and power by doing the same: “When the Israelites saw [Holofernes’] vast numbers they were greatly terrified,” breaking the law that commanded “when you see an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid; for the Lord your God is with you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 20:1)

Egypt is archetypical, as it recalls four hundred years of Israelite slavery to a god-king, Pharaoh. To recall the God who delivers from the regime of slavery-constituted divinity is to avoid participation in precisely that constitution. It likewise recalls the great difficulty with which the Israelite people were weaned from their longing for the security of Egypt, during their wanderings in the desert.

Holofernes cuts the Israelites off from their water supply. He chooses this tactic because he is told that “the Israelites...do not rely on their spears but on the height of the mountains where they live,” and it would be difficult not to see in this a reference to the principle that Israel receives its strength, not from the amassment of power into a military mechanism (spears) but from divine help (mountains); to see Israel as the woman who crushes kings from a height. By subjecting this woman to thirst, Holofernes makes Israel another desert, and in the desert outside of Egypt, the Israelites were tempted, by thirst, to idolatry.

In the wilderness of Zin “there was no water for the congregation and [the Israelites] assembled together against Moses and against Aaron,” (Numbers 20:2) against their ruler and their high priest. In besieged Bethulia, “all the people...gathered against Uzziah [the high priest] and the rulers of the city.” (Judith 7:23) In Zin, the people “contended with Moses” (Numbers 20:3) and in Bethulia they “cried out with a loud voice” (7:23). The

arguments of both thirst-riven communities are the same: both, in fear, demand submission and subsequent unity with a slave-state operated by a god-king for the sake of survival. Against Moses, they argue, “Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord to this wilderness, that we should die here” (Numbers 20:4), and against Uzziah, “You have done us great injury in not making peace with the Assyrians. For now we have no one to help us. God has sold us into their hands, to strew us on the ground before them with thirst and utter destruction,” (Judith 7:25). Both reject the womanly expectation of help from the Lord and demand a return to the state of slavery under a human divinity. In Zin, they ask, “Why have you made us come up out of Egypt,” (Numbers 20:5). and in Bethulia they demand that Uzziah “surrender the whole city to the army of Holofernes and to all his forces...for we will be slaves but our lives will be spared,” (Judith 20:11–12). And in both narratives the response of the leader is a movement towards idolatry. In the Numbers narrative, this is notoriously obscure: Moses strikes the rock twice “and water came forth abundantly” and God punishes him, saying, “you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the sons of Israel,” (Numbers 20:11–12). In the book of Judith, Uzziah agrees to deliver the people to slavery if “five days pass by, and no one comes to help,” (Judith 7:31).

The Book of Judith casts intelligibility back onto the Numbers narrative. Judith describes the specific nature of the idolatry that the Israelites risk committing: “Who are you, that have put God to the test this day, and are setting yourselves up in the place of God among the sons of men,” (Judith 8:12). “God is not like man to be threatened, nor like a human being, to be won over by pleading,” (Judith 8:16). This deconstructs the earthly power to which Israel would have otherwise submitted itself; revealing it as a god who is really a man, and thus really motivated by threat, even as he motivates others.<sup>423</sup> This is the specific form of power that the woman, wisdom, and the law are prophesied to

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<sup>423</sup> Maurus describes this idolatry of binding God to a five day “test” as spiritually relating to the five senses of the body, by which idolaters attempt to bind God, saying, essentially, provide for the senses of this present life or I will follow another god, and another law: “For indeed, just as an inept teacher seeks a span of five days for a grace period, so does anyone who unwisely promises that physical comfort is to be given from the Lord first-hand to his students, as if the generosity of the highest giver is in his power (given that the time and the manner of giving are established more by the power of the giver than of the receiver)...If, however, convenience is refused to be bestowed upon those things of the present life by the supernal Judge, in accordance with their promise, they immediately desert them to turn aside into illicit desire, and by yielding to their persecutors they avoid physical pain; our Judith, that is the Holy Church, refuses and disdains as hurtful the condition of their agreement...” [*Explanation*, 7:16–17]



crush, and so it is fitting that Judith, like the wise woman at Abel, rebukes Israel for abandoning the remedial woman, the law, and takes Israel under her authority as a particular woman in order to fulfil the abandoned law, she says “the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand,” (Judith 8:33).

Reading Numbers through Judith, we can interpret Moses’ punishment as a punishment for that idolatry by which Moses would be set up “in the place of God among the sons of men.” Judith’s taunt—“who are you, that have put God to the test”—echo Moses’ frustrated bark against his people—“Why do you find fault with me? Why do you put God to the test?” (Exodus 17:2). Moses is constantly avoiding the Israelites’ habit of assigning to him an epithet that belongs to God alone, that he is the one who brought the Israelite’s “up out of the land of Egypt,” (Exodus 17:3) and faulting him, rather than God, for the various miseries of the exodus. Moses understands this form of complaint to be, not merely fault-finding, but an ascription of divine power and responsibility to himself, rather than God. As Moses is treated like God, God is treated like a man “to be threatened...like a human being, to be won over by pleading,” (Judith 8:16). But Moses fails to show the Israelites the falsity of their ways. God commands Moses to “tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water,” (Numbers 20:8) but Moses “struck the rock with his rod twice” (20:11) taking God’s command into his own hands, as it were. Likewise, he ascribes the miracle to his own power, and to Aaron’s, rather than as their mediation of the mighty power of God: “Hear now, you rebels: shall *we* bring forth water for you out of this rock?” (20:10, emphasis added) Both sins place Moses in the precarious position of appearing as a unique source of divine power, rather than as a servant and mediator of the same. Moses’ is not punished for a loss of belief in God, simply, but “because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the sons of Israel.” (20:12) Rashi, commenting on this passage, points out that Moses has sinned before:

But was not the doubting question, “shall the sheep and oxen be slaughtered for them?” a more grievous lack of faith in God than this? But because that had been said in private (no Israelites being present and therefore it could have no evil influence upon them), Scripture (God) spared him (and did not make his lack of faith public by pronouncing punishment for it), but here, where all Israel were

standing by, Scripture does not spare him because of the Hallowing of the Divine Name.<sup>424</sup>

Israel, having just left Egypt, stood uniquely posed to fall back into the idolatry which would grant the appearance of divinity to a human person, as evidenced by their willingness to exchange the leadership of Moses for the leadership of the golden calf: “Up, make us gods, who shall go before us: as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” (Exodus 32:1) Rashi argues that, had Moses fulfilled God’s command according to the letter, the Israelites would have been lead to worship: “For had you spoken to the rock and it had brought forth water I would have been sanctified before the whole congregation, for they would have said: What is the case with this rock which cannot speak and cannot hear and needs no maintenance? It fulfils the bidding of the Omnipresent God! How much more should we do so?”<sup>425</sup> Instead, Moses strikes the rock twice, as if to move God by threat, displaying the true God as if he were a man, even while displaying himself, according to his people’s idolatrous eyes, as if he were a god.

Moses is punished for the sake of the Israelite people, as he recalls, “the Lord was angry with me also on your account” (Deuteronomy 1:37). His punishment contains the same pedagogy as Deborah’s reprimand of Barak: “The road you are going will not lead to your glory.” It is too dangerous for Moses to establish eyes prone to idolatry within an abundant land flowing with milk and honey, if, in providing an abundance of water flowing from the rock, he failed to show forth the holiness of God, but showed forth his own power instead. How easy would it have been for the Israelites, established in the land, to say of Moses what they so often said of Moses while they wandered in the desert, that he, and not God, was the one who brought them up out of the land of Egypt? The Lord ensures that road of the Exodus will not lead to Moses’ glory, rather, God gives the victory into the hands of one lesser than himself, Joshua, who was “full of the spirit of wisdom,” (Numbers 34:9) and who is placed firmly under the law, commanded to “be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law which Moses my

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<sup>424</sup> Rashi on Numbers 20:12

<sup>425</sup> Rashi on Numbers 20:12

servant commanded you; turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it” (Joshua 1:7–8).

Judith is called to release the waters of Meribah, not as Moses did, but as Moses ought to have, giving glory to God rather than man. Her prayer for help is suffused with an awareness of this mission, echoing the central prayer of women throughout the Old Testament as it prefigures Mary’s Magnificat in the New, all of which centre around the primary pedagogy of the woman in her original glory and her postlapsarian mission, namely, the inversion and rebuttal of the myth of primal androgyny, which is the revelation of human strength as weakness and human weakness as strength.

She describes the amassment of wealth and persons into a total mechanism which produces the appearance of superhuman divinity: “Behold now, the Assyrians are increased in their might; they are exalted, with their horses and their riders; they glory in the strength of their foot soldiers; they trust in shield and spear, in bow and sling, and know not that you are the Lord who crushes wars” (Judith 9:7). As a true Israelite, she sees this usurpation of glory and exaltation as nothing less than idolatry, the attempt to “defile your sanctuary, and to pollute the tabernacle where your glorious name rests,” (Judith 9:8) which she relates to the rape of a virgin.<sup>426</sup> As the woman, she sees the fundamental precariousness of this manufactured glory and idolatrous trust; that such strength is without help, an amassment of command and submission into a single, unwieldy body, one which renders both dependent on the fear of the other, and so renders the whole ripe for destruction, not from a rival force, but from something as small as a word from a woman: “By the deceit of my lips strike down the slave with the prince and the prince with his servant; crush their arrogance by the hand of a woman.” (Judith 9:10) Against the weakness of mechanism, she contrasts the strength that comes from the prototypically womanly position of being-helped, answering Holofernes’ inquiry into the source of Israelite strength: “For your strength depends not upon numbers, nor your might upon men of strength; for you are God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed,

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<sup>426</sup> Cf. Judith 9:2.

upholder of the weak, protector of the forlorn, saviour of those without hope,” (Judith 9:11).

## 6. Under the banner of the woman

Those particular women who live according to the law of Moses—destroying gods like Judith—do not negate the law, but fulfil it in their persons, revealing its purpose as protection from idolatry and the slavery it produces. This is why women like Judith can be said to represent Israel, not simply because they fight for her, but because, by living her law, they are conformed to her image, a conformity which is not a confinement of the particular woman to some extrinsic image, precisely because Israel is already conformed to the image of the original woman. Within this dynamic, women progress towards becoming “what they are,” and “how they were created to be,” in and through the internalization of the law, which does not regularize women into a new type, but being itself a remedial image of the original woman, returns them to a family resemblance of the original woman. Women both are and become daughters of Eve.

