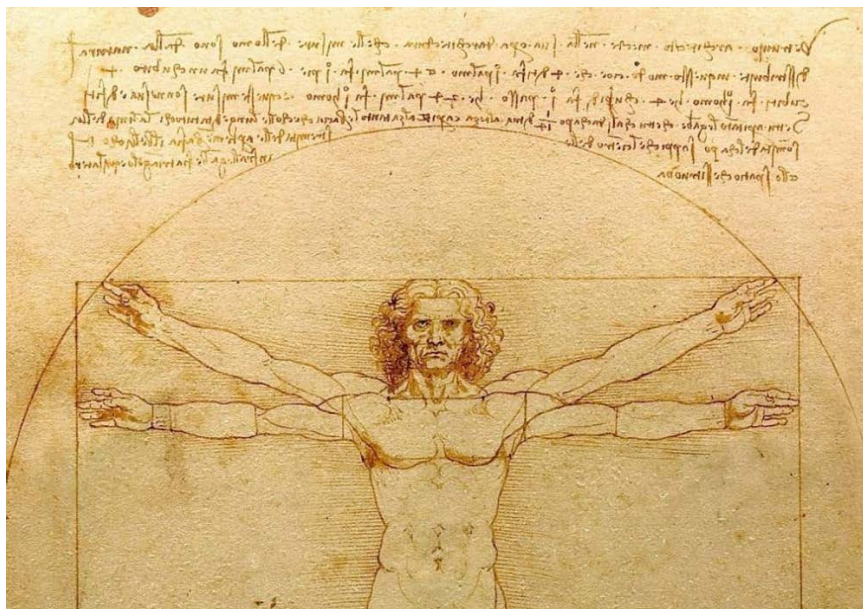


The Making of Adam

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Vitruvian Man (partial) by Leonardo Da Vinci, circa 1492

The Midrash

Most readers of the biblical account of the creation of people assume that the first human being created was male, but the Bible's account of human is, in fact, frustratingly ambiguous. This ambiguity led to some fascinating midrashic interpretations of Genesis 1:26-27, which recounts God's creation of humankind.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ
וְיִרְדּוּ בְדִגְתַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל
הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל הָאָרֶץ. וַיִּבְרָא
אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלֵּם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא
אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם.

And God said, "Let us make man [adam] in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male [zakhar] and female [nekeivah] He created them." (NJPS)

Since the word adam is not used previously in the Bible, there is no evidence that this word must denote a male. Indeed, the explanatory phrase, "male and female He created them," could be read as

clarifying what the nature of this adam actually was.

To this end, a number of rabbinic passages preserve what may have been a popular interpretation of this passage, which indicates that the first human actually comprised of both genders.^[1] Leviticus Rabbah to Leviticus 12:2, for instance, we read the following:

אמר ר' שמואל בר נחמן בשעה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא אדם הראשון אנדרוגינוס ברא
Rabbi Samuel b. Nahman said: At the time that the Holy One, Blessed Be He created Man, He created him as an Androgynos.

אמר ר"ל בשעה שנברא דו פרצופין נברא ונסרו ונעשה שנים גבים גב לזכר גב לנקבה איתיבין ליה (בראשית ב) ויקח אחת מצלעותיו אמר להן מסטרוהי כדכתיב (שמות כו) ולצלע המשכן
Resh Lakish said that at the time that [Adam] was created, he was made with two faces, and [God] sliced him and gave him two backs, a female one and a male one, as it says And He took from his sides,^[2] as it says, And to the side of the Tabernacle.^[3]

אמר רבי ברכיה ורבי חלבו ורבי שמואל בר נחמן בשעה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא אדם הראשון מסוף העולם ועד סופו מלא כל העולם כולו בראו מן המזרח למערב מנין שנאמר אחור וקדם צרתני מן הצפון לדרום מנין שנאמר (דברים ד) ולמקצה השמים ועד קצה השמים ומנין כחללו של עולם שנאמר ותשת עלי כפכה,
R. Berachya and R. Chalbo and R. Samuel b. Nahman said: At the time that the Holy One, Blessed be He created man, He created him from one end of the earth until the other, filling the whole world. He created [Man] from the east to the west. From where do we learn [that man was created from the east to the west]? As it says, You have fashioned me behind and of the earth to the other]? As it says And from one edge of the heavens until the other edge of the heavens.^[4] And from where do we learn that before.^[5] And from where [do we learn that man was created from one end Adam filled the space of the whole earth? As it says, And lay your hand upon me.^[6]

R. Samuel b. Nahman's suggestion has an exegetical basis: The passage in Genesis begins by referring to adam in the singular, but then says that God created "them" male and female. Was it one being or two? R. Samuel answers by saying that it was one being that had both genders.

Resh Lakish's suggestion also has exegetical basis. If Genesis 1 records the creation of males and females, how is it that Adam in Genesis 2, which immediately follows, has no partner? Resh Lakish answers that Adam did have a partner on his back, but that this was not the ideal way of creating a male-female couple, and so God divided them into two people.

Plato's Symposium and the Speech of Aristophanes

The fact that a careful and literal reading of Genesis can be made to support the surprising interpretations of R. Samuel ben Nahman and Resh Lakish that the first human was an androgynous

being does not explain what motivated them to advance this interpretation. How did they think of this idea and why did it appeal to them? There are other, simpler ways to solve the contradiction. For example, Rashi, Rashbam and Radak all assume that Gen. 1:26-27 was meant as a general statement and that Gen. 2 fills the reader in with the details—a case of *klal ufrat*—a generality followed by a specific.

