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# Human Creation Accounts in Genesis 1–3

by Dorothy Yoder Nyce

A quote of writer and scholar Virginia Woolf has hung near my desk for decades. It states: “To have by nature a point of view. To stick to it. To follow it where it leads is the rarest of possessions and lends value even to trifles.” For decades, that posture has shaped my knowledge, writing,<sup>1</sup> and teaching about the two creation accounts of humanity found in Genesis 1–3.

This article highlights Hebrew scholar Phyllis Trible’s lengthy chapter titled “A Love Story Gone Awry,” about Genesis 1–3, in her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*.<sup>2</sup> Her concern centers primarily in consequences of translation error: the Hebrew term *ha’adam* means *the human* or *earth creature*, not *man* or *Adam*. Gene Tucker’s review of Trible’s book states its goal: “To redeem at least some elements of the biblical tradition for a liberated humanity, female and male, by reinterpreting—not rewriting—certain biblical texts.”<sup>3</sup>

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1 For example, see Dorothy Yoder Nyce, “The Interpretive Intrigue—Genesis 1 to 3,” *Gospel Herald* (October 4, 1983): 684–85.

2 Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 73.

3 Gene M. Tucker, “Trible’s *Rhetoric*: A Review Article,” *Andover/Newton Quarterly* (March 1979): 225–30.

Some writers of similar view, or who engage with Trible’s detailed literary analysis, deserve citation: Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 75–85; Phyllis A. Bird, “Male and Female He Created Them”: Gen. 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation,” *Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 2 (April 1981): 129–60; Richard M. Davidson, “The Theology of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 1–2,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 5–21; Pamela J. Milne, “The Patriarchal Stamp of Scripture: The Implications of Structuralist Analyses for Feminist Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Feminist Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 17–34. Phyllis A. Bird, “Genesis 1–3 as a Source for a Contemporary Theology of Sexuality,” and “Biblical Authority in the Light of Feminist Critique,” in *Missing Persons and*

Trible addresses how traditional patterns of living out translation and interpretation of specific words may distort a text's core truth. Central to such traditional teaching is that *woman's* value is reduced by woman having been created later than and from *man*; that she deserves being faulted more than he for disobedience; and that punishments for the two validate man's control over woman, along with her acquiescence to such control. Both women and men have used this imbalance of human value to justify physical and/or emotional abuse of women through the centuries. Self-definition for each becomes skewed. Such outcomes need not and should not be.

Critics will ask, why return to a late-1970s resource for insight today? Because I believe that the core Truth of Trible's book holds firm even while some later writers continue to "bless" the earlier creation of *man*; that Trible's writing has value beyond liberal scholarship; and that resistance to change continues from some leaders already exposed to Trible's authentic metaphor of "journey." A couple years ago, for example, a Mennonite Bible professor in a public lecture on human creation referred to Trible's chapter noted above. After the lecture, when I asked if he had actually read Trible's chapter and he said yes, I asked why he had avoided advocating for her insight. "Because too much would have to change," he answered.

In other words, he chose not to change his view or to encourage others to change theirs, based on *his* judgment of the *re*-vision needed in order to be faithful to the Hebrew text. Do we then conclude that *he* was unready to shift from historic views? Did he wish to claim traditional judgments about woman being inferior to man and more directly responsible for choosing to eat of one tree in the Garden that God had pronounced off-limits to the first earth creature? Did conviction that both woman and man truly represent or image God (declared in the earlier Genesis chapter 1 but chronologically later creation account) require "too much change" for Christians like him? People who resist "rev'lution" do so for a reason, denied or admitted. I deeply care for and teach church people who need and benefit from Wise change; to conserve the comfort of teaching from the past risks extended absence of created goodness!

