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THROUGH HIS EYES

GOD'S PERSPECTIVE ON
WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

JERRAM BARRS

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Through His Eyes

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1

THE FIRST FACE OF EVE:

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GENESIS 1:27–28; 2:15–25

To commence these reflections on women of God, we have to go back to the very beginning, to the origins of the human race. Eve is the name that the first man, Adam, gives the first woman after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. God drives the two of them from the Garden after they have rebelled against him. But to turn to the shame of their disobedience takes us too far ahead, for the name of the first woman has nothing to do with her temptation or with her and Adam's fall into evil.

We might ask, what's in a name? For those who live in a western society, names do not usually have particular significance, beyond being the parents' choice and sometimes being a name carried down through the generations. But in many cultures around the world names commonly have particular meanings—they tell others something about the specific person who carries the name. This was also true for the cultures of the peoples of the Old Testament. Eve's name means “the mother of all living,” and it tells us something about her nature; it captures something of who she is as God created her to be. Revealing a person's nature is what naming is all about in God's Word. Naming also represents something of the significance of the one giving the name.

Eve, then, is the mother, the ancestress, of every human being who has ever lived, apart, of course, from Adam, the first man. We might respond with wonder as to how one woman and one man could have had such a genetic richness that all the diverse traits found across the world could have come from this original pair. But many secular thinkers, people who believe in the evolution of our species, rather than in the creation of humans by God, recognize that we are all descended from one human source. We do not know the exact date of our first mother's existence but God has told us that there was indeed one mother of us all.¹

For our reflections on the first woman, we need to consider the three faces of Eve—Eve at creation, Eve as rebel against her Creator, and Eve as the recipient of God's promise of redemption. In each of these portraits we learn something about ourselves, for each one of us, female and male, can trace Eve's features in our own lives, so many thousands of years after her life here on earth was finished.

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What do we learn from Genesis 1–2 about Eve as she came from the hand of God?

Eve and Adam are described as “living creatures” (2:7) or “living beings” (NIV) just like all the other “living creatures” (1:20, 24). We are indeed “from the earth,” “natural” (1 Corinthians 15:45–49). We, as humans, are creatures with the same physical nature as the other creatures made by God that are all around us. Some may complain, “Surely I am not made of the same basic materials as a monkey, a mouse, or a mosquito!” However, we most certainly are made of the same stuff as monkeys, mice, and mosquitoes, and we should not regard this as a problem, for this is indeed what God made us to be. We bear the likeness of the first woman and the first man taken by God from the earth, and we bear the likeness of all the other creatures of this earth. We are more than animals, but there indeed is a sense in which we bear the same physical nature.

It is because of this fundamental physical similarity that we are able to live on this earth, breathe the air of our atmosphere, and eat what this earth produces. We share a kinship as physical creatures

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with the other creatures of earth, sea, and sky, and we ought to recognize this kinship (think of Francis of Assisi with his profound understanding of this when he called the animals and the birds of the air his “brothers and sisters”).

This kinship is important when we think of our stewardship of the environment, for we are those who are given authority over this earth and over all of its creatures—we are to see all other creatures as living members of God’s good creation just like ourselves. Scripture also acknowledges this kinship when all creation, including humans, is called on to offer praise to the Creator. See, for example, Psalm 148, which urges angels, sun and moon and stars, sea creatures and oceans, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, wild animals and cattle, small creatures and flying birds, rulers and nations, young men and maidens, old people and children—all the creatures of this universe—to praise the Lord.

So the biblical text draws attention to our similarity to the rest of God’s creatures as well as to our uniqueness. Francis Schaeffer used to represent the dual reality of our nature in this way:

FIG. 1-1: MAN’S TWO NATURES

<u>infinite</u>	personal God
finite	<u>personal humans made in God’s image</u>
animals	animals
plants	plants
physical structures	physical structures

Eve and Adam were like but also different from all other living creatures; of them alone is it said that *they are made in the image and likeness of God*. Eve, our mother, and Adam, our father, bear the glory of being the crown of creation, the ones who are like their Creator and not merely like their fellow creatures. What does this mean?

