

Exegetical Notes on Genesis 2:18-24

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The reading from the Old Testament which is assigned to the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost in Series B of Lutheran Worship consists in seven verses of chapter 2 of the Book of Genesis, namely, verses 18-24.

THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY SETTING

The Book of Genesis is called in addition, quite correctly, the First Book of Moses. Moses composed the volume late in the year 1447 B.C. in the land of Goshen while the first several plagues of Exodus 7-12 were falling on the Egyptians (as argued in exegete's Isagogical Notes on the Pentateuch). The passage under study falls within the second of the twelve distinct books which constitute the Book of Genesis as we have it, the ancient records of previous prophets which Moses now welded together into one single volume in order to provide the people of Israel with a rationale of the exodus from Egypt and the return to Canaan which the prophet had already proclaimed to them (as, again, elaborated in the work just cited).

Book Two of Genesis is entitled "The Generations of the Heavens and the Earth" or, more fully, "These Are the Generations of the Heavens and the Earth at the Time of Their Creation" (2:4a). The opus so denoted embraces chapters 2:4-4:26 as Genesis has come to be divided since medieval times. There is no reason to date the record in its original form any later than the lifetime of its principal human figure, Adam. Not only is he counted among the prophets in the tradition of ancient Jewry, but the passage before us, especially verses 23-24, necessarily implies as much.

The first of the four main parts of Book Two of Genesis consists in verses 4-25 of Genesis 2. This section is organized as follows:

1. The Introductory Remarks (verses 4-6)
2. The Creation of the Male (verses 7-17)
3. The Creation of the Female (verses 18-22a)
4. The Institution of Marriage (verses 22b-24)
5. Concluding Remarks (verse 25)

The verses in view here, then, comprise subsections 3 and 4 of the narrative outlined.

Section 1 of Book 2 of Genesis (Genesis 2: 4-25) in no way contradicts Book 1 (Genesis 1:1-2:3) by reason of deriving from a different source as the critics imagine (in terms of the documentary hypothesis in which the supposed main sources are the Yahwist [denominated "J"], the Elohist [abbreviated "E"], the Deuteronomist [called "D"], and the Priestly Author [designated "P"]). Book 1 provides a general summary of the creation of the universe in strict chronological terms. Section 1 of Book 2, on the other hand, focuses on the culmination of creation by providing the details of the formation of man, both male and female.

The rationale, then, in Book 2 is relational rather than chronological, as obtains in the previous book. The references to non-human elements of the universe only appear in the picture in Genesis 2 (4-25) in such a way as to show how they relate to man as the crown of creation. Nothing is said here of these other elements in terms of chronology, in which regard Book 1 is always understood as the norm already familiar to all the readers of Book 2.

Thus, verses 4b-6 first of all recount the creation of the plants the maintenance of which God was planning to assign to the man when He would bring him into being on the sixth day of creation. These verses firstly, indeed, restate the non-existence of both plants and man on the first day of creation (in accord with Genesis 1): "At the time that the LORD God made earth and heaven, then no shrub of the field was yet in the earth nor was any plant of the field yet sprouting forth, for the LORD God had not caused rain on the earth; nor was there man to till the ground" (verses 2b-5). Verse 6 then supplements Genesis 1 by noting the use of a recurring mist to prepare the way for the sprouting, on the third day, of plants from the ground and, on the sixth day, the formation of man from the ground and the provision of a special garden as his original home: "But a mist was going up from the earth and was watering the whole face of the ground" (2:6).

All of the following events in Genesis 2 (in verses 7-25) occurred in the course of the sixth day of creation and thus provide material supplementary to verses 24-31 of the preceding chapter. Genesis 1 had already implied that man was created in some unique way differing from the simple fiat which had called all the other elements of the universe into existence (verses 26-27). Genesis 1 had likewise implied the creation of both male and female "in the image of God" in some closely connected way. It remains, however, to Genesis 2 to amplify this summary by reporting precisely how unique was the creation of both man and woman, separated by the span of several hours and in ways which were quite distinctive while still maintaining the integral unity of the two.