This means that sexism is expedient for the idolatrous enemies of Israel, even required. For, if it is the case that the law does not replace the particular woman, but that the particular woman always embodies the purpose of the law, then the attempt to suppress daughter Israel (whether externally, as in the warring of the nations, or internally, as in the apostasy of the kings of Israel) can only occur in and through an actual suppression of daughters; an obscuration of their original vocation through a discipline of their bodies and minds that habituates them, not to a law which is in their own image, and thus freeing, but to a law which is an image of the primal androgyne, and thus violent and enslaving. If men are to appear as gods, women must be reshaped, by law, in order to cease signifying man’s creaturely insufficiency and constitutive need for help; if social bodies united in a common slavery are to continue in the illusion of self-sufficient strength, they must constantly deconstruct the sign of the woman, which is the sign of creaturely weakness, as it displayed in the particular women that make up that social body. To say that actual sexism is required to achieve the pretensions of idolatry is

not to deny that effective idolatry must also war against the woman in her remedial modes: Idolatrous nations must disobey the law of Moses, abuse divine wisdom, destroy the nation of Israel, and obscure the Genesis account of the original woman with the myth of primal androgyny, in order to be powerful and successful moments of artificially produced divinity. But if it is true that the remedial and allegorical modes of womanhood spring forth from and return to the real, historical woman, then there can be no successful idolatry without violence against actual women.<sup>427</sup>

As we saw in the narrative of the Flood, sexual perversion is revealed by the Scriptures as a manner of producing the illusion of divinity in men through the destruction of women, both physically and in their historic mission. Like all idolatry, these deifying acts, because they rely on the “very good” differentiation they would deny, reveal themselves as fundamentally weak, unstable, and incapable of achieving the serpentine promise that motivates them. As the laws of limitation that make up the law of Moses are grounded in the historic vocation of the original woman, so “harlotry,”<sup>428</sup> the dominant metaphor which describes Israel’s departure from the law and worship of idols, is more than an appropriate image of infidelity: it is grounded in the actual effort of idolatry contained in acts of sexual perversion. Idolatry is harlotry because harlotry is already idolatry.

This is shown, throughout the Scriptures, in that the particular women called upon to destroy particular god-kings are tempted to sexual perversion, to participate in the structural sexism of the nations, and to be reshaped so as not to show forth the sign of the

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<sup>427</sup> This unity of sexism and the artificial appearance of divinity has a certain common sense to it. It is, after all, the story that the myths usually tell: that without woman, man was a god. It is also the subject of the ethical insight (informed, no doubt, by the Scriptures) that the man who beats his wife or abuses his daughters is not merely angry or mean, but fundamentally weak and insecure, elevating himself, not by any kind of growth, but in and through the degradation of others, only growing in strength in comparison to the degree he causes them to shrink in fear. The typical correction, if pedagogy fails, is to shame him, revealing that his strength is no superhuman attribute, but a pretense he indulges in and through his victims. This is the logic behind the desire that he “pick on someone his own size,” that purported strength be revealed as actual weakness. It is the story that the Scriptures tell. But sexism and misogyny operate more effectively to the degree to which women do not merely suffer the obscuration of their image, but participate in it. The man who beats his wife elevates himself through moments of induced degradation and comparative self-elevation is—and his divinity is self-evidently fake and petty.

<sup>428</sup> “Because your shame was laid bare and your nakedness uncovered in your harlotries with your lovers, and because of all your idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers, with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you loathed; I will gather them against you from every side, and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness” (Ezekiel 16:36-37)

woman. Holofernes wishes to “embrace” Judith. His experience of this “law of the flesh” is immediately accompanied by the need to denigrate the woman who gives it meaning. His eunuch invites Judith to a banquet “for his slaves only,” (Judith 12:10) wherein she will be “be honoured in his presence, and drink wine and be merry with us, and become today like one of the daughters of the Assyrians who serve in the house of Nebuchadnezzar.” (12:13) Holofernes is “moved with a great desire to possess her,” but this possession can only come through the reduction of the woman to a slave, that is, an extension of Holofernes’ will, and thus an effectively muted sign of the god-king’s creaturely self-insufficiency.<sup>429</sup>

Holofernes’ desire to possess Judith is characterized, first and foremost, as a fear: “it will be a disgrace if we let such a woman go without enjoying her company, for if we do not embrace her she will laugh at us.” (12:11-12) This fear that the woman will go unembraced is characteristic of all sexual perversion, which acts out of fear that the sign of the woman will not be smothered but will continue to signify unto the destruction of all idolatry.

The Book of Esther, like the Book of Judith, describes a woman called upon to destroy a would-be god-king, but Esther gives a deeper insight into the means by which idolatrous nations suppress the sign of the woman as it exists in particular daughters of Eve, a suppression which only faces Judith as a temptation and a threat. Esther shows what it means to “become today like one of the daughters of the Assyrians who serve in the house of Nebuchadnezzar.” The structure of the narrative is one which, by now, we may have come to expect: Israel risks destruction in the jaws of Haman, whom the Esther Rabbah describes as one “who stirred up passions like a snake.”<sup>430</sup> Esther denounces this serpent, not merely as an aggressor, but as an idolater who, in and through his destruction of daughter Israel, would “stop the mouth of those who praise you and quench your altar

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<sup>429</sup> For an overview of Esther as a narrative of resistance to empire, to which this interpretation is in debt, see M. Stone, *Empire and Gender in LXX Esther* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2018).

<sup>430</sup> Esther Rabbah, Petichta 1:5 Sefaria Community Translation, [https://www.sefaria.org/Esther\\_Rabbah](https://www.sefaria.org/Esther_Rabbah) This connection between the serpent and Haman is also made in Bamidbar Rabbah, trans. Rabbi Mike Feuer, *Jerusalem Anthology* 14:12: “R’ Pichas said: there are two enemies who were not cursed until seventy verses had been completed about them—the snake and Haman the wicked. Regarding the snake, from “In the beginning...” (Genesis 1:1) until “...cursed be you more than all the cattle...” (Genesis 3:14) is seventy verses. Regarding Haman, from “After these events, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman...” (Esther 3:1) until “And they hanged Haman...” (Esther 7:10) is seventy verses. For the purpose of seventy he was hanged on fifty (cubits of wood).”

and the glory of your house, to open the mouths of the nations in praise of vain idols, and to magnify forever a mortal king.” (Esther 14:9-10) <sup>431</sup> In and through a rejection of the sexist mechanisms of idolatrous nations, and by the help of the Lord, Esther ends up crushing the head of the serpent: she hangs Haman from gallows of his own making.

The work of magnifying a mortal king is apparent within the kingdom that Esther is enslaved and daughter Israel is in captivity. The narrative introduces King Ahasuerus as giving a one-hundred-and-eighty-day banquet to impress the administrators of his state with “the riches of his royal glory and the splendour and pomp of his majesty.” (1:4)<sup>432</sup> Within this display, Ahasuerus wishes to “bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the people and the princes her beauty.” (1:11) The Queen refuses his request.

The Queen is giving her own banquet for the women, that is, the wives of the royal harem. The harem is a social technology that obscures the sign of the woman by refracting it into a multiplicity. Its effect is the effect of all polygamy, which allows particular men to relate to the particular woman, not as a particular, sexually differentiated other, but as a member of an abstract collective which is not, considered as a collective, sexual, but rather a neutral category: the “harem.”

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<sup>431</sup> “What did Haman do? He made for himself an image of an idol, and had it embroidered upon his dress, above his heart, so that everyone who bowed down to Haman also bowed down to the idol which he had made. Mordecai saw this, and did not consent to bow down to the idol, as it is said, “But Mordecai bowed not down, nor did him reverence” (Esth. 3:2); and (Haman) was full of wrath against him, and said: These Jews hated my forefathers from of old, and now will I say to the king that he should destroy them from the world.” [Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, 50:5]

<sup>432</sup> A 19th-century Rabbi describes what seems evident in the text, that this display is a typical mechanism of human sovereignty, namely, the pretense that the power that comes from subjugation is in fact a power of his person: “In order to rule with absolute power, Achashverosh appropriated them and exhibited them before the assembled nation like a man who flaunts his own personal wealth.” [Malbim on Esther, Sefaria Community Translation, 1:4:2 [https://www.sefaria.org/Malbim\\_on\\_Esther](https://www.sefaria.org/Malbim_on_Esther)] Again, Gregory Nazianzus, inheriting the deconstruction of god-kingship from the Scriptures, ridicules this pretense of divinity procured through that amassment forbidden by the Deuteronomic law: “Have we been so corrupted by our life of ease, or deranged, or I know not what, that along with the bran and barley cakes that we have procured for ourselves, possibly by foul means, we shall imagine that we are naturally superior to our fellows? And just as there was once, at least so legend tells us, a race of giants set apart from the rest of mankind, shall we too tower over these people like supermen, like the famous Nimrod or the race of Anak that once oppressed Israel, or those who provoked the flood that swept the earth clean? [...] Grow rich not in property alone but also in piety; not in gold alone, but also in virtue, or rather in this alone. Come to be held in higher esteem than your neighbor by proving yourself more kind. Come to be a god to the unfortunate by imitating God’s mercy” [Gregory Nazianzus, *Select Orations*, 58–59].

This attempt at relating, not to the particular, uniquely created woman, but to the particular as an instantiation and a repetition of a neutral “kind,” has its obvious analogue in the manner that man is said to properly relate to animals. As we argued above, only man is created as *this* male and *this* female, whereas what we call “male” and “female” within animal species is, in fact, a masculine and feminine mode of a kind which is neither male nor female, for the sake of (literal) reproduction. The harem, and polygamy broadly speaking, produces the illusion that only *women* exist in the mode of the animal, whereas man, who is one as opposed to the many, remains in the mode of the original, unique creation. Within this illusion, the meaning of sexual difference tends to give way to the myth of primal androgyny, for, if women are a kind of animal—an exchangeable repetition of a kind over which man has a natural dominion—then man is comparatively a god, and the sexual differentiated body of the woman no longer points towards his creaturely self-insufficiency; no longer “says” anything about him at all; no more than the bodies of the birds of air or the cattle of the ground define the man who names them. The male becomes qualitatively other, raised up on the hierarchy of being, and, by virtue of becoming metaphysically other than the woman, he also ceases to be a man, who is only known in and through in a constitutive relation to the woman.