The basic meaning of the two parallel expressions *image* and *likeness* is that there is a resemblance of being, a fundamental similarity, between the Creator and his human creatures, a resemblance that is not true of anything else in this creation. Eve and Adam are

made as finite and visible/physical copies of the infinite and invisible God. The image, or statue, of a king was set up in a city square to be a constant visible reminder of the king himself and of his governing power to all the dwellers in that city. Just so with Eve and Adam.

Eve and Adam are not lifeless statues, of course, but living, breathing, personal representations of the Ruler of the universe. Eve and Adam are to be constant reminders, visible representatives, of God, the King of creation, to all his other creatures. The Scriptures do not define the precise content of *image* and *likeness* for us. But God's people have always recognized that there are many consequences of this reality of being God's image, and these may be summarized in the following way as we reflect on this traditional understanding, an understanding that came from seeking scriptural statements about the nature of God that are then applied to us his creatures, made to be like him:

Eve and Adam are created for dominion over the other creatures. God is the Sovereign over all creation, and we have a finite and limited sovereignty under him. We are designed to exercise loving and faithful rule over this earth and all of its creatures. We are not to be despots who simply use and abuse our environment for our own willful pleasure but rather those who are to imitate the loving, gracious, and caring rule of God. Psalm 8 teaches that this creational purpose—that a human person is designed to be ruler over all of this creation—is what makes King David declare:

*You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet. (vv. 5–6)*

Eve and Adam are created for love and relationship. Scripture draws attention to the personal and relational nature of the image of God. God declares, “Let us make man in our image,” and the text adds, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26–27). Eve and Adam are made for a personal relationship as male and

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female. Just as the three persons of the Trinity love, relate, and fellowship with each other through all eternity, so we as those created in God's image are made for love, relationship, and fellowship with our Creator and with one another. Fundamental to our humanity is that we are made to dwell in families, in community. As Paul would later write, "I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Ephesians 3:14–15). Every human person is designed for loving union with God and with other persons who are made in his likeness.

Eve and Adam are created to be like God in righteousness and holiness. We are to mirror the moral nature of our Creator, to walk the way he walks. Behind every commandment of God stands the reality of God's moral beauty: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Consider also the words of Jesus when, after an exposition of moral obligations, he teaches us, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

Eve and Adam are created to be significant. We are designed to willingly and gladly choose to be what God has made us to be and to live in love and in moral beauty as he designed us to live, delightfully reflecting his nature in all we do. We have a kind of limited sovereignty over our own lives, mirroring in a little way the infinite sovereignty of God's divine majesty. We are finite history-makers, under God, the Lord of history.

Eve and Adam are created to think God's thoughts after him. We are made to be rational, to use our minds to the glory of our Creator, as we seek to understand our world and our life here in it, as we turn our thoughts to understand and to treasure all that is right and true.

Eve and Adam are created to be those who use language. We are all like the Word himself—we might say that we are "little words," made to be communicators in words just like our Creator. God is the One who called all worlds into being by his creative word, who sustains and rules over all things by his powerful and law-giving word, who reveals himself by his truth-giving word, who communicates by his life-giving word. We are to use language in imitation of him by

exercising the gifts of creative imagination, by understanding and naming the world around us, by revealing ourselves truthfully in all we say and write, by communicating with our Creator and with one another to build trust and to give life to all of our relationships.

These attributes of Eve's and Adam's humanity, and of ours, are basic aspects of how Scripture reflects on our likeness to God. Basically these are the characteristics of what it means to be a person, just as God is truly personal. Each of us shares these characteristics, and yet each of us is different from each other person. Each one of us is unique, just as Eve and Adam were alike and yet each was a different person from the other; and their children in turn were like them, yet different from each of their parents. In this, too, our human life reflects the nature of God in whom there is both unity and diversity.