Plato's Symposium clarifies the Rabbis' exegetical motivation. The very same Greek word used in the Midrash by Samuel ben Nahman, androgynous, appears in Plato's Symposium (ca. 4th cent. BCE) and is spoken by Aristophanes, who is theorizing to his colleagues regarding the origin of humankind.

According to Aristophanes, there were three original genders, each globular in shape and four-footed: an all-male form, an all-female form, and a form that included both sexes. These humans were so large and powerful that they considered ascending into the sky to attack the gods. Because the strength and intelligence of these forms threatened the gods' authority, Zeus and his divine cohorts split each of these forms into two halves.^[7]

In addition, the other strange midrashic tradition regarding the original man, that he was a giant stretching from one side of the world to another, makes sense when read in light of Plato. The end of the passage in Leviticus Rabbah cited above, which states that the image of the original man stretched from one world to the other, strikingly parallels Aristophanes' description of the original humans who planned to attack the gods.

Both Aristophanes and the Midrash share the opinion that the human form is but a fragment of its original self. Aristophanes explains that this fragmentation was due to the fact that the original human's strength presented a threat to the gods. How do the Rabbis explain why humanity was shrunk down to current size? Although Leviticus Rabbah offers no explanation for this, Yalkut Shim'oni does clarify the reason for the fragmentation of the original human form.

At the time that the Holy One, Blessed be He created man, he created him as Androgynos, as it says, "Male and Female [He created them.]"^[8] Rabbi Samuel b. Nahmani said, "Double-faced He created them."...Originally [Adam] was created reaching the heavens, but when the Angels of Service saw him, they trembled and were frightened before him. What did they do? They all went before God [and requested that man be shortened.].^[9]

The Greek writers explained the shrinking of mankind's size from giant to current size as being due to the jealousy of the gods. However, unlike the Greeks, who were comfortable attributing human qualities such as jealousy and lust to the gods, Midrash Yalkut Shim'oni transfers these qualities to angels, thereby explaining the reason for God's diminishing the human form without implying divine imperfection. In this account, the Angels, divine beings subordinate to the Supreme God, were threatened by man's height and requested that he be shortened.

Both Aristophanes' account and this Midrash share the theme of a power-struggle between humankind and god(s), and incorporate into their depictions a third party that is divine but not supremely authoritative. In Aristophanes' story, the third party is the gods to whom Zeus speaks, and in this Midrash the third party is the angels. According to Midrashic tradition, then, there was no pantheon of gods, but one omnipotent God who could choose whether or not to indulge the request of his angels. These changes may reflect a Jewish reworking of Aristophanes' speech.

The Pseudepigrapha [10]

Evidence that Jewish writers in antiquity were aware of a dual-gendered human is implicit not only in traditional sources but also in pseudepigraphic ancient sources such as The Apocalypse of Adam. In this text, which was likely authored by a Jewish individual writing in the late Second Temple period, Adam tells his son Seth that after he and Eve were created,

We resembled the great angels, for we were greater than the God who had created us and the powers that were with him, whom we did not know. Then God, the ruler of the eons and the powers, divided us in anger. Then we became two eons and the glory that was in our heart abandoned us – me and your mother Eve – along with the first knowledge that breathed in us.”^[11]

It is not likely that the authors of the midrashic tradition cited above had before them a text of the Apocalypse of Adam, which is dated to the first four centuries CE – or for that matter, Plato's Symposium – but they were likely aware of these traditions which were circulated and transmitted orally throughout the ancient world.

The Rabbis sought to distill this tradition of pagan elements and to incorporate it into their own exegetical tradition, since it could be read back into the scriptural text easily, and helped to advance their own theological framework. Indeed, the Midrash effectively highlights some fundamentally Jewish notions, such as God's omnipotence and man's superiority over other life-forms.

Reading the Midrash in light of Plato and Pseudepigraphic literature helps us understand how they adopted common traditions that were well known in the ancient world to creatively further their own unique theology. Like today, when efforts are often made by intellectual theologians to harmonize modern science with the creation account in Genesis, the rabbis of ancient times were aware of the popular scientific philosophy of their day and integrated it – albeit in a way that also subjugated it – to fit within their broader worldview.

Footnotes

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[1] See parallel traditions in Genesis Rabbah's commentary to Genesis 2:21, Midrash Psalms' commentary to Ps. 139:5, and Midrash Yalkut Shim'oni's commentary to Ex. 26:20.

[2] Genesis 2:21.

[3] Exodus 26:20.

[4] Deuteronomy 4:32.

[5] Psalms 139:5.

[6] Psalms 139:5. The Hebrew translation of this Midrash is mine.

[7] Aristophanes' theory suggests that homosexuality is simply the result of two half-forms attempting to reunite with one another, and that the resulting emotional and sexual intimacy between two men is as legitimate as the intimacy that two humans of opposite gender enjoy. See in particular Plato's *Symposium* 189-191.

[8] Genesis 1:27.

[9] Translation mine.

[10] The Pseudepigrapha is a collection of religious documents that were preserved by the Catholic Church. These documents, which range in genre from fictional narrative, to rewritten bible, to liturgical material, are unrelated to one another outside of the fact that they are thought by scholars to be of Jewish origin and are generally dated to the 2nd century BCE through the 2nd century CE.

[11] *The Apocalypse of Adam* 1:2-3 in James H. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983) 712



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