Of course, like all mechanisms of magnifying mortality beyond its flesh, the harem is a work of illusion, faking the elevation of the one by the subjugation of the other. It is only by pretence that man is sexually related to the neutralized, abstract “harem,” and thus only by pretence that man appears as something more than one whose very flesh is what is by virtue of the particular woman who is “flesh of his flesh.” Like all sexual perversion, the harem tends sexual arousal, that law of the flesh, into acts which deny the anti-idolatrous meaning of sexual arousal. But more than most acts of perversion, polygamy rests on the very sexual differentiation that it seeks to overcome. In the end, no matter how the harem is constructed, the would-be god-king must reveal himself in his particular nakedness to a particular woman if he is to procreate. Thus, the harem is typically characterized, not just by the amassment of wives, forbidden to the Israelite king, but towards the vain attempt to regularize an amassment of wives into a common appearance.



This is attained, first and foremost, by the actual separation of the harem from its husband, which creates a space in which man can be man-alone, and which allows him to regulate the appearance of particular women according to his desires, rather than to encounter her as a surprise, revealed according to her own manner and person. This is the law that forms the basis of Esther's trial: "if any man goes to the king inside the inner court without being called...all alike are put to death," (Esther 4:11) This technology of power produces a refined kind of weakness: the illusion of the harem is uniquely vulnerable to being shattered by the mere appearance of the particular woman, not according to the king's desires, but according to her own. Disobedience, rather than an expression of particularity, rather, even, than condemnable wilfulness, becomes evidence of the non-divinity of the human sovereign. When Queen Vashti refuses to appear, her act is immediately seen for what it is: a threat to the entire social order of the kingdom, which is predicated on the superhuman rule of the king.

The logic of the harem is intuited in the *Esther Rabbah*, which insists that the king desired, not simply to display Queen Vashti in order to impress his administrators with the glory of his kingship, but to achieve this effect by displaying her naked. Nakedness before the one who is clothed is, in a single image, the relation of the animal to the man. The beauty of Queen Vashti is only proof of the glory of the human king insofar as it is a beauty that he subjugates rather than one which reveals him in his own nakedness and need of the other. Her refusal reveals the king as merely pretending to his divine status: "You were the...stablemaster of my father's house and you were experienced in leading before yourself prostitutes naked and now that you have come into kingship you have not changed from your debauchery."<sup>433</sup> In the *Esther Rabbah*, the refusal of Queen Vashti is met with her death, her head delivered to the king on a platter.<sup>434</sup> The dead queen is denied in her assertion of particularity, and is revealed as essentially replaceable: "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king [...] [a]nd let the maiden who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti," (Esther 2:2, 2:4)

Esther enters into this androgynous social body "under the custody of...the king's eunuch," where she begins her new role as an animal under dominion, existing for the

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<sup>433</sup> *Esther Rabbah*, 3:14

<sup>434</sup> *Esther Rabbah*, 4:11

king, in a mode that renders her into an extension of his will. Besides the separation of the harem, the particular women of the harem were to undergo a law which would achieve for the senses what the obfuscation of particularity within a multiplicity achieves for the intellect: the appearance of the woman as a repetition of a kind. These were “the regulations for the women...the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women,” (Esther 2:12) The wives of the harem were given a homogeneity of scent. After this year of physical regulation, each woman of the harem was to appear before the king for the work of reproduction: “in the evening she went, and in the morning she came back,” (Esther 2:14). She did not return, except at the pleasure of the king: “She did not go in to the king again, unless the king summoned her by name,” (Esther 2:14).<sup>435</sup> Her appearance, then, is always in custody, both literally and figuratively barred from particularity.

Esther lives under this regulatory law, but internally rejects it. In this, she is a sign and microcosm of daughter Israel, a people likewise orphaned and living in captivity to a foreign law. Haman’s critique of the Jews, and the king’s reason for destroying them, describes them as people who do not contribute to the appearance of divinity in mortal men, as those who “continually disregard the ordinances of kings,” (Esther 13:3). Daughter Israel is seen, in the eyes of the serpent, as a disobedient Queen Vashti, and the punishment recommended for the Queen in the Esther Rabah is the same recommended for the Jewish people, that they be “utterly destroyed by the sword,” (Esther 3:16). Their infidelity to the king’s command is justified in and through their fidelity to the law of Moses, which forever reveals and enforces the non-divinity of would-be gods, a fact dimly recognized by the king, who writes that the Jews “have laws contrary to those of every nation,” (Esther 13:3). Though the king is misled, his words are correct. Israel has a law contrary to the law of every nation, just as, when it is given a king, it is not given a king like unto the other nations, but a judge and husband of a law that limits him. In this

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<sup>435</sup> The harem is not merely a mechanism for the destruction of the sign of woman, but also an attempt to androgenize reproduction, so that what is reproduced is more apparently the male than the female. For detail on the use of the harem for the extension of patrimonial power, see B.W. Cushman, “The Politics of the Royal Harem and the Case of Bat-Sheba” in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30.3 (2006): 327–343.

sense, the woman Israel “stands in opposition to all men, perversely following a strange manner of life and laws,” (Esther 13:5). Because of this, Israel, even in captivity, is a sign opposing the aspirations of mortal divinity, and must contradict the ordinances of the king insofar as they usurp divine honours, as Mordecai says: “you know, O Lord, that I would have been willing to kiss the soles of Haman’s feet to save Israel! But I did not do this lest I set the glory of man above the glory of God; I will not bow down to anyone but you, O Lord, my God,” (Esther 13:12). Esther, embodying the remedial woman in her particular person, must likewise disobey the ordinances of kings, precisely at the point of seduction, breaking with the law of regularity by which the woman, as a sign of creaturely self-insufficiency, is muted unto the appearance of divinity in man. She disobeys the regulatory law: “instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung,” (Esther 14:2) literally changing her scent and her appearance, “putting on garments of distress and mourning” (Esther 14:1) and thereby separating herself from the harem as a regulatory technology producing the appearance of a “common stock” of women; she likewise confesses that she does not participate in its logic and purpose, saying:

“I hate the splendour of the wicked and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised. I abhor the sign of my proud position...I abhor it like a menstruous rag, and I do not wear it on days when I am at leisure. And your servant has not eaten at Haman’s table, and I have not honoured the king’s feast or drank the wine of the libations. Your servant has had no joy since the day I was brought here until now, except in you, O Lord of Abraham.” (Esther 14:16–17)

Israel cannot bow before men; Esther, to save Israel, must disobey the fundamental regulatory law by which women were only to appear according to the will of the king: “I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish,” (Esther 4:16) She will reveal herself irregularly, and thus particularly, and thus bearing the sign of the woman which destroys the sexual perversion of harem and undermines the divinity of man that it produces.

The “splendour of the wicked” is real; the appearance of divinity, even as it is theologically denied by faithfulness to the law, is still present as an amassment of wealth, property and persons into a mechanism operated, through fear, by the king. At the level of the particular woman, this splendour is the force of seduction unto sexual perversion. For Esther, the sexual perversion is the harem, and the splendour of the king is a temptation to swoon, through fear, into the cowed, androgynous, animal appearance that the harem produces. This production and direction of fear is the way in which god-kings govern, not simply the harem, but society as a whole, as described in the book of Samuel and as forbidden in the Deuteronomical laws concerning warfare. Esther goes to the god-king as daughter Israel goes to battle against the same. Both risk death for the same purpose: to mortalize the god-king and glorify the true God. Because of this, their prayer is the same: Esther prays “save me from my fear,” and the priest prays over the Israelite army, “let not your heart faint,” because externally and internally, fear is the stimulant which animates the social body of the city of man. Through fear, the woman is not merely destroyed, but seduced into a participation in the very means by which the “arm of flesh” is able to move at all.

Daughter Israel is tempted to fearfully desire unity with the nations, demanding an idolatrous king to replace the sovereign rule of God upon seeing the military splendour of “Nahash the king of the Ammonites” (1 Samuel 12:12). So Esther sees the splendour of the wicked, within the inner court,<sup>436</sup> separated from her by many doors, “seated on his royal throne, clothed in the full array of his majesty, all covered with gold and precious stones.” (Esther 15:6) This appearance is as of a god in its temple,<sup>437</sup> and Esther becomes afraid: “Lifting his face, flushed with splendour, he looked at her with fierce anger. And the queen faltered, and turned pale and faint, and collapsed upon the head of the maid who went before her,” (Esther 15:7) Likewise Judith, representing daughter Israel, is exposed to the splendour of a god in his temple, Holofernes, “resting on a bed, under a

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<sup>436</sup> “‘And she stood in the inner court of the king’s house’ (Esther 5:1). Rabbi Levi said: Once she reached the chamber of the idols, which was in the inner court, the Divine Presence left her. She immediately said: ‘My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?’ (Psalms 22:2). Perhaps it is because You judge an unintentional sin as one performed intentionally, and an action done due to circumstances beyond one’s control as one done willingly.” [Talmud, *Megillah*, 15b:7]

<sup>437</sup> For a detailed and learned description of the Ancient Near Eastern adornment of gods within their temples, see G.K. Beale, “Cosmic Symbolism of Temples in the Old Testament,” *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2004).

canopy which was woven with purple and gold and emeralds and precious stones. When they told him of her he came forward to the front of the tent, with silver lamps carried before him,” (Judith 10:21). Judith is tempted to submit to the power of the king by becoming “like the daughters of the Assyrians,” while Esther, already enslaved, is tempted to return to that same, sexually perverse logic of the harem. In response to Esther’s prayer, which acknowledges, with the mother of all the living, the help of the Lord, “God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and in alarm he sprang from his throne and took her in his arms until she came to herself,” (Esther 15:8).