Eve is as fully God's image-bearer as is Adam. There is therefore complete equality between the first woman and the first man as we reflect on their fundamental nature as persons made to be like their Creator. This full equality means that there is no hierarchy of being between a man and a woman. As those made by God and made to be like God, Eve and Adam are made first of all for eternal personal fellowship with God, for a loving relationship with their designer, a relationship that is intended to endure forever.

This is important for us to remember, for before we start to think about the relationship between female and male we need to recognize that our relationship with God is even more foundational to us than any human relationship. This means also that our relationship with God takes precedence over any human relationship, whether it is a relationship between wife and husband, mother and child, father and child, sister and brother, friend and friend, ruler and subject, employer and worker, teacher and student, or pastor and church member.

Every one of us is answerable first of all to God, for we, each one of us, were made by him and for him, and each one of us will have to give our own account to him. When we answer to him, there will be no other human intermediary between each of us

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and him. Every woman will stand before God directly, giving her account of herself and her life to him, for she is his image-bearer made for fellowship with him and is therefore answerable to him, just as every man will stand before God giving his account of his life and choices.

But in addition to being made to love God and to know him as their primary characteristic and primary calling, these two, Eve and Adam, are made for each other as their secondary calling. We ought not to use these terms *primary* and *secondary* to suggest that our relationships with each other are secondary in the sense of less significant or as if they could be safely ignored or even set aside, for Scripture teaches us that we cannot properly claim to love God if we do not love our fellow human beings (see 1 John 3:16–18; 4:7–12—we are taught in fact that anyone who says they love God but hates his or her fellow human beings is a liar).

Rather, this language of *primary* and *secondary* reflects the way that Jesus himself speaks when he teaches us about the two great commandments in answer to the question, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28–31). Jesus makes it quite clear that while the command to love God is primary, it necessarily carries with it and within it the second command to love our neighbor.

Returning to the account of our origins, Genesis 1 emphasizes our creation as those with a primary relationship upward to our Creator. Genesis 2 focuses on our secondary relationships horizontally with our fellow human persons.

In the second, more detailed account of creation, we learn that *Adam is made before Eve*. He is created first. He then needs to learn that he is alone, in the sense that while he has personal fellowship with God, his Creator, and he has a similarity as a fellow creature with other living beings that God has made, he has not yet

met another who is his equal. God, the infinite One to whom he owes his existence, his life, his breath, and his world, is clearly his superior. The animals are brought before him to be named so that he, and we, may learn that no other living creature is like us. This naming of the creatures implies that Adam understands the nature of each creature, and the naming also implies his authority over the creatures as he is the one who can give to each one its appropriate name. As he understands and names them as God's representative, he also understands that none of the other creatures is his equal or is fully like him. None of the other creatures is the image of its Creator.

Then God creates Eve from Adam to be his equal, his helper, and his complement—one similar to Adam, yet corresponding to him in her difference from him. An old English folk song that is often sung at weddings expresses in a graphic way the meaning of the phrase “a helper fit for him.”

*She was not took out of his head, sir,
To reign and triumph over man;
Nor was she took out of his feet, sir,
By man to be trampled upon.*

*But she was took out of his side, sir,
His equal and partner to be.²*

Adam cries out with joy, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (*Genesis 2:23*). This is the cry of all men and women when they find one who is their equal, their mutual help, one who will be the perfect complement to them. This creational likeness and complementariness is the foundation for monogamous, lifelong marriage; it is at the heart of who we are as women and men made for relationships with one another.

The text also teaches us that *sexuality is God's good gift from creation*, a gift about which there should be no shame. Sadly, the church has not always acknowledged this. The primary purpose of the sexual partnership that God has given to us is not reproduction but rather the expression, the consummation, of love and unity between one

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man and one woman.³ Of course, bearing and begetting children is a possible consequence of some of the occasions when a couple comes together sexually; but it is not a probable or even possible consequence of every sexual union. There are times of each cycle when pregnancy will not result from sexual union, and there is a time in every woman's life when ovulation ceases (this is true during the months of pregnancy, and it is true after menopause), but this does not mean that sexual desire or sexual union and fulfillment come to an end. The joy of becoming one flesh is more fundamental to sex than is childbearing.