Indications that Mennonites rely on traditional interpretation of key scriptures continue to surface. In October 2018, a lectionary text for preaching centered on Genesis 2 content. After the worship leader read the text, the preacher admittedly struggled to express Wisdom in conveying traditional views and

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*Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 155–73, 248–64; Joseph E. Coleson, "Ezer Ceneqdo: A Power Like Him, Facing Him as Equal," Wesleyan/Holiness Women Clergy, 1996, retrieved May 24, 2018; Mary Kate Morse, "Gender Wars: Biology Offers Insights to a Biblical Problem," Portland Seminary, George Fox University, 2006, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes/47>.

consequences of man being created first. Distraught that yet again my people, including vulnerable children, had been misled by tradition, I left the service prior to the serving of communion. Much as I valued that preacher’s usual efforts, I felt driven to write to both leaders of that service, assuring them that “neither of them needed to declare that *man*, and certainly not a person named Adam, was created first and woman later from his rib.” The preacher’s genuine response was that simply “due to an exceedingly busy week, she hadn’t had time to get her hands on Tribble’s chapter” when preparing the sermon.

Further, for some years, I have been a part-time adult Sunday School teacher. During the fall 2018 quarter of Adult Bible Study (ABS), the lessons focused on Genesis 1–3. After the quarter’s study, I wrote to the Mennonite ABS editor of the international series expressing regret that so many churchwide adults had again missed opportunity to examine that content by *countering* negative judgments about women. The editor explained the planners’ intent to “move people beyond the conservative theological rabble about creationism” and the risks of directly addressing contemporary, scholarly issues like “patriarchal, oppressive theologies.” Real dilemmas! But now the harm of traditional, misinformed teaching about core Genesis texts regarding human creation will continue among most Mennonites for yet another three-year cycle.

How, most effectively, will change in understanding scripture come about? This is a recurring question, one that hints toward the mission of a journal like *Anabaptist Witness*. (Hopefully, the journal’s readers deny traditional claims like “the West knows best” or “We have a message to tell, not to receive.”) Before Mennonites share insight about human creation in broader world settings, we need to authentically live equity within marriage, value leadership of both women and men, and counter physical or emotional duress toward the “other” sex or toward one who exhibits diverse sexual being—to truly enable and share diverse human gifts with family members and neighbors. Therefore, the “mission” regarding authentic value and equity for all people remains most local.

Attention to the goodness of being created human invites us to learn from others, ancient or modern. We might study “the immortal myth of Adam and Eve” from a Jewish perspective or be informed about similar or differing views of humanity by a Muslim from Quranic Truth. For instance, studies about “Female Images of God in Christian Worship” described by a Korean would prompt us to understand *han* if we wished to discuss being created in God’s image as described in Genesis 1:4. And having lived in India multiple times, I was invited by a returned missionary in early 2010 to respond to an Indian bishop’s studied paper titled “Woman, You Are Great! (Genesis 1–3 content).”

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4 Myungsil Kim, *Female Images of God in Christian Worship: In the Spirituality of TonSungGiDo of the Korean Church* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014).

While his paper expressed genuine respect for women, I felt free to stretch his thought further by drawing from Tribble's insight.

Both women and men experience harm from distortions of scriptural content. Tribble notes a number of such distortions:

- That a male God created man before woman; *first* indicates being superior while *second* implies inferior.
- That woman's purpose as "helper" cures man's loneliness.
- That woman's destiny (from man's rib) is to be derived and dependent, not autonomous.
- That woman was first to sin; she in turn tempted man to follow.
- That woman's greater sin caused her punishment of severe childbirth pain, whereas man is destined only to struggle with the soil.
- That God's way for women to remain faithful is for man to rule over her and for her to desire being submissive to him.

Not one of these schemes restates or actually appears in scripture, Tribble says.<sup>5</sup> Yet centuries of such patriarchal, misogynist, male-privileged views of scripture among Christians, including Mennonites, have hindered our practice of Divine vision for creation.<sup>6</sup> Many women, judging themselves as created last and more at fault for sin, minimize their worth; sex stereotypes persist; and Jesus's radical call to live out God's basic design for human equity is undermined.

Since many Christians have chosen to pursue untruth regarding scripture or have been vulnerable to such, our sacred task is to choose different interpretations. It is our duty to revolt against traditional views that harm both women and men—to practice authentic scripture translation, claim due vision, and bond through informed conviction. All that any of us knows about any scripture text is someone's interpretation. Each of us, with bias, depends on a translation of scripture, usually from an original language or with preference for a specific view. We choose what view to uphold. The duty is ours to decide either to persist with traditional consequences or, out of conviction, work toward change in perception.