In the sight of Esther’s weakness, the god-king becomes a man, literally separating himself from his throne and taking the part of the maid who supports Esther in her frightened collapse. Similarly, Judith “prostrated herself and made obeisance” (Judith 10:23) before the splendour of Holofernes, and though this seems to be a part of her “deceit,” (Judith 9:10) Holofernes presumes that she shakes with the same fear that afflicts Esther. But rather than separating himself from the signs of his divinity, “his slaves raised her up,” (Judith 10:23) and though, like Ahaseuerus, Holofernes seeks to soothe Judith, saying, “Taken courage, woman, and do not be afraid in your heart,” (Judith 11:1) he does not mortalize himself in her presence. He tells her not to be afraid precisely insofar as she relates to the god-king Nebuchadnezzar as a slave: “No one will hurt you, but all will treat you well, as they do the servants of my lord king Nebuchadnezzar,” (Judith 11:4). Holofernes offers Judith the freedom from fear that comes through submission. Ahasuerus offers Esther the freedom from fear that comes through his own self-abasement: He asks, “What is it, Esther?” calling her by name and acknowledging the very particularity by which she breaks with the regulatory law of the harem. He says, “I am your brother,” a confession which can only be seen as a conversion, for the brother of a wife of the harem, even a favourite wife, can no longer pretend to divine status over and against her; rather, to be a brother to a sister is to share a common parent with her; siblings are mutual evidence of their common, human origin. The king then denies that the regulatory law applies to her, bidding her to “take courage...for our law applies only to the people,” permanently “letting in” a woman into the very inner court which allowed him to regulate the appearance of women into an extension of the king; legally destroying the fiction of the primal androgyne. His first act,

as a king partnered to a woman, is to ask her to speak (15:12), and in speaking, Esther radiates forth the sign of constitutive weakness, confessing her fear of death, and describing the appearance of divinity idolatrous kingship produces: “I saw you, my lord, like an angel of God, and my heart was shaken with fear of your glory,” (Esther 15:13) By weakness, Esther destroys the god-king in the king. In the letter he writes to revoke the ordinances sent to destroy the Jews, he gives expression to a newfound humility that one would expect of a Davidic king, apologizing, promising “changing our methods and always judging what comes before our eyes with more equitable consideration,” (Esther 16:8) and firmly expressing his kingship as an authority under God: “For God, who rules over all things, has made this day to be a joy to his chosen people instead of a day of destruction for them” (Esther 16:21). Esther crushes the head of the serpent by the instruction and conversion of the king into the basic humility of creaturely kingship, and the destruction of Haman who would destroy daughter Israel.

Like Esther, by God’s protection, Judith overcomes seduction unto sexual perversion which would obscure the anti-idolatrous sign of the woman: “he committed no sin with me,” (Judith 13:16) Like Jael, she uses drink to trick the god-king into sleep, that fundamental sign of creaturely weakness: Holofernes “drank a great quantity of wine,” (Judith 12:20) which cast him into a drunken stupor. Like Adam, revealed in his creaturely need by being cast into a deep sleep, the god Holofernes lies mortalized beneath his canopy. Like Eve, Judith is “standing beside” (Judith 13:4) the sleeping man as his help against idolatry, no longer as the protectress of his innocence, but as the avengeress of his guilt. Adam’s rib was removed while he slept, that man might know that he was not alone; Holofernes’ head was removed while he slept, that man might know the same.

Judith’s beheading of Holofernes is a redemption of Moses’ idolatrous posturing at the waters of Meribah. Moses, immediately after the death of his sister Miriam, appears as a man alone. Judith, widowed, appears as a woman alone. Moses struck the rock twice; Judith “strikes his neck twice with all her might,” (Judith 13:8). Moses’ double-strike released water to a thirsty, idolatrous, Israelite people. Judith’s double-strike does the same, releasing a thirsting Bethulia from the grip of the siege. But while Moses usurped the glory of God, obscuring divine power into an expression of the glory of man, Judith

acts as the redeemed Eve, acknowledging the help of the Lord: “Give me strength this day, O Lord God of Israel,” (Judith 13:7). Moses risked creating a god in the eyes of an idolatrous people; Judith kills a god in the eyes of the same. Thus, while Moses is punished by the Most High, Judith is declared “blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth,” (Judith 13:18) and while Moses cannot enter the Promised Land, lest he usurp divine honours, Judith “remained on her estate, and was honoured in her time throughout the whole country” (Judith 16:21).

Like the woman who crushes the head of Abimelech with an upper millstone, Judith brings shame upon the machinations of human power: “One Hebrew woman has brought disgrace upon the house of King Nebuchadnezzar!” (Judith 14:18) This shame is the revelation of the woman, that strength is weakness and weakness is strength. Through fear, Holofernes animates an army as an androgynous extension of his will, an amassment of strength which renders the army as weak as Holofernes, drunk in his tent. When Judith cuts off his head, she cuts off the mortal head of the Assyrian army, which loses all appearance of unity and, as a body in death, disintegrates in every direction: “Fear and trembling came over them, so that they did not wait for one another, but with one impulse all rushed out and fled by every path across the plain and through the hill country,” (Judith 15:2).

## 7. Towards a New Testament theology

While it is necessary to explore the manner in which the New Testament both repeats and fulfils the meaning of the woman, as it is revealed in the Old Testament, we will have to be satisfied with a few remarks by way of conclusion. Christianity, and the set of values it unleashes in the world, is grounded in the victory of the woman, that is, in the destruction of false gods that occurs in and through an inversion of power which declares weakness to be strength and human strength to be weakness, as Mary sings:

He has shown strength with his arm,  
 he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,  
 he has put down the mighty from their thrones,

and exalted those of low degree... Luke 1:51–52

What is prefigured in the Old Testament comes to a literal fruition in the New: God becomes man, and man, in Mary, becomes the Mother of God. Because the singular incarnation of Jesus Christ is a real, historical, and unrepeatable event, the effect of Christianity is to banish the possibility that some other man might, after all, become God through the amassment of power and the calculated use of fear. The sheer, wondrous fact that God became *this* man excludes *that* man being God, no matter the awe and dread he inspires. While, even now, a man might hold more power over others than the lords of the Gentiles ever wielded over their slaves; might operate a mass of men as an androgynous extension of his will; might usurp divine honours and pretend, explicitly, to His sovereignty; nevertheless, the effect of faith in Christ as the One True God is to render any actual claim to divinity ridiculous. The idolatrous machine may be once more constructed, but because of Mary, it can never produce a god.

Mary crushes man's dreams of divinity by allowing the divine to become man in her. Man is saved from his habit of faking divinity by the subjugation of others, because a woman opens up a way in which man may "become God" by elevating others. From Mary's "be it done unto me according to your word," (Luke 1:38) all divinization becomes either a participation in that womanly act, which accepts the salvific and sanctifying gift of God, which we cannot do, but which is "done unto" us—or it stands revealed as fraud.

The Jewish rebellion against the norm of pagan strength; that powerful weakness signified by the woman and enforced by the garments of skin; that rebuke of primal androgyny signified once more by circumcision and enforced once more by the law of Moses; that confession of being fundamentally helped so rarely signified by the virtuous, Davidic king: all of this is fulfilled in faith in Christ and made possible by Mary. Within the one who believes that God became man in the particular and unrepeatable person of Jesus Christ, the anti-idolatrous revelation, as it was remedially presented in the law, becomes internalized as a virtue, a habitual mode of being-in-the-world which simply cannot see god-kings, no matter how the powers rage. The "circumcision of the flesh," which remedially signified man's "very good" creaturely status, becomes "circumcision



of the heart,” by which that goodness is confessed without ceasing: by perfectly becoming His creation, the perfect God puts to rest the doubt of Eve, that we are imperfectly created.

## Chapter V: Judith Butler in the biblical tradition

### 1. The metaphysics of modification

The biblical revelation does, in fact, *reveal*: “Male and female he created them” is not a confirmation of what was generally known and practised, but a new proposition spoken against the grain of the myths which surrounded and opposed the biblical authors. These myths tended to interpret the data of human experience, in which human beings generally present themselves as men and women, to mean that being a man or a woman was a secondary modification of the primarily androgynous “human.” And, after all, why not? What force compels us to see something uniquely different about the manner in which man and woman are sexually differentiated, as opposed to, say, cats? What phenomenological data defies the eminently reasonable reduction of sexual differentiation to sexual modification for the sake of reproduction? Within contemporary debates on questions of transgenderism, primal androgyny is assumed by all parties: “Conservatives” may find themselves arguing that hormones, DNA, or anatomy irrevocably modify the human being into this or that sexed being; “progressives” may find themselves arguing that gender is a social construct given this or that definite expression on the basis of the will or the internal sense of self. Both argue, in their own idiom, that sexual difference is something that happens to the ontologically sexless organism. It is the revelation of Genesis, which gives itself as a description and a history of the creation and fall of man, which contains a genuinely new piece of data, that the original man and the original woman are created in two, distinct acts, distinct from the creation of the animal.

This study of the biblical typology of the woman has revealed the fundamental difficulty with the Christian absorption of a theology of primal androgyny; a theology

which must, as we have shown in Part I, undergird the philosophy of gender identity currently utilized by liberal nation-states and international powers to include non-binary genders existing in theoretical equality with all other genders. The revival of the myth of primal androgyny will always meet opposition within Christian theology, not because of its purported attack on a historically normative locus of power and privilege, but because it inverts the Christian inversion, silencing the very voice by which amassments of power and privilege are brought low in the first place, namely, the sign of the woman.

What follows is a broad analysis of the work of Judith Butler, whose attempted syntheses of the Freudian and Foucauldian traditions have introduced contemporary Western culture to a series of claims, now taken as truisms: that “gender is a social construct,” that “gender is a performative act,” and so on. Our effort, in these final words, is not to produce a critique of Butler on her own terms, a herculean task, given her usual mode of doing philosophy within interpretations of a wide array of philosophical and literary texts. Rather, our task is first and foremost descriptive: Given the biblical revelation, what, exactly is the work of Judith Butler? We are familiar, perhaps, with one of the principal efforts of “queer theory,” which is to read texts, not by trying to understand their native soil or taking on the assumptions of their authors, but by re-reading them through lenses sensitive to the various ways that power constructs the appearance of sexual, racial, and other identities.<sup>438</sup> Similarly, Butler’s works can be read,

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<sup>438</sup> A myriad of examples could be supplied here, but the book *Take Back the Word: a queer reading of the Bible*, provides the standard justification of this mode: “With the rise of postmodernism we have seen a shift in biblical hermeneutics that considers the role of the reader in assigning meaning to the biblical text. Not only have we come to realize that readers make meaning of texts, but readers also bring particular ‘selves’ to the text, which is shaped by a variety of factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, religious affiliation, socioeconomic standing, and, we would add, sexual orientation. These new voices have pointed out, among other things, that there is no completely objective reading of the text. The scientific and objective stance of historical-critical methods of modernity has been nothing more than a reading from a privileged location described as European American, male, and heterosexual.” This allows for readings of the book of Ruth as one concerning “bisexuals who transgress the sexual identity categories of straight and gay,” for “a queer reading of the Song of Songs, which celebrates the gift of human life and sexuality apart from its procreative value and conformity to social conventions,” and so on. [Robert E. Goss and Mona West, “Introduction,” *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000)] Whatever merit this form of criticism has, it is certainly open to a reversal: one simply reads such criticisms as so many more Scriptures: as texts of terror, enforcing particular theological visions, easily read against or queerly other than the intentions of the author, who, after all, has developed a theological anthropology which includes some iterations of the human by excluding others, and remains as unaware of the androgynous empire they work to establish as the authors of Genesis were (presumably) unaware of their own heteronormative construction.

not from within her own idiom, but through the Scriptures: The question, then, is not how to “queer” the Bible, but how to “Bible” (i.e., biblically read) queer theory.