A LITERAL TRANSLATION AND COMMENTS

18. And then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I shall make for him a help corresponding to him."

The initial two words in the version here translate a strong *waw* with its most common force, being used to indicate temporal consequence (listed as IV.D.2.e.(1.) in Classical Hebrew and the English Language). The idea is that the Lord made the ensuing declaration subsequent to the instructions to Adam in Eden which are quoted in verses 16-17.

The description of the condition of man without woman as being "not good" pertains, as the Blessed Reformer observes, not to the "good" of an individual man but rather to the "good" of the human race (LW, I, 115). The continued existence of the race demanded, of course, as the Prime Doctor argues, the creation of woman. There is, at the same time, no reason to limit the scope of the assertion here to procreation or, indeed, to marriage. The creation of woman occurs in verse 21 before the actual institution of marriage in verses 22-24. Marriage, therefore, albeit a divine institution and essential to humanity, can scarcely be construed as the be-all-and-end-all of the existence of woman. Nor is this verse saying anything about companionship between members of the opposite sex as such. Such companionship outside of the family was, indeed,

foreign to biblical culture; and, however good a companion a given spouse may prove, individual marriages are only applications of the more general truth being enunciated here. This verse has, to be sure, sometimes been misused to require the universal marriage of adults. Such a demand, however, not only lacks any basis here, but also runs contrary to both the example of the our Good Lord and His commendation of celibacy as good "for the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19). The state here, contextually speaking, of man being "alone" is not individual men living separately from individual women, but rather man as such lacking the very existence of woman as such.

The ensuing sentence, still within the same verse indeed, immediately states the reason why the existence of woman is a "good" thing, namely, her place in the universe as a "help corresponding to" the man. The divine intention to create woman as special assistant to the man is one proof among many in the pericope before us of the position of woman under the authority of man in the order of creation. The feminists, to be sure, appeal to cases in which the word 'ezer is used of God Himself to evade this conclusion. In Psalm 70, for example, David prays to the Lord as his 'ezer (verse 6 MT, 5 EV):

Thou art my help and my deliverer;

O LORD do not tarry!

An essential distinction, however, which must be made is that woman serves as man's special aide by no self-determination as she so chooses, as does the Creator of man and woman. In the case of woman, quite to the contrary, her very being issues from a divine design to provide a helpmate to the man. Thus, woman was created as man's assistant par excellence; assisting man is her special role in the divine scheme of all things. The true woman, of course, delights in her special position in the universe, even as she is empowered to fulfil this role as fully as she can by faith in the Creator-Creature (the God-Man) who has now hallowed the order of creation in the order of redemption by His own sacrificial service to her as much as to man.

The Blessed Reformer stresses procreation again in speaking of woman as a "help" to the man in the verse before us (LW, I, 118). Again, however, there is no reason to circumscribe the conception of "help" here within the bounds of reproduction or even of marriage. The woman is, after all, a "help" to man in all the ways in which God bestows His blessings on the human race through women. The conception and bearing of children is obviously physically essential to the continuation of mankind, in accord with the divine mandate of Genesis 1:28. To be included too, however, are all the other activities of women which God commends in His word, certainly service in the home (as wives and mothers and assistants of many sorts) and in the church (teaching other women and children and assisting the ministry in numberless ways). Thus, the work of a wife and mother in taking care of husband and children would be a common application of the divine intention here; the assistance of a celibate deaconess to the ministry of a celibate pastor would be another application of the same principle enunciated here. The application, nevertheless, to procreation is admittedly, (as noted before), already obvious from Genesis 1:28. In this sense, therefore, one may speak Genesis 2:18, as does Augustana XXVII (20), as directing to procreation (and so to marriage) all those who have not received the gift of continence.