To revolt always demands risk and requires serious reflection and conviction. It may express reformer Martin Luther's confession that "I can do no other." Revolution is unlikely to be easily accepted by others. It requires care, including caution, lest further oppression occur. To revolt involves serious *re-exam*, often altering traditional patterns. Each of us determines which efforts to engage, which programs to promote, which causes to pursue, which "points

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<sup>5</sup> Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 73.

<sup>6</sup> Note: Issues like evolution, creationism, or ancient accounts of creation are not addressed in this article. Nor are perspectives from multiple world religions that may describe women as inferior and therefore worthy of abuse.

of view to stick to and follow regardless of where they lead.” Juliana Claassens suggests in *Claiming Her Dignity: Female Resistance in the Old Testament* that revolt spreads from the impact of ruptured new ideas.<sup>7</sup>

Wilda Gafney, womanist writer and preacher, practices revolt in the form of midrash, describing her close reading of texts like Genesis 1–3 as “God-wrestling.” She wrestles with “God of the Holy Name,” God and the text, and even talks back to the text itself.<sup>8</sup> We choose whether to value her use of “sanctified imagination.” While Gafney’s feminist, educated, Anglican stance takes into account Jewish heritage as well as her African American heritage with slavery, my feminist, white, Mennonite loyalty is enhanced by research and interfaith—notably, Asian—Wisdom. Revolt regarding Genesis creation accounts about humanity calls us to not blame women, to not cower because “too much needs to change.”<sup>9</sup>

All cultures have creation *myths*, accounts of “how things began.”<sup>10</sup> Myth, a biblical, literary genre rich in symbolism, explains stories or responds to questions about causes or customs. African Modupe Oduyoye, writing about Genesis 1–11, suggests that the right question to ask about a myth is not “Is it

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7 L. Juliana M. Claassens, *Claiming Her Dignity: Female Resistance in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2016), 156. Also, in Claassens’s book (97), Martha Nussbaum names conditions needed for a person or group to truly show solidarity with another—being convinced that the other’s predicament is undeserved and that both involved (self and other) are vulnerable.

8 Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 8–9.

9 Other perspectives exist. For example, a college student wrote a paper comparing “Eve and Lilith” for a course I taught titled “Bible and Sexuality.” Lilith’s legend most likely developed during the Jewish exile to Babylon, the stress of which could have been threatening their survival. Editor Susannah Heschel describes how men feared loss of morale and manhood; they feared that Jewish people might become extinct (“The Lilith Question, *Aviva Cantor*” in *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader* [New York: Schocken, 1983], 40–50). Further, men in exile might have feared women’s power, their resistance to being primarily enablers of men; instead of being “helpmeets,” women might have presumed patriarchal, male roles. Within such a milieu, a legend about Lilith, the first woman, might have emerged. Woman’s struggle to be equal with or independent of Adam displeased him, the legend explains. So he complained to God, who dispatched three angels. And Lilith took decisive action to escape. In her commentary *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman’s Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), Ellen Frankel describes the rebel Lilith as, together with Adam, being the first creature. But when Adam resented their equal status, Lilith voiced her protest by leaving Paradise (viii).

10 Keep in mind that creation is an ongoing process.

accurate?” but rather “What does it mean?”<sup>11</sup> Most likely, those who told and wrote the Genesis creation stories borrowed segments from ancient stories near them—Babylonian or Sumerian. The Sumerians had lived in the region with their language several thousand years before the Israelites arrived with Hebrew. Chapters 1–11 of the Hebrew Bible convey Primeval (original) History, while chapters 12–50 relate “ancestral family stories.” British writer Karen Armstrong explains how these “creation accounts of fiction that offer timeless truths demonstrate the basic religious principle that no one human account can ever comprise the whole of divine truth.”<sup>12</sup> But since faulty interpretation of such content has strongly shaped our being human, we do well to at least be more accurate with it.<sup>13</sup>

Creation of *adam* (human or earth creature) in chapter 1 conveys writing from the sixth century BCE. Two other distinct details about human beings are noted in this chapter:

1. They represent *God’s image*. Remarkably, God distinctly shares in equal depth with all human beings the Divine image. In explaining the meaning of image, Oduyoye notes that women and men, unlike other creatures, “respond to God.”<sup>14</sup> Ellen Ross adds that we have the capacity to know and love and to also deepen our relationship with God.<sup>15</sup>
2. They have *dominion* with the rest of created existence. *Dominion*, never to be distorted as *domination*, means “responsible care” or respect.<sup>16</sup> Other created life is to experience Divine care through action conveyed to it by humanity. Today’s concern for ecology follows from human failure to care responsibly.