Judith Butler’s work is a bracketing of theology, one which sets aside the question of God’s original creation and proceeds by holding it in abeyance. She is most explicit about this in her critique of the Lacanian figuration of the laws and norms as operations of the Law of the Father, a primary prohibition which produces desire and language in the subject:

This is the moment in which the theory of psychoanalysis becomes a theological project. And although theology has its place, and ought not to be dismissed, it is perhaps important to acknowledge that this is a credo of faith. To the extent that we mime the gestures of genuflection that structure this practice of knowledge, we do perhaps come to believe in them, and our faith becomes an effect of this mimetic practice. We could...claim that a primordial faith preconditions the gestures of genuflection we make, but I would suggest that all that is necessary to start on this theological venture is the desire for theology itself, one that not all of us share.<sup>439</sup>

Butler takes as “theological” that which precedes from a “credo of faith,” a thing believed to be true as first principle from which subsequent reasoning occurs, rather than a conclusion of a process of reasoning. The desire to avoid an originating “credo,” along with the impossibility of avoiding it, is most apparent in her work in describing the formation of the subject.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler, seeking “to account for how the subject comes to be” argues that the “subject is initiated through a primary submission to power.”<sup>440</sup> She then, in myriad ways, expresses that this primary submission cannot be an account of the *creation* of the subject, for something must first exist in order to submit:

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<sup>439</sup> Judith Butler, “Competing Universalities,” *The Judith Butler Reader* (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 267

<sup>440</sup> Butler, “Introduction,” *The Psychic Life of Power*, (Stanford, 1997) 2

The moment we seek to determine how power produces its subject, how the subject takes in the power by which it is inaugurated, we seem to enter this tropological quandary. We cannot presume a subject who performs an internalization if the formation of the subject is in need of explanation. The figure to which we refer has not yet acquired existence and is not part of a verifiable explanation, yet our reference continues to make a certain kind of sense. The paradox of subjection implies a paradox of referentiality: namely that we must refer to what does not yet exist.<sup>441</sup>

The dizzying quality of this argument lies in the fact that it is circling around the doctrine of *ex nihilo* creation, which responds to the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” with “In the beginning, God made...” Butler’s account of subject-formation brackets this answer but presses forward with the question: how does a subject come to be, when there was no subject before? Butler’s only alternative to an act of *ex nihilo* creation is an act of *modification*: a power which does not bring something into being, and nevertheless seems to produce what was not there before, can only be a power which acts upon some already existing material, arranging it, shaping it, activating what potencies belong to it, and otherwise modifying it. Butler understands this (“we cannot presume a subject who performs an internalization [of power] if the formation of the subject is in need of explanation”) and she attempts break through the presumption of a subject through her subsequent description of the subject as a mode of “the individual.” Here, “the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category,” and the “individual,” for its part, is located as that pre-existing *x* which becomes a subject: “Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a “site”) [...] No individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing ‘subjectivation.’”<sup>442</sup>

This admission, that the “individual becomes,” would seem to lead to the question, “what, then, is this individual that undergoes subjectivation in order to become a subject?” Butler argues that this individual cannot be spoken of:

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<sup>441</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>442</sup> Ibid, 10–11.

It makes little sense to treat ‘the individual’ as an intelligible term if individuals are said to acquire their intelligibility by becoming subjects. Paradoxically, no intelligible reference to individuals or their becoming can take place without a prior reference to their status as subjects. The story by which subjection is told is, inevitably, circular, presupposing the very subject for which it seeks to give an account.<sup>443</sup>

What appears as another dizzying circle is, in fact, another bracketing of the question of creation. The concept of the individual is only an intelligible concept, available to being spoken of, to the extent that it is “established in language,” a process which Butler says is the function of subjectivation. This point is elucidated in *Bodies That Matter*, where Butler decries the idea that we can know “sex,” the material fact of differentiation, as opposed to gender, which is the cultural interpretation of that difference:

[T]he ‘sex’ which one referred to as prior to gender will be itself a postulation, a construction, offered in language, as that which is prior to language, prior to construction. But this sex posited as prior to construction will, by virtue of that positing, become the effect of that very positing, the construction of construction. If gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this ‘sex’ except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that ‘sex’ becomes something like a fiction...

Both the prelinguistic “individual” and “sex” appears as “something like a fiction,” for the simple reason that they cannot be accessed except in and through the linguistic (and so cultural) terms of the “speaking ‘I’”<sup>444</sup> which they are supposed to precede. Thus, like the electron of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, the “individual” is only located by being changed; only known by being altered. For Butler, this bars us from speaking intelligibly of “the individual” as that pre-existing material upon which power works to

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid, 11

<sup>444</sup> Butler, “Introduction”, *Bodies That Matter*, (Routledge, 1993) 3

produce a subject; it brackets “the individual” as an  $x$  of which nothing can thought, because the capacity to know “the individual” is only made possible on the grounds of that individual having already become what it is not: a subject of language. And so, instead of a creation account, Butler is content that “[t]he story by which subjection is told is, inevitably, circular, presupposing the very subject for which it seeks to give an account.”<sup>445</sup>

This bracketing of creation is not necessary. For an  $x$  to only be known insofar as it is established in language does not put it irrevocably outside of the reach of thought, as if the sheer fact of “naming” something which, considered in itself, does not have a name, is to establish a necessarily false relationship to it. To assume this is to simply assume, as a “credo of faith,” a radical discontinuity of mind and world, in which things that exist “as known” are necessarily divorced from things in themselves.

That something exists in a certain “mode” is not the negation of the thing prior to its modal existence. Indeed, the very notion of a modality implies a pre-existing fittingness (or “power”) of the thing to exist in that mode. That Butler’s “individual” is only ever known “in mode of the knower” says this much about the “individual”: it has the *capacity* to be established in language and the power to become a “speaking ‘I.’” But if that  $x$  which becomes a subject has the capacity to become a subject, then we can no longer imagine “the individual” as a purely contentless  $x$  but as something which can be considered, indeed, which already has been considered, through language, in its specific modality prior to being established in language.

Establishing a prelinguistic thing in language only infects and obscures that thing if language, and the intellectual operation itself, is a lens which obscures being, rather than keeping and preserving it; if thought is not in any degree passive to reality, but only ever constructs reality in a manner disconnected with and extrinsic to reality itself. This pessimistic epistemology is everywhere assumed within the work of Butler, but not by any necessity.

Within the biblical narrative and its history of interpretation, man is described as a being who is, by nature, a constructor. Adam is placed, not in a wilderness, but in a garden, an already constructed, cultural world. The world, for its part, is not unrelated to

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

the man, suffering his gardening as an alien force. Rather the world is for the sake of the man, just as man is for the sake of the world: “no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground.” (Genesis 2:5) Indeed, both man and world *are* the world, considered as a single act of Creation.

This fundamental relation between the human person and the world is extended to the intellectual operation: Adam establishes each crawling thing in language. This naming is neither a violence against the crawling thing as it is apart from language, nor is it a slavish passivity, as if Adam only “named” in a fictional sense, copying names that already inhered in those beings, his creative freedom contributing nothing. Rather, the animals are described as ordered towards being named and brought into language, just as Adam is ordered to naming, not arbitrarily, but precisely by seeing the animals. He establishes them in language because they are the kind of beings which present themselves, in one of their manifold capacities, as beings capable of being so established.

Butler is quite wrong to argue, in an essay on Kierkegaard, that “Kierkegaard appears to take over the power to name that properly belonged to God in the book of Genesis. In Genesis, God spoke and said, “Let there be...light, man, woman, beasts, etc.”<sup>446</sup> Not only is the power to name *given* to man in Genesis, but even those works that God can be said to “name” are not named as the “private property” of the divine, rather, man names them within the naming of God: God says “let there be light,” but he does not call those heavenly lights “sun,” “moon,” “stars,” “planets,” “Neptune,” “Milky Way,” and so on, rather, all beings remain given over to constructing capacities of the free, intellectual operation as it characterizes the human person. Likewise, it is not true that, in the book of Genesis, God says “let there be...woman.” It is the man who rejoices and says, “she will be called woman.” (2:23) Man’s naming is not creation. He only names what is first given. But what is given to him is not “complete” until it is has been so named, brought up into the linguistic, social world of man. In the book of Genesis, God is not described as merely allowing Adam to name the animals, as if humouring an arrogant child: he “brought them to the man to see what he would call them.” (2:19) This image, of the divine waiting “to see,” tenderly expresses the fact that man’s naming is *for* God, the

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<sup>446</sup> Judith Butler “Kierkegaard’s Speculative Despair,” in *Senses of the Subject* (Fordham, 2015) 145

intellectual operation given to man to creatively and freely offer the world back to the one who gives it to be named – who waits to see what his creatures will do with it.

The work of naming, keeping, and tilling, of constructing and categorizing the world into a pleasing social construction is genuinely given over to man. The Genesis text already collapses the natural-artificial binaries that Butler is at pains to expose. But where Butler sees only artifice, because “nature” is unknowable in its own mode, the Genesis text sees only artifice, and in another sense only nature, because it is the nature of the world to be the artifice of man’s intellectual operation, just as it is the nature of the intellectual operation to be moved in its operation by that which is given as preceding it – as nature. The attempt to make a real distinction between the two is the vain attempt to imagine a Creation other than the one that has been revealed, namely, a garden given to a man and a woman to till.