The phrase "corresponding to him" in the version above translates the single word *knegdo* in the original text. The form, which occurs only in this pericope (in verses 18 and 20), attaches the prepositional prefix *kaph* and a third masculine singular pronominal suffix to the a word which in one way or another occurs 151 times in the Old Testament, according to Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB, 617a-b). The idea of the verbal root *ngd* revolves around conspicuousness, so that the commonly used *hiphil* form means "make known" and so "declare" (BDB, 616b-617a). The substantive *negedh*, therefore, designates essentially "that which is conspicuous"; thus, in its uniform use as an adverb or preposition in the Hebrew Bible, it refers to something "in front of" someone and so "opposite to" him (BDB, 617a-b). An even more literal translation of *knegdo*, then, would be "according to what is opposite to him." Any idea of adversarial opposition is, of course, excluded here by the word "help" immediately preceding. The point is, then, the way in which woman corresponds to man as does no other creature indeed, complementing him while remaining quite distinctive. Translating *knegdo* as "adequate to him" falls short of the complementary correspondence entailed, while "equal to" is completely erroneous as a rendering of the word (which is in no way to deny the equality or, indeed, the superiority of a given woman to a given man aside from the position of each in the order of creation).

19. For the LORD God had formed from the ground every living thing of the field and every bird of the heavens, and now He brought [each] to the man to see what he would call each; and, indeed, everything which the man would call each living being that was its name.

The initial word in the translation of this verse represents the strong *waw* being used to indicate positive logical consequence, since temporal consequence is excluded by the chronology of the creation clearly enunciated in Genesis 1. In this verse, indeed, the *waw* of logical consequence introduces not, as more commonly, a conception which logically proceeds from the preceding conception (as does the strong *waw* translated "and so" beginning the ensuing verse), but rather a conception which is required as the logical basis of the preceding conception (listed as IV.D. 2.e.(1.) in CHEL). Such a usage of the conjunction often implies a pluperfect understanding of the verbal form which it precedes, as is reflected here in the rendering "had formed" of the breviate aspect of *ytzr* (BDB, 427b- 428a).

The phrase "would call" above represents in both cases a subjunctive use of the imperfect aspect of the verb *qr'*. The prepositional *lamedh* with third masculine singular suffix which is attached to the verb by a *maqeph* is here construed as "each" in both cases.

The phrase "living thing" in the first clause above renders the feminine noun *hayyah* (BDB, 312b), which is cognate with the adjective *hay* ("meaning "living" or "alive") which appears in the second clause (BDB, 311b-312a). There it takes a feminine form to modify the feminine noun *nephesh*, which occurs with considerable frequency in the TaNaK according to Brown-Driver- Briggs some 756 times (BDB, 659a). The *usus loquendi* of *nepheshis* a "being" or, more specifically, the "soul" as that which is distinctive to the human being (BDB, 659a-661b).

20. And so the man called all of the beasts names that is, the bird of the heavens and every living thing of the field but for the man one did not find a help corresponding to him.

The phrase "that is" in the translation above represents a conjunction which is here taken as waw explicativum, which is to say that the waw introduces one or more words which explain the word or words preceding the waw (listed as IV.C.4. in CHEL). The reason why this use is assumed here is that the two phrases which follow the waw concerned are the same as the two stated in the preceding verse, while the word b.hemah, before the waw, is broad enough to embrace both of the ensuing classes of animals. For b.hemah, meaning "beast" or, as here, "beasts" collectively, refers, in the first instance, to all "living creatures other than man" (BDB, 96b-97a).

The ability of Adam to provide appropriate names in brief compass to all the animals which God brought before him proceeded from several complementary sources:

1. His uncorrupted intelligence was vastly superior to that of any subsequent generations.
2. He was in direct communication with God, comprehending fully His self-revelation and serving as His sinless spokesman.
3. He was still in complete harmony with all the other creatures of God which he was called on to name.
4. He was indeed expressing his unchallenged authority over all these creatures by giving names at this point to a minority of all the earthly creatures which God was placing under his dominion (according to Genesis 1:26).
5. He had a vocabulary fully adequate to his task in the language which God had implanted in his mind in the very course of creating him.

We may note, at the same time, that there is no need to say that Adam gave names to every kind of animal in the hours which intervened on the sixth day between his own creation and the creation of Eve (assuming the use of the waw-explicativum already noted). He was instructed to name only the mammals called "the living things of the field" and birds. Nor do we know precisely how many such mammals and birds were presented to Adam on the first day of his life, depending on the comprehensiveness of the categories involved. The "kinds" of plants and animals of which Genesis 1 speaks are ordinarily broader in scriptural usage than "species" in the modern system of biological classification. There is, in any case, no need to place more than several hours between the creation of man and the creation of woman.