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11 Modupe Oduyoye, *The Sons of the Gods and the Daughters of Men: An Afro-Asiatic Interpretation of Genesis 1–11* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 34.

12 Karen Armstrong, *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis* (New York: Ballantine, 1996), 18–20.

13 Three sources known as J, E, and P frame much of the Genesis and Pentateuch content. P, for the Priestly school of scholars of the sixth century BCE, explains God Almighty’s creative purpose and goodness in chapter 1. With J (or Y) Yahwist writing, God is named *Yahweh* (tetragrammaton letters YHWH: *yud-he-vav-he*). Likely from the tenth century BCE, J content shapes creation and the disobedience content of chapters 2–3. E for Elohist, with God named *El/Elohim*, likely originated in the ninth century. (The fourth writer is known as D, the Deuteronomist writer.)

14 Oduyoye, *The Sons of the Gods*, 87.

15 Ellen Ross, “Human Persons as Images of the Divine: A Reconsideration,” in *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts*, ed. Alice Bach (Philadelphia: Trinity International, 1990), 102.

16 James Limburg. “What Does It Mean to ‘Have Dominion’ over the Earth?” *Dialog* 10 (1971): 223.

Features of the older creation account, found in Genesis 2,<sup>17</sup> have been distorted, largely by men, to oppress women through thirty centuries. Comments from three writers—Phyllis Trible, Robert Alter, and Wilda Gafney—are linked here. In chapter 2, God first created *ba'adam* (the human), not *man* nor *Adam* the proper name, from *ba'adamah* (the soil). Aware of *ba'adam's* isolated, lonely state, God causes part of *ba'adam's* (the human's) *tzela* (side) to be modified or fashioned during a deep sleep, for the first time into two persons. At that concurrent point, *ish* (man) speaks for the first time. He expresses delight that *ishsha* (woman) is his companion. With both created *good* by God alone and equal in strength, man calls attention to woman's effective nature (*ezer*), not what tradition calls “mere help.” Be aware that *ezer* also describes *God's* help or power twenty times in the Hebrew Bible. *Sexuality* is characterized in chapter 1 through Hebrew terms *neqeba* and *zakar*—*female* and *male* that refer to physical relating; here in the creation account sexuality reflects gender or social relating—*woman* and *man* (*ishsha* and *ish*). “Bone of bone and flesh of flesh” explains the relational partnership of woman and man, from strength to weakness. Unity, as mutual companions—a feature missing in God's prior creation of animals—now comes into being (v. 23). Being naked suits the companions' way of existing.

Genesis 3 details include the appearance of a cunning beast—the snake—which engages speech with the independent woman. The Divine had given to the original earth creature, before the creature became distinct by sex, a limit—not to eat of one particular tree in Paradise. Woman interrupts the snake, adding that they were not even to touch that tree lest they die. The serpent assures her that rather than die, upon eating from it they will come to be like God, knowing good and evil. On seeing the desired tree, woman, fully aware, eats. And without question, the man follows her example and offer. They both longed *to see as God sees*. Having both *disobeyed* Yahweh God, they acquired a sense of being without defense.<sup>18</sup> They then realized their nakedness and knew shame. Together they combined fig leaves to cover their genitalia.

Fearing Yahweh, they hid when they sensed God walking in the Garden. Confronted by the Divine, the two transferred blame. Man blamed the woman and also God for creating her for man's own disobedience; woman blamed the serpent for causing her to disobey. In that context of rebellion in which both man and woman chose to be their own God instead of granting unique honor to Yahweh, punishment followed. From then on, the snake, which had been revered in the ancient world as a form of divine being, was cursed to slither on the ground. Its persistent conflict with people would follow too. The woman would

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17 Recall that chapter numbers were not designated for the printed text until much later.