The presumption that it is otherwise, and that there is no fittingness between the intellectual operation and the reality upon which it operates, is not a *necessary* presumption. Indeed, the very structure of language seems to signify otherwise, insofar as every name is only a name insofar as it contains a reference to that which is named; to an *x* which, however battered and bruised it may or may not become in the naming, nevertheless remains an *x* of which we can say this much: that it has the capacity to be established in language. The relational structure of the word implies a fittingness of reality to language, and no matter the degree to which we attempt to speak only of our constructions and banish all else as unknowable, we will struggle to effectively exorcise the reality of the given: a “construction” is always a construction of something; never appearing as a self-grounding phenomenon, but always as a taking up and arranging of what is given. It may well be the case that all we know are human constructions; nevertheless, we can only know a human construction as a construction insofar as it contains within itself an essential reference to that which is given as the material for construction. Were “construction” stripped of this access to the given which it modifies it would cease to be “construction” and appear as “natural.”

Once again, the biblical revelation really does reveal. We could not know, apart from it, that the intellectual operation is not an obscurer and poisoner of reality as it is given rather than the recipient of a creation that is perfected in being known, named, and freely



built into a total social construction by that self-same intellectual creature. What, in the data of everyday experience, allows us to presume that the intellect is doing one thing rather than another? Rather, what is exposed in this analysis are two fundamental presumptions of who the human person is and what Creation is. Butler presumes an original, ontological violence between the two, while the Bible presumes an original, ontological peace.

## 2. Power as god

Only an act of *ex nihilo* creation could “enact” something “into being” without acting upon it.<sup>447</sup> “Power,” in Butler’s sense, can only act on something that already exists. Unless “power” is to become divinized, it is only comprehensible in the activation of some potential (some potency) present in an already existent being. With all the power in the earth at my command, I can nevertheless only act upon, say, a large chunk of granite, in a manner completely circumscribed by what possibilities are genuinely present within that large chunk of granite: I can destroy it or use it as a cornerstone, but I cannot use it as a flotation device or pour out as a liquid. It is not abstract power that gives a thing its capacities, but capacities that give abstract power its efficacy. It is a work of mythology to imagine the opposite, namely, that power endows an individual with the capacity for being a subject, rather than imagining that the individual being, with its capacity for becoming a subject, gives an otherwise abstract power its specific efficacy, constituting power in its specificity as a “power to raise up subjects from individuals.”

This means that power is not strength, but weakness; it is subordinate to act; it waits upon the real as its handmaid; it midwifes those potencies which already exist in the wombs of all created things; it is limited, circumscribed, and indeed made possible by the

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<sup>447</sup> “For when anyone makes one thing from another, this latter thing from which he makes is presupposed to his action, and is not produced by his action; thus the craftsman works from natural things, as wood or brass, which are caused not by the action of art, but by the action of nature. So also nature itself causes natural things as regards their form, but presupposes matter. If therefore God did only act from something presupposed, it would follow that the thing presupposed would not be caused by Him. Now...nothing can be, unless it is from God, Who is the universal cause of all being. Hence it is necessary to say that God brings things into being from nothing.” [STh., I Q. 45 A. 2]

prior fact of creation; of the preeminent mystery that there is something rather than nothing in the first place. To imagine power as “strength,” that is, as genuinely creative, is to falsely deify it. By rendering the existence of a given which is subsequently *modified* by power, but which is not reducible to this modification, as something unknowable, Butler expresses the origins of the “subject,” not as a particular working of power upon what is given, but as the working of power on itself: “If, in a Nietzschean sense, the subject is formed by a will that turns back upon itself, assuming a reflexive form, then the subject is the modality of power that turns on itself; the subject is the effect of power in recoil.”<sup>448</sup> Power, rather than referring to the capacities of created being as they are activated by the acts of other created beings, becomes a quasi-divine substance whose workings, whose turning, considered in itself, is sufficient to constitute a thing called the “subject.” Butler acknowledges that this image of a serpent devouring itself, which encapsulates the simultaneous acting-on and enacting which simply *is* Power<sup>449</sup> taking on the appearance or mode of the subject, is not so much a reasonable explanation, as an image which one presumes in order to make subsequent explanations. As she says:

Such a notion, then, appears difficult, if not impossible, to incorporate into the account of subject formation. What or who is said to turn, and what is the object of such a turn? How is it that the subject is wrought from such an uncertain form of twisting? Perhaps with the advent of this figure [of power turned on itself], we are no longer in the business of “giving an account of the formation of the subject.” We are, rather, confronted with the tropological presumption made by any such explanation, one that facilitates the explanation but marks its limit. The moment we seek to determine how power produces its subject, how the subject takes in the power by which it is inaugurated, we seem to enter this tropological quandary.

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<sup>448</sup> Butler, *Psychic*, 6

<sup>449</sup> I am led to the use of capitalization, not on my own, but by Butler’s unsurprising use of the capital “P” at the conclusion of her description of the subject as simply being a modality of power itself: “Because Power is not intact prior to the subject...” [*Psychic*, 13]

Again, this quandary is not necessary, as Butler has already located the pre-existing “individual” as that which is submitted to gendering and subjectivating power in order to become a “speaking I” within a cultural world, and is wrong to presume that this “individual” is devoid of content, reducible to a metaphysical necessity that there be a pure *something* upon which power works in order to appear as power. Rather, precisely insofar as it specifies abstract power in some ways rather than others (as a gendering and subjectivating power) the prelinguistic individual is revealed as a specific, given being; mysterious, but not unthinkable. The necessary presence of a given upon which it works renders power into weakness, and certainly prevents it from being considered as a god of which the human subject is a mere appearance or modality. But it is nevertheless understandable that Butler is prone to divinize power, precisely because she seeks to theorize “outside” of creation, explaining the *sui generis* appearance of the human subject as the product of power which is ultimately reducible to the human.

### 3. The problem of violence

Butler seeks to strip the claim of substantive gender, in which being “male and female” is of the order of creation, of any ontological support, arguing, instead, that such “beings” are only ever appearances produced by a power which forecloses other possibilities: “What will and will not be included within the boundaries of ‘sex’ will be set by a more or less tacit operation of exclusion.”<sup>450</sup> And it is certainly the case that, within the operations of finite, human power, however diffused throughout a social body, there is no construction which is not, in another sense, a destruction; no making something into *this* which is not a refusal to make something into *that*. For Butler, resistance or subversion of these exclusionary powers does not involve any return to a pre-gendered body, but a certain taking up of a place within that which is excluded from counting as “sex” but which, as an excluded term, remains necessary to delineate “sex” as a distinct construction, “from the exterior regions of that boundary...from the discursive

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<sup>450</sup> *Bodies*, 11

possibilities opened up by the constitutive outside of hegemonic positions...the disruptive return of the excluded from within the very logic of the heterosexual symbolic.”<sup>451</sup> To do the thought justice would require a full analysis of the Freudian-Lacanian tradition of gender identification. From the biblical perspective, we may ask a broader question: Why, precisely, is the exclusionary logic of gendering *violent*? More simply, why is it *bad*?

Typically, one would expect an answer to be given by reference to that “individual” which undergoes the gendering process: If “individuals” are constituted as males and females by a logic which serves as a cultural gatekeeper for which bodies will count as which, which parts will count as sexed, which mode of being appears as genuine human being, and so on, we would typically consider this process of selection as a violent one if the process violated some principle intrinsic to the individual teetering on the brink of cultural intelligibility and existence. If, for instance, the individual is metaphysically androgynous, neither male nor female but simply a discrete body which has sexual differentiation as an accidental modification, akin to, say, hair, then the selection by which only those who appear to have *substantive* gender count as properly sexed, gendered, and human, as opposed to those who have *accidental* gender, could be seen as a violence. Indeed, the injunctive that humans are and must be “men” and “women,” as opposed to neuter “humans,” would be violent. It is the ascription of some definite content to “the individual” which is gendered that makes that gendering “violent” rather than “natural,” because “violence” can only be understood as that which goes against (violates) the particular thing. Thus, Aquinas can say, “It is not always a violent movement, when a passive subject is moved by its active principle; but only when this is done against the interior inclination of the passive subject. Otherwise, every alteration and generation of simple bodies would be unnatural and violent: whereas they are natural by reason of the natural interior aptitude of the matter or subject to such a disposition.”<sup>452</sup>

Within the biblical narrative, the *violence* of androgyny is apparent. Here, the human person is created male and female. A regime reduces the male or female human person to a neuter unit holding sexual difference as an extrinsic modification for the sake of the

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<sup>451</sup> *Bodies*, 12

<sup>452</sup> STh., I-II q. 6 a. 4

reproduction of the immortal city. This is violent because it is a violation of the *nature* of the human family, created, and not modified, as sexually differentiated beings. Once creation is barred from intelligibility, it is not clear why the exclusionary logic of “sex” is similarly violent, in Butler’s scheme, beyond that she insists that it is: “This marking off will have some normative force and, indeed, some violence, for it can construct only through erasing; it can bound a thing only through enforcing a certain criterion, a principle of selectivity.”<sup>453</sup> Gendering, the subjecting of the individual to “the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being” is only violent if it operates against an intrinsic principle of the individual that suffers it. If the individual is really the unintelligible *x* which is referred to but only ever falsely known through always already being established in language, then it is somewhat incredible that we know this much about it: that it contains within itself a principle by which it is proper, good and non-violent to be constructed to appear in such a manner that no other is also constructed as an abject negation by which its identity is achieved. Either the accusation that a construction is violent presupposes a tacit description of the created nature of that which is constructed, or the claim of “violence” makes no sense. Might we not, with equal, arbitrary force, simply claim that it is proper to the nature of the individual that undergoes gendering to be so gendered? That the exclusionary method of identification violates no intrinsic principle of that mysterious *x* which undergoes the process? The Aristotelean defence of slavery, as fitting to the nature of some individuals, was obviously a part of the mechanism which produced the identity of the free citizen, who likewise ruled by “nature,” free from the charge of violence. It was only a recourse to a “natural” freedom, shining dimly from within the opaque construction slave and master, that served as the pivot point away from slavery, revealing slave-ownership as the violation of an intrinsic principle of the enslaved creature. Has Butler, by refusing to let creation shine forth within the modifications and constructions of human power, cut herself off from that source of critique by which the violent can be distinguished from the nonviolent?