Any view that regards procreation as primary and that is therefore in principle opposed to any form of birth control fails to do justice to this text about the joy of becoming one flesh and so reflecting the unity of the Trinity and also fails to do justice to the difference between human sexuality and sex among other creatures. When a man and a woman come together, they sometimes hope and pray that they might have a child, but that is not the primary reason they come together. It is their love for each other, their desire for each other, and their delight in each other that is primary and that is basic to sexual union.

In addition to this delight in their physically coming together, *God has made sexual union, as with most other creatures, the means of bringing a new generation into the world.* All of us are the children, the offspring, the descendants of Eve and Adam. All that it means to be human, to be both a creature and to be in God's image, comes to us through the fruit of this original union between Eve and Adam. God has created us so that we beget and bear children truly made in our own likeness—they bear the image of their mother and their father. Out of our greatest experience of unity comes the possibility of diversity, the bringing into the world of a new person, a unique daughter of Eve or son of Adam. This creation of diversity out of our greatest experience of unity is yet another way in which we as human persons reflect the likeness of God—in this case the unity and diversity within the Trinity. As we saw in an earlier section, our families are named after the family of our heavenly Father (Ephesians 3:14–15).

The text in Genesis 2 suggests that *some kind of leadership is given to Adam, for he is created first*, and Eve is created “from” him and “for” him (1 Corinthians 11:8–9). In addition, it is Adam who gives Eve her name, and, as was mentioned earlier, this implies a particular significance or authority in the one who does the naming. It is important to stress here that this structure in the relationship of Eve and Adam does not negate what has already been written about both the woman and the man being equally in the image of God. This leadership of Adam in relationship with Eve, and her corresponding commitment to him, does not mean that their equality is undermined, for Eve and Adam are like the Trinity in which there is a headship of the Father over the Son, and yet there is also a full equality of Godhead (1 Corinthians 11:3; Colossians 1:19; 2:9).

This last point needs to be developed more fully as it is an issue of such contention in our generation. We will reflect on this further after we look at the second and third face of Eve. For now, let us leave Eve and Adam enjoying the wonder of their union of equals—two who see in each other a perfect reflection of the glory of their Maker, two who see in the other a perfect complement to be a life-long partner and helpmate, two who have the same dignity and yet are delightfully different, two who are designed to fit together and support each other in every way—physically, emotionally, mentally, imaginatively, volitionally, spiritually.

SUGGESTED READINGS AND QUESTIONS

1. Do you struggle with the biblical teaching about our origins? If you do, a fine book by Philip Johnson (*Darwin on Trial*) may be of help to you. Also see the excellent volume *Science and Faith* by John C. Collins.⁴
2. Does the teaching that all races are of one origin and therefore that the people of all races are all equally God’s image-bearers go against what you have been taught or what you have heard?
3. Some believers are troubled by the teaching that we are those who *physically* bear the image of God and insist that it has to be

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our *spiritual* nature that shows the image and likeness of God. How would you respond to someone who holds such a view?

4. What do you think are some implications of our sharing our physical nature with the other creatures of this earth? Do you find this idea distasteful, and if so, why?
5. What to you is the most wonderful implication of your being made in the image of God?
6. How do you see the equality of Eve and Adam as God's image working itself out in your relationships with men or women (especially in your husband or your wife for those who are married)?
7. What was your experience of equality between the sexes (or lack of it) in the family in which you were raised?
8. How do you see being complementary, the fitting, supporting, and meeting one another's needs of Eve and Adam, working out in your relationships with men or women (especially with your husband or wife for those who are married)?
9. Read Genesis 3:1–24. What changed in the relationship between Eve and Adam in consequence of the Fall? How does sin particularly impact us as men and women according to Genesis 3?