18 Armstrong, *In the Beginning*, 29.

know severe pain in giving birth, and she would long unnaturally to have man's attention. And the man would find working with the cursed, often drought-prone soil to be most painful. Further, for him to assume control over woman<sup>19</sup> would cause their separation. Power over woman, with whom man had been creatively intended to share full equity, would ever reflect *their* disobedience.

Punished, humans have persisted in their failure. Woman and man, having lost their previous enjoyment of tilling (serving) and keeping (protecting) the Garden—their authentic and mutual care marred and Yahweh God afraid that they might attain eternal life on their own—together, equally at fault, were ejected from Paradise. Sex stereotypes and patriarchal male power over female express *disobedience*; they typify direct perversion of God's created design for human goodness. About such reality, Tribble observes: "The Yahwist narrative tells us who we are (creatures of equality and mutuality) and who we have become (creatures of oppression)."<sup>20</sup>

Now that we have reviewed the Hebrew human creation accounts, we think more of what tradition has conveyed through the centuries. Many men subtly or boldly justify their dominance, control, or feelings of superiority over women. And many women, along with men, prefer to deny or explain away feminist translations of the Hebrew because "too much would need to change" for themselves and others.

The greatest harm results from the wrong translation that *man*, or *Adam*, was created first and that woman therefore deserves to be cast as inferior. A mere "helpmate" from man's rib to treat his loneliness, she fails to provide true partnership. Such textual misreading disowns the actual meaning of the Hebrew term *kenegdo*. More than a dozen years ago, Mennonite Brethren writer Randy Klaasen drew from other writers to clarify the term, specifically from Carol Meyers's translation "suitable counterpart" and Phyllis Tribble's "companion corresponding to."<sup>21</sup> Tribble reminds readers that "strength, aggressiveness, dominion and power over do not characterize the man in Genesis 2,"<sup>22</sup> in created goodness. Such qualities reflect *punishment* for wrongdoing. And ongoing negation of the woman has justified violence against women today by weak men who justify their power "because they can."

Patriarchy often faults women more than men for sin. According to theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, such theology faults woman's "greater apt-

19 Gafney's midrash suggests *with* instead of *over*, in *Womanist Midrash*, 25.

20 Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric*, 81.

21 Randy Klaasen, "Ezer and Exodus," *Direction* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 18–32, <http://www.directionjournal.org/35/1/ezer-and-exodus.html>, accessed May 20, 2018. Klaasen cites Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 85, and Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric*, 90.

22 Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric*, 76.

ness for sin, her lesser spirituality.”<sup>23</sup> Know, however, that *sin* first appeared in Genesis 4, not in this Hebrew text. Only in the fourth century did the phrase “fall from grace” emerge, along with the “assumption that sexual desire was inherently sinful.”<sup>24</sup> Tradition has ingrained that woman, ranking first in the order of sin after being second in the order of creation, alone was seduced by the snake. Then biased interpreters welcomed Jewish texts being adapted, as in I Timothy 2:11–15 (NRSV): “For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing. . . .” Or, I Corinthians 11 where Paul “constructs a hierarchy that diminishes woman’s God-likeness.”<sup>25</sup>

To the extent that we believe such views, to a similar extent we can change such beliefs.<sup>26</sup> Christians need to own and repent of the distortions that we prolong. We must admit being party to “why things are the way they are.” Women are abused, in part, because parents, Sunday or Bible school teachers, and leaders of “children’s time” during worship teach that man came first and woman last in creation. The ranking of *first* has more often than not suggested privilege or preference. Many have been somewhat duped into thinking that boys are more worthy of value than girls. Some men have presumed through adulthood their right to take advantage of women in physical or emotional ways, having learned much earlier that women can be more blamed than men for sin. And too many women fail to be convinced of their created goodness as equal with men, a natural defense toward abuse. My bias holds as well that too many abused women fail to be radical, to convince leadership that distorted understanding of Genesis texts has allowed or endorsed abuse.

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23 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 94.