This is certainly one way to interpret an ambivalence in Butler’s work. As she argues, “there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural

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<sup>453</sup> *Bodies*, 11

meanings.”<sup>454</sup> But if there is no body that escapes its cultural interpretation, this must be true of a body interpreted by queer theorists, as much as a body interpreted by, say, medieval peasants. Queer theory does not refute itself in this manner, but it does dramatically limit its own possibilities, saying, in effect, that all identities and postures which “trouble” the presumption of a male-female binary cannot therefore be any more real, true, authentic, proper, or otherwise expressive of a reality beyond the constructing hand of human power. Rather, the most that can be said is that gender, this “work of human hands,” becomes the work of a few more human hands. Where the naïve, self-identified “woman” is prefabricated to appear as such by the powerful operations of the heterosexual matrix and the nation-state which orientates all difference towards reproduction, the critically queer, self-identified genderfluid person is prefabricated by the powerful operations of the Western academy, medical industries, and institutions of liberal governmentality to appear as a body which troubles the supposedly natural truth of the male-female binary. The effect of a theory which brackets gift and creation, limiting itself to the metaphysically unknowable and its subsequent, knowable, human modification, is to relativize both the binary description and its non-binary description into two operations of human power which have no resources by which to justify themselves as being true, just, or right. The theories, if they can say to be justified in any meaningful way at all, are justified by the *de facto* power which enables, allows, or enforces their belief for its own ends. In a word, the bracketing of any intelligible givens which are subsequently interpreted and constructed by human power means that no particular construction or interpretation can be a violent one.

Like the queer theorists, the Bible argues that there is no body which escapes its cultural interpretation, understood broadly, as a body already given its meaning through a total, social world. Indeed, this is the meaning of “male and female he created them,” in which neither the male nor female have access to a body that is not already marked, made what it is, by its reference to the other, but stands forth as irreducibly *social*. Unlike the queer theorists, the Bible contains no lingering presence of “the individual” which makes all construction into a kind of violence. It is precisely *natural* to a familial and social being to know bodies as belonging to a social world; as already constructed; never as

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<sup>454</sup> Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” in *Gender Trouble* (Routledge 1990) 11

isolated monads; always mutually influenced and influencing each other within a meta-construction called “the world.” This irreducible sociality is first and foremost a matter of being – man is not alone, and this is not a description of a frustrated, disconnect from man as he would be in himself, but a description of the human family *as they are created*. Indeed, the joy of queer theory seems to be to nix as impossible a desire which, from the biblical perspective, is already quite absurd, indeed, evil: the desire to be one’s own.

Are Christians and queer theorists, then, batting for the same team? Does the theology of the one and the critique of the other congeal into a single affirmation of the irreducibly social nature of the human subject? Butler’s work can often be read in a tune eerily familiar to the one struck by the “*communio*” school of Catholic theology: “to persist in one’s being means to be given over from the start to social terms that are never fully one’s own,”<sup>455</sup> and so on. But while, within the Church, such affirmations of the human being as an ecclesial being are descriptions of human nature, its intrinsic powers, and its future fulfillment, within queer theory, these affirmations are spoken of in dark, bitter tones, as castrations of what would otherwise be:

The desire to persist in one’s being requires submitting to a world of others that is fundamentally not one’s own (a submission which does not take place at a later date, but which frames and makes possible the desire to be). Only by persisting in alterity does one persist in one’s “own” being. Vulnerable to terms that one never made, one persists always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary and inaugurative alienation in sociality. If such terms institute a primary subordination or, indeed, a primary violence, then a subject emerges against itself in order, paradoxically, to be for itself.<sup>456</sup>

Cut off from the revelation that sociality is a matter of being, that is, from the revelation that the original creation of the human family was always twofold, queer theorists are constrained to describe all sociality as a kind of violence. But that sociality is an “alienation” attained through a “primary violence” is simply the negative evidence of

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<sup>455</sup> *Psychic*, 28

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*

what Butler takes as natural – the one not alienated in sociality, not submitted to a violent naming, the man-alone, the androgyne. That living this “natural” position is recognized as impossible certainly puts the queer theorist ahead of the liberal individualist, who naively imagines that the individual can be spoken of as only secondarily achieving sociality, and that the “citizen” is the true unit of society, from whose individuality larger groups may, or may not, be built up. But queer theory’s description of sociality as a violently imposed necessity still presumes that the androgyne is the primary unit of society – it merely bemoans that, the world being what it is, its continued existence is predicated on the continually repeated fall of this androgyne into the sexes.

It is necessary to posit this presumption of primal androgyny as the underlying theology from which Butler works, or else her constant description of subjectivation as a violence which occurs in and through the individual taking a sexed position simply makes no sense. If the individual is nothing before it is subjectivated, how can subjectivating it be called a violence? If we cannot speak of a body prior to the body being made visible within categories of sex and gender, how can we presume to speak of these categories as oppressing, alienating, or otherwise turning the subject against itself? Because the androgyne is everywhere assumed, it makes sense that gendering is a violence, even if it is one that, paradoxically, bears fruit in the “speaking I.” But, because the prelinguistic “individual” is everywhere disavowed as inaccessible, the critic is turned from Butler’s trail. But if queer theory will have the gendering and sexing operations of power figured as “violent,” then it will have the individual who suffers gendering, at whatever non-temporal, constitutive “point” that it so suffers, as an individual for whom sex is no intrinsic principle; an original body of whom it can be said: “It is good for man to be left alone.”

#### 4. Butler and Babel

How would the biblical narrative “see” this quandary which Butler assumes? By bracketing as “unintelligible” the problem of an original creation of that “individual” upon which “subjectivation” works, Butler assumes the position of a philosopher within the city of Babel. Babel, because she self-consciously closes off the range of the



intellectual operation to the given, not by denying its metaphysical necessity, but by denying that we can know the given *in* our constructions; that we can continue to see the original creation in the man-made bricks of the city.

Not that Butler is a *proponent* of Babel; indeed, Butler's work protests the particular configurations of the city and its tower, namely, against the "regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality...which reiterates itself through the forceable production of 'sex.'"<sup>457</sup> In this, there is a certain structural agreement between the biblical tradition. As we have argued, the work of Babel subordinates the human person to the reproduction of the immortal city, of which they appear as replaceable parts. In a real sense, this amounts to "the forceable production of 'sex,'" in that sexual differentiation is given an end extrinsic to it through law and the "reiteration of norms." That is, through the command that no one is to leave Babel, and through the institutions of child-sacrifice, "[a]s a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect."<sup>458</sup> Sexual difference, in Babel, appears as animal difference, for the sake of reproduction, under the dominion of a god-king, and this is a production of power which exceeds the ruled and the ruler as a "total mechanism" of power that conditions their actions.

Butler looks for the reason for the repeated, lifelong fall of the androgyne into those contingent constructions which have the naturalized appearance of "male" and "female," and offers a theory of compulsory heterosexuality. Here, gender designates the "very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established,"<sup>459</sup> in which culturally intelligible genders "are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, and sexual practice."<sup>460</sup> Citing Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig and Michel Foucault, Butler suggests that the reason "power"<sup>461</sup> would operate "gender" to establish "sex" as an apparently substantive fact is threefold: to preserve exogamy (or marriage), patriarchy, and reproduction.

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<sup>457</sup> Butler, *Bodies*, 12

<sup>458</sup> *Bodies*, 10

<sup>459</sup> *Gender Trouble*, 10

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

<sup>461</sup> Power here, describes a broad, diffused, and social sense of "sovereignty," rather than in simply, say, government actors.

“For Irigaray, the substantive grammar of gender...is an example of a binary that effectively masks the univocal and hegemonic discourse of the masculine, phallogocentrism, silencing the feminine as a site of subversive multiplicity. For Foucault...[t]he binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive, and medicojuridical hegemonies...For Wittig, the binary restriction on sex serves the reproductive aims of a system of compulsory heterosexuality.”<sup>462</sup>

Butler will add the subsequent point, that gender actually produces the notions of subversive sexuality that it represses, establishing itself, not as *incidentally* restrictive, oppressive, and pecuniary, but as essentially so, in need of its external enemy in order to be. But, ultimately, and regardless of what unintended sites of subversion it opens up, the culturally enforced maintenance of a binary system of gender exists for the sake of the maintenance of human sexual activity along reproductive and exogamic lines and has, as its purpose, however diffusely and inarticulately aimed at, the assurance of a steady stream of people that make up the social order and the ability to exchange people within marriage ties.

If this is the case, it is worth wondering why this enforced order seems so easy to trouble; why “power” has so easily assimilated its subversion within itself; why the particular goals of the gender binary have been all but abandoned by what most people would recognize as definite centers of institutional power. For, whether one observes the highest levels of capital accumulation or peers into the most quotidian government office; whether one traces the direction of national or international policy, as enacted by institutions like the European Union or the United Nations; whether one queries the professed positions and financial expenditures of the universities or the doctrines of the churches; whether one polls for the opinion of the *demos* or consumes the media productions of its capitalist class, one finds the same trend, namely, the assimilation of queer theory into the operations of recognizable power; the bolstering and celebrating of “identities” which trouble the supposed naturalness of the male-female binary; the repeated and reiterated distancing of sexual activity from both marriage and reproduction;

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<sup>462</sup> Ibid., 26

the acceptance of and eager capitalization upon forms of kinship that avoid marriage entirely. Increasingly, one must turn to reactionary holdouts, like the state policies of Russia, or religions deemed fundamentalist, like Islam or Catholicism, in order to find a source of suppression in which the supposed aims of “power” can be convincingly described as enforcing the sexual binary in the service heterosexual, reproductive aims.