21. And then the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and so he slept, and then He took one of his ribs and then He closed flesh in its place.

The last clause of this verse and the second clause of verse 23 imply that God took, as well as the rib itself, some flesh attached to the rib from which to make the original woman.

The phrase "in its place" consists in tachath with a third feminine suffix referring back to the rib of the previous clause. The noun tachath means at basis "under-part" and so "place" (as that which is beneath one's feet). Used, therefore, as always in the Hebrew Bible, as an adverbial accusative or preposition, it signifies "underneath" and then "in the place of" someone or something (BDB, 1065a-1066a).

22. And then the LORD God built the rib which He had taken out of the man into a woman, and then He brought her to the man.

The use of the verb *bnh* (meaning "build"), as opposed to the use of *ytzr* in verse 7, shows the distinctive nature of woman. By using only elements from the man to create the woman God assures both the integral unity of the race and the headship of the man.

The word "brought" in the version above translates as in verse 18 the *hiphil* of *bw'* (meaning "come" in the *qal* and so "cause to come" in the *hiphil*); here, however, a third feminine suffix is added, referring back to the woman. It is with this action of God in bringing the woman to the man that the actual divine institution of marriage takes place.

23. And then the man said:

This one, now, is bone out of my bones

and flesh out of my flesh.

This one will one call woman

because this one was taken out of man.

Adam is clearly to be understood here as the spokesman of God, which is to say one speaking by divine inspiration. He perceives the essential nature of woman and expresses it by means of a generic name derived from his own generic name. The critics describe the etymology cited here as naive ignorance of the actual linguistic facts; they derive the words 'sh and 'ishshah from quite different roots. In the first place, however, there is still much room to debate the etymology of these two words in Classical Hebrew. Secondly, moreover, there is the question of how these vocables of Biblical Hebrew relate to the original words of Adam (whether as descendants therefrom or simply as translations like the "man" and "woman" of the English language). In any case, however, we can be completely certain that in the original language of Eden the word for "woman" was derived from the word for "man" since, after all, the first human speaker of the language so constructs the word in the verse before us now.

24. On this basis will a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

In biblical culture the leaving and cleaving of verse 24 would not necessarily involve a physical move, much less a desertion of filial responsibilities. The point is, rather, that marriage constitutes a distinctly new building-block of the human race in which the man and woman are committing themselves to obligations involving inseparability which a child does not owe to his parents. The conjunctions preceding the second and third verbs are instances, not of the strong *waw* indicating consequence, but rather of the weak *waw* (before perfects) betokening correlation. All three clauses are merely different ways of expressing the same divine truth. The

leaving and cleaving refer, as already noted, to the unique commitments undertaken in marriage, and the third clause describes these commitments as constituting, in the eyes of God, a relationship as integral as the one connecting the original man with the original woman derived from his side.

This verse is quoted by our Lord in Mark 10 (verse 7-8) following a reference to "the creation" by God of "male and female" (verse 6) and followed, in turn, by a deduction of the divine institution and hence sanctity of marriage (verse 9 with elaboration in verses 11 and 12). It is this citation, clearly, which caused the committee which constructed Series B of the three-year lectionary to chose the particular reading from the Old Testament which they assigned to the same week to which they had appointed verses 2-16 of Mark 10 as the gospel. The whole episode in the ministry of the Messiah is recounted more fully in Matthew 19 (verses 1-15), which includes, not only the dominical logia on marriage (verses 4-6 and 8-9), but also the divine commendation of celibacy (verses 11-12). Matthew (verses 4-5) makes even clearer than Mark the facts that our Lord (in a rhetorical question using the word "read") is quoting specific words firstly from Genesis 1 (verse 1:27) and then from Genesis 2 (verse 24). Also this second verse our Lord regards as consisting in the words of God Himself by predicating the word "said" (before quoting the verse) of "the one who made" "male and female" "at the beginning" (19: 4-5), which is to say of God the Creator.