24 John Gross, “Free Will and How Sex Came to be Called a Sin,” review of *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent: Sex and Politics in Early Christianity*, by Elaine Pagels, *New York Times*, June 28, 1988, *Books of the Times*.

25 Helen Schungel-Straumann, “On the Creation of Man and Woman in Genesis 1–3: The History and Reception of the Texts Reconsidered,” in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 59–60.

26 Although Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s translation team did limited work with the Genesis text in her late nineteenth century book *The Woman’s Bible*, the traditional image of Eve was not thoroughly examined before feminists did so in the 1960s. Response varies. Four decades ago, Mennonite Bible professor Perry Yoder called for radical change. He commended Paul’s Galatians 3:27–28 (“in Christ, neither male nor female”) text rather than calling for women’s silence in public worship (see I Timothy 2 or I Corinthians 14). Error persists from those who promote man’s being normative as God’s image whereas woman images God only in a secondary sense. Others inclined to be judgmental of women may suggest that only man is fully a human being.

Why do many people, including some leaders and theologians, remain so resistant to feminist (white), womanist (African American) or *mujerist* (Hispanic) scholars who call attention to faithful translation and interpretation of texts? Because of ignorance? Because of failure to own the dilemma? Because they honestly wish to believe that women are inferior and deserve abuse? Because “too much would need to change”?

Many Mennonites adhere to *sola scriptura*, the idea that we look only to scripture for insight. In that claim, we deny how greatly we too are influenced by tradition. Granted, we do not honor church fathers as do most Roman Catholics, but their views and tradition do shape ours.

In her book *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, church history scholar Elaine Pagels discusses the sway of church fathers.<sup>27</sup> From the fifth century on, Augustine’s influence shaped a theory of original sin and pessimism toward sexuality and “the flesh.” For him, in contrast to Jewish predecessors, woman’s formation from a rib explained her weaker nature. “A husband is meant to rule over his wife as the Spirit rules the flesh,” he said. Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, stressed that woman’s entire, defective nature is inferior; she should naturally be subject to man.<sup>28</sup> Already in the second century, Tertullian had taught that, like Eve, all women are “the devil’s gateway.” She, the first deserter of divine law, destroyed “God’s image, man.”<sup>29</sup>

Did Protestant Reformers enable women? Historian Elise Boulding suggests that “Luther and Calvin set back at least a hundred years the progress of

27 Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988), 114.

28 Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 96.

29 Pamela Milne, “Genesis from Eve’s Point of View,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 1989, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/03/26/genesis-from-eves-point-of-view/dc371184-1f4c-4142-ac2d-d5efee72a0da/>, accessed October 7, 2018.

Another influence on attitudes toward and treatment of women based on Genesis creation accounts was false judgment of women as being witches. Readers of the book *The Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witches Hammer) by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, trans. Rev. Montague Summers (New York: Dover, 1971), or those who have been to the Museum about Witch Trials in Salem Massachusetts, know more. *The Malleus Maleficarum*, written by two Dominican Inquisitors in 1486, formed a handbook for persecuting witches. Blamed for their limited role as “helpmeet” to man, many women—faulted for a feeble mind, slippery tongue, inordinate passion, or lack of discipline—were hunted as witches. Linked with devils, witches were faulted by critics for affecting a man’s private part, causing hailstorms, or afflicting animals. Midwife witches could be faulted for killing or offering a child to a devil. Yet, the resource assures, “Never had an innocent person been punished on suspicion of witchcraft” (136).

the Middle Ages in education for women.”<sup>30</sup> Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests that the Reformation only slightly modified patriarchal patterns. For example, Calvin understood women’s subordination to men not as a state of being inferior but as God’s created social order. God had ordained the “rule of some and the subjugation of others.” Both, he said, need to accept “their own place” in this divine scheme of things.<sup>31</sup> Sound familiar?

Early Anabaptist life does hint toward re-vision:

- The 1527 Schleitheim Confession refers to “brethren” seven times and to “brethren and sisters” ten times.
- Women knew and quoted considerable scripture in personal letters prior to their death; one third of early Anabaptists martyred were women.
- Anabaptists used a hymnal of 102 songs by Soetgen van der Houste, published in 1592, in worship gatherings.
- Anabaptists urged “obedience to God rather than to men.”<sup>32</sup>
- Wolfgang Schaufele states: “Woman emerges in Anabaptism as a fully emancipated person in religious matters and as an independent bearer of Christian conviction.”<sup>33</sup>

Do such compliments describe Mennonite women today?