Have the normative injunctions of queer theory simply succeeded? Has the supposed fixity of the gender binary been revealed, through parodic reiterations of the compulsions that it produces, to be a contingent form? Have those who have been compelled to take it up in order to become speaking subjects, culturally intelligible and viable, successfully broadened the categories of the “intelligible” and “viable” to include more forms of life? On the one hand, it is self-evidently true that more subject-positions are available for relative pain-free assumption within the widespread deployment and acceptance of the gender identity model. On the other, this seems rather unlikely as a liberatory movement, in that it is precisely in those we would recognize as being marginalized from typical accumulations of power who remain stubbornly attached to the sexual binary and enforced heterosexuality, while the capacity to see it as a contingent production seems to be correlated with wealthier countries and the capacity to purchase a higher education.<sup>463</sup>

The biblical narrative offers an insight which may well be of service to the theoretical aims of queer theory, namely, that the successful amassment of power is not necessarily served by the unequivocal proliferation of heterosexual, reproducing families, nor staid by the proliferation of non-binary identities. Rather, if we consider “earthly power” in the light of the biblical narrative, as the will to power, tending towards absolute sovereignty and moved to persist in being in and through the elimination of rivals, then it is as a power inaugurated and constrained by two threats: the lack of reproduction on the one hand and a certain excess of reproduction on the other, the former reducing the mass, the subjugation of which produces the appearance of mortal divinity of those who operate it, the latter “filling the earth,” that is, multiplying beyond the ability of the law to univocally command and reproduce itself in subjects motivated by fear and reward, thus

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<sup>463</sup> Poushter, J., & Kent, N. (2020, October 27). Views of homosexuality around the world. Retrieved May 08, 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/>

necessitating the mediation of the law, and so revealing it in its weakness and dependence upon the subjects it produces.

It is true that queer theory and its subversive practices threaten these amassments of power by producing non-reproductive subjects. Were everyone, with Wittig, to “expose the idea of a natural body as a construction and to offer a deconstructive/reconstructive set of strategies for configuring bodies to contest the power of heterosexuality,” to make sexuality a “set of acts outside of the reproductive matrix,”<sup>464</sup> then, presumably, capital would be deprived of its labor force, the god-king of his subjects, and humanity of humans. But it is also true that reproduction proliferates, multiplies and fills the earth with diverse centers of power and authority which must mediate the laws, norms, and strategies of power to make it efficacious. If power relies on sexual reproduction, it, for this very reason, fears it – as a Pharaoh worrying over his multiplying Israelites. From this perspective, it is not coherent to argue that gender is deployed to produce the appearance of a substantive sexual binary in and through the regulation of sexual activity unto heterosexual reproduction, rather, power aims towards the total *management* of reproduction. The regulatory regime of gender, far taking reproduction as its *telos*, takes the reigns of both reproduction and its enforced absence; it takes power over reproduction as a whole, administering fertility and sterility, life and death, insofar as either are useful to regime threatened by too much of either.

To describe both “heterosexual” and “homosexual” as contingent, constructed identities which rely on each other to persist in their very intelligibility,<sup>465</sup> while it certainly troubles the notion that either is a natural fact, means a good deal more, and a focus on the differences between the two subject positions misses their underlying sameness: both the heterosexual and homosexual now has “sexuality” as a contingent product, constructed through a primary submission to power. Though this “submission” can be described as a subversion in the case of the homosexual and a conformity in the case of the heterosexual, this hardly differentiates them in Butler’s view, in so far as both the attempt to subvert of the law and the attempt to obey the law are only ever failed attempts to repeat the law within the terms it allows. Rather than revealing the limits of

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<sup>464</sup> *Gender Trouble*, 170

<sup>465</sup> “For a gay or lesbian identity position to sustain its appearance as coherent, heterosexuality must remain in that rejected and repudiated place.” [*Psychic*, 149]

subversion, Butler has revealed the fundamental usefulness of both subversive and obedient identifications precisely as two, mutually-informed modes of repeating the law.

Through the binary ordering of human sexuality through the either/or of hetero/homosexuality, the human person is rendered fundamentally available to serve the twofold necessity of fertility and sterility; to form unions which produce and unions which do not produce; to become a reproductive unit that expands and maintains a population or a non-reproductive unit which curbs and limits a population. What is achieved in either case is a “sexuality” recapitulated within a field of scarcity, in which “something must be done” in order to attain to and maintain one’s sexual identity; in which one is always at risk of losing that identity if one does not act, dress, and speak in a certain way, and not just losing it, but losing it to a rival identity: if one fails to be a heterosexual, one looks like a homosexual, and vice versa. From a biblical perspective, we would simply say that, as in the tyranny bemoaned by Samuel, sexuality is made to plant and plow the field of the king. What was once received as a given is now achieved by a successful repetition of acts, an alternation of form which transforms or invents “sexuality” as a possible point of leverage, available to threat and reward.

In fact, by bracketing the possibility of Creation as a theological question, Butler presumes that *all* identities are constituted by a certain repetition of acts, the limits of which are reducible to the shifting whims of human power which determines which of these performances will “count” as the successful achievement, or a successful troubling, of that identity. Because of this, all identities are exclusionary: human power can create nothing new, only modify existing beings to appear as this rather than that. Likewise, all identities are fundamentally fragile and anxiety-ridden: they may not be achieved, they may not be recognized, one might be mistaken for the other which one is not. Because of this, the human person is described as constitutively available to threat: “You must do this in order to be that,” “you must buy this, if you are really that,” “if you were a real this, you wouldn’t say that,” and so forth. Within this schema, gender identity is an inroad into the human being by which he may be motivated, through fear, to serve the will of another.

Jemimah Repo, in her work *The Biopolitics of Gender*, shows this technique in her description of the European Union, which, in its policy documents, does not enforce

“heterosexuality,” but uses “gender” as a technique of destabilizing the human person in their sex: “By manipulating the sociocultural (gender) biopower can better govern the human organism (sex), and hence, life.”<sup>466</sup> Repo describes the European Union as utilizing the notion of “gender” as the malleable, programmable, injunction to perform and achieve an identity as a part of its “innovative measures to support the [fertility] rate and judicious use of immigration [so that] Europe can create new opportunities for investment, consumption and creation of wealth.”<sup>467</sup> Men and women are to be motivated to avoid “rigid gender roles [which] can hamper individual choices and restrict the potential of both men and women,”<sup>468</sup> where “potential” is considered as the potential to become a successful “self-examining and self-governing rational-economic subject,” who engages in “self-inspection, calculation, and self-governance” in order to produce more wealth through labor (production) without thereby destroying the society (through lack of reproduction). Gender is productive of the theological anthropology it presumes, namely, that differentiation is a secondary work achieved upon the metaphysically sexless anthropoid for the sake of “widening the human capital base and raising competitiveness.”<sup>469</sup> Through it, actual institutions of power are able to alternately motivate both sterility and fertility in the service of the society, conceived of as a neuter whole transcending its differentiated parts.

This is not merely true on an individual life, in which individuals are motivated to become normal, responsible members of the human capital base by engaging in non-reproductive unions, limiting reproduction for long enough to produce more wealth than would be otherwise absorbed into the care of children, while engaging in enough reproductive unions to save Europe from a population crash and subsequent dependence on immigration for wealth creation. But it is also true on a social level: the European Union is characterized by its ability to include marginalized gender identities and family structures insofar as they can serve its teleological goal of wealth production: “Indeed...the Commission no longer has a fixed definition of the family. Instead, it

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<sup>466</sup> Jemimah Repo, “Gender Equality as Neoliberal Governmentality” *The Biopolitics of Gender* (Oxford University Press 2016) 154

<sup>467</sup> European Commission 2005, cited in Repo, *Biopolitics*, 10

<sup>468</sup> European Commission 2010a, 10, cited in Repo, *Biopolitics*, 146

<sup>469</sup> European Commission 2010a, 4, cited in Repo, *Biopolitics*, 145

openly maintains that the ‘family is a shifting concept’ and that ‘family relationships vary over time and space’ (European Commission 2008b, 60).” Repo argues that, “[b]y expanding the number of sexual relationships given legal status by governments, these nonconforming bodies and spaces are rendered ‘institutionally visible and can be recorded in official statistics’ (2008b, 67), therefore rendered biopolitically governable.”<sup>470</sup>

This attains for “family structure” what the deployment of homo/hetero, queer/straight, cis/trans binaries achieve for binary gender, namely, the destabilization of the “family” as a given, operating independently from larger amassments of power, upon which all legal order depends for the mediation of the law, most broadly construed as the “normal” within a society, unto its new members. By rendering family into a “shifting concept,” rather than a given; an achievement capable of legal recognition, rather than a created order upon which all legal order depends; the “family” is rearticulated as a creation of the state, transformed into another leverage point for threat and motivation of human beings towards it end, as in, “a real family is one which does this, not that; which looks like this, and not that.” Rather than a node of resistance, by which some commands can be recognized as anti-family, and so serve as a rallying point for the limitation of a particular institutions bloated claim to sovereignty, the unmooring of “family” as a created form, and the paradoxical acceptance of its queer status as an open-ended possibility of sociality, allows for its theoretical deployment towards any number of ends. There is no principled reason why one’s family, institutionally disassociated from any particular form, should not include “the boss,” “the party,” the “police officer,” and the “social worker” as integral members of its care.

Repo’s study, read alongside the biblical theology of gender, proves troublesome to the naïve notion that queer theory and practice is a thorn in the side of the powers of the earth, and their basic *telos* of amassment. Rather, queer theory, in articulating its ideals, advocates the creation of the ideal body to enable and support the goals of contemporary power structures, namely, the amassment of capital and a totalizing sovereignty over bodies and minds. By reinterpreting the human person as lacking any intelligible given, any nature, beyond that which is constructed to appear; and by subsequently

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<sup>470</sup> *Biopolitics*, 151-152

acknowledging that there is no choice *not* to appear through taking up names and identities; and by reducing all subversion to variations within the same, queer theory articulates a human subject who is always and already given over to and dependent upon the powers of this earth for who and what he is.

The doctrine “male and female he created them” is best understood in this context, as a banner of resistance waved against all attempts at homogenous governance, unlimited sovereignty, and the reduction of the human person to a modification of human power. Here, the family is given, not as an identity constructed by human hands, but as that which is given for subsequent construction. Sex is not produced, but created, and because of this, it is an irreducible difference and particularity which cannot be reinterpreted as a mere accidental variation of a being which is most fundamentally for some other end: a neuter *homo economicus*, say, or a servant within the war economy of the god-king. The doctrine amounts to a claim that Butler’s “individual” which undergoes “subjectivation” is not an unintelligible *x*, presumed to exist for the sake of the coherence of her system but otherwise an intellectual black hole, rather, the “individual” is male and female. If it is true, and God created us male and female, then the human person is always already in resistance to amassments of power which would operate bodies and minds as so much stuff, available for human construction.



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