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Androgyny/Hermaphroditism: Hebrew Bible

Jennifer J. Williams

The Hebrew Bible lacks a term for androgyny or hermaphroditism. The term *tumtumim*, which identifies persons of indeterminate or “hidden” sex, appears later in rabbinic texts. Nevertheless, sexual fluidity, ambiguity, intersexed persons, and persons with a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics appear in the Genesis creation stories and prophetic texts. While gender transgression is relevant to the general discussion, this entry will focus primarily on ancient understandings, namely those presented in the Hebrew Bible, of those of “both sexes.”

Nascent creation presents androgyny as the human ideal. Wholeness and perfection of creation can be found in the androgyne: the sexually undifferentiated first human and the androgynous creator God. Human and divine androgyny at the start of creation prominently appear in other ancient Southwest Asian texts and Greek mythology, including the Sumerian *Enki and Ninmah*, the Akkadian *Atrahasis*, *The Orphic Hymns*, and Aristophanes’ tale in Plato’s *Symposium*, to name a few. Many ancient myths consider androgyny natural and representative of the third sex. Genesis creation stories depict an androgynous first human, but interpreters have come to different conclusions about the primacy of this androgyny and the reason and meaning for the eventual bifurcation of the sexes.

A few key passages and phrases inform this debate. Gen 1:1—2:3 recognizes the equality of the two sexes and their simultaneous creation. Gen 1:27, “So God created humankind/’*adam*, in his image, in the image of God he created them (Heb: *him*); male and female he created them,” provokes debate about the singular ’*adam* as the representative of humankind and why the next line contains the plural “male and female, he created them.” The second creation narrative, Gen 2:4–25, also emphasizes the equality of the two sexes. The human needs an ’*ēzer kēnegdô*, a helpmate or compatible partner. And God takes a *side* (*šēlā’*) of the first human to make the second (see Reisenberger 1993). Along with many other scholars, Phyllis Tribble (1973, 251) notes, “The first human, ’*adam*, is not yet sexed.” The biblical text identifies this first human, this earth creature, using ’*adamā* and not ’*iš* (male).

Tribble and other modern and postmodern scholars are not the first to argue for the androgyny of the first human. Jewish tradition also holds that wholeness of the original human was represented in both sexes together. R. Jeremiah b. Leazar calls Adam a hermaphrodite/androgyne, and R. Samuel b. Nachman argues that Adam has two faces or backs, with one back on one side and the other back on the other side (Gen. Rab. 8:1; see also Lev. Rab. 14:1).

This rabbinic exegesis evokes debate. R. Jeremiah argues that the first human was intended as androgynous. It is unclear if R. Jeremiah means an androgynous being who holds both female and male genitalia, or if this first person is actually two bodies, male and female, joined together. In the androgynous view of the first human, the bifurcation of the sexes is a secondary aspect—perhaps even interpreted as divine punishment.

For example, the end of Genesis 3, which focuses on etiological explanations and the sexual hierarchy in the patriarchal social order, (unfortunately) supersedes the egalitarian ideal of unity and wholeness of human flesh in creation's culmination with the woman (see Carden 2005). R. Samuel's "double-faced" human becomes separated into the two sexes through the removal of one of Adam's sides so that the two might face one another. According to this interpretation, the bifurcation of the sexes serves as a correction to the one androgynous first human rather than as an indication of divine punishment. Regardless of these interpretations of the androgynous first human and the results or meaning of sexual division, the recognition of the primal unity of both male and female remains a fundamental emphasis in the Genesis creation account.

Questions about God's nature also arise in Gen 1:27. The mention of the human sexes with the *imago dei* could reflect an androgynous God who possesses both sexes. Or, the passage could reflect a God who completely lacks sexual differentiation, so as to distinguish humans from God. According to this latter interpretation, humans are created in the image of God, but because they can be sexually differentiated, they are not God. This marks the major distinction between humans, God's greatest creation, and God. Humans are not divine. According to Psalm 8:6, God makes humans a little lower than God's self, and thus the separation of masculine and feminine elements degraded humans to the earthly sphere like other living creatures (Gen 2:19; Wojciechowska 2015). Wojciechowska (37) notes that from this point on in Genesis, humans are no longer referenced as the unsexed earth creatures (*'adam*), instead they are divided into man and woman (Gen 2:23) and Adam becomes a proper name (Gen 2:20).

According to the former reading of Gen 1:27 in regard to God's sexual state, God is both male and female. If Adam, the androgyne, was created in God's image, then God must also be androgynous (Gudbergson 2012; Moore 1996). The prophets also frequently insist on God's androgynous character. God is not only "Father" or "Husband," but God displays various maternal aspects. God bears children (Isa 42:14 and 46:3–4); is a woman with a womb in Jer 31:20; is like a nursing mother in Isa 49:15; and gently comforts like a mother in Isa 66:13 and Hos 11:3–4.

Prophetic texts introduce androgyny for rhetorical emphasis, to either provide comfort or to describe holistic devastation. An androgynous God who both bears pain and comforts the people meets the needs of all people. Just like the divine image, humans in the prophetic texts similarly experience biological and sexual fluidity. Jer 30:6 and Isa 26:17–18 each have a reference to men giving birth. The rhetorical question in Jeremiah, "Ask now, and see, can a man bear a child?" would normally require an answer in the negative. But the response evokes surprise, "Why then do I see every man with his hands on his loins like a woman in labor? Why has every face turned pale?" Isaiah similarly describes men in labor, this time with an unsuccessful birth: "Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, O LORD; we were with child, we writhed, but we gave birth only to wind." Both of these male prophets also personally experience female biological processes as they go through labor pains (Jer 4:19; Isa 21:3). Isaiah also becomes the

androgynous; s/he praises the Lord for making him/her a cross-dresser as both the bride and bridegroom (Isa 61:10).

The exploration and discussion of androgyny/hermaphroditism in light of the Hebrew Bible potentially disrupts binary assumptions and essentialist claims of gender roles and constructions. Such inquiry also subverts the established sexual hierarchy often promoted in the Hebrew Bible.

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