Change regarding traditional notions about created humanity has occurred on occasion. I view such examples noted below as hopeful but slim. I experience them to be outnumbered or overshadowed by Mennonite reliance on traditional readings. I have known only a couple Mennonite biblical scholars or theological leaders to have publicly validated the understanding of simultaneous creation of woman and man as important. We need assurance—lived patterns today—of mutual agreement that, with equity, we image or represent God. Together we determine whether to avoid freedom and go on seeing women as inferior or more prone to disobedience than men. Toward that goal, I believe that Phyllis Trible’s pioneering translation of *ha’adam* as *the human* or *earth creature*, not as *man*—plus the Wisdom of her entire chapter—continues to lead toward less

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30 Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1976), 527, in “The Climate for Women in Early Anabaptism,” paper by Dorothy Yoder Nyce for Professor Eleanor Commo McLaughlin (Andover Newton Theological Seminary, May 1977), 13.

31 Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 97–98.

32 Dorothy Yoder Nyce, exam responses for Anabaptist History and Theology course, Professor C. J. Dyck (Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, January 1979), 7, 25, 33.

33 Wolfgang Schaufele, “The Missionary Vision and Activity of the Anabaptist Lati,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (April 1962): 108.

human abuse by Christians. The following examples, moreover, hold promise as building blocks of a less abusive Mennonite interpretation of Genesis 1–3.

- Retired Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (now Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary) Hebrew professor Perry Yoder already in 1974 addressed Eastern District Mennonite women.<sup>34</sup> He called for revolution to live out the goodness of humanity in creation. Abuse of women by men who presume that women are “lesser” and/or to be silent during worship reflects failure to receive the equity that Jesus’s life enabled, Yoder said. To promote sex stereotypes or justify the negation of women based on church fathers’ statements lives out what followed *disobedience* in the Garden, he added.
- Gene Roop, with help from students and church groups, published the Believers Church Bible Commentary *Genesis* in 1987, more than thirty years ago.<sup>35</sup> In it, he clarified that God alone creates woman and man. Dominion, he states, refers to “responsible care”—care for the world that reflects God’s care. He admits that the text does not use the words “fall” or “sin,” that disobedience is the preferred term. Tradition, Roop adds, not the text, teaches that the serpent addressed the woman because of her being weak, having been created after man. God’s good intent for mutual, human companionship turned into acceptance of domination, man over woman. But that rule conveys disobedience, not Divine will. It too often excuses abuse.
- Meghan Florian, in a 2012 *Mennonite World Review*<sup>36</sup> blog excerpt of her chapel talk at Duke Divinity seminary sees *partnership* rather than *hierarchy* in the word *ezer* (companion). She confronts the faulty idea of an imbedded power struggle—that for women to win men must lose.

Questions persist. Does traditional insight into human creation shape your hope? What will historians say about twenty-first-century Mennonite interpretations of the Genesis creation accounts as visible in our sermons, Sunday school teaching, and published articles? How intent on revolution are we—on declaring and upholding with conviction that *all people* are created in God’s image?

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34 Perry Yoder, “Toward a Biblical Understanding of Womanhood,” Eastern District’s *The Messenger* (1974): 3–6.

35 Eugene F. Roop, Believers Church Bible Commentary *Genesis* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1987).

36 Meghan Florian, “Flesh of My Flesh, Created as Helpers,” *Mennonite World Review* (November 23, 2012): 4. Unwisely, Florian mistranslates the Hebrew term *ha’adam* (the human) as *Adam* prior to the social terms for *woman* and *man* (*ishsha* and *ish*). Does this matter? I think so. May we grow in alertness to what helps or hinders relating.

Are we creative in diverse partnership, in blessing truly mutual relating between people of any gender, in scripture interpretation that confirms God's original design of goodness? Will revolution or resistance to past error enable Wisdom, empathy, and compassion all around?