

11.07.27 Responding to Phil re: sex and gender in the Bible

1. Sex and gender in Genesis

There is no explicit discussion of marriage or of gender roles at all in Genesis 1 or 2. The implicit discussion is exceedingly vague, and may not imply any gender roles that are normative for all humans. Let us consider all the possible candidates for texts that establish the normativity of gender roles in Genesis 1 and 2.

Genesis 1:27

Genesis 1:27 states regarding the creation of humans, “male and female he created them.” This could be read in a few ways.

One common reading would be something like, “God created Adam and Eve as archetypes that all humanity should follow. Hence men and women are separate genders, and this is a good part of His original creation that we should strive to maintain.” Let us call this the “exclusive reading,” since it excludes males and females from each other.

Another possible reading is a strict factual reading, which might interpret 1:27 as follows: “God created Adam and Eve and they were a male and a female respectively. Also, many other human descendants of Adam and Eve will be males and females. Nothing normative can be assumed from this account of the fact that God created humans as male and female.” Let us call this the “physiological reading.”

This interpretation seems unlikely to be the one meant by the original author, given the poetic expression of the text. I think that we are supposed to get more than “some humans have penises and others have vaginas” out of this verse.

A third reading, and the one I think is more accurate might say, “God created humans male and female. Both males and females are equally human and equally created in God’s image. The diversity of even human existence is a beautiful part of the expression of the glory of God.” I will call this the “inclusive reading” of 1:27,

since it includes males and females both as equally human and equal reflexions of God's image. This reading does not sanction gender roles at all. In fact, it may have been meant as a call away from gender roles and away from the valuing of one higher than the other: It reminds us, both males and females are created in God's image.

Order of creation in Genesis 2

Much ink has been spilled regarding the order of creation of man vs. woman in Genesis 2. Some have argued that because man was created before woman, he has some higher authority or purpose, or that men at least have a different (but equal) role from women. (I will address the famous passage in 1 Timothy later.)

I will only make a few general remarks about this. First off, even in the Bible, birth order does not always imply higher authority or blessing from God. Just ask Esau.

Further, even if we did find a completely non-controversial custom throughout Scripture that primogeniture implied greater (or different but equal) blessing or roles, or even that in the case of Adam and Eve, creation order grounded different blessing or roles, there is not necessarily any reason to think that they would be normative for all humans. Not everything that Adam and Eve did before the Fall is something that we should all do now.

Genesis 2:18

Genesis 2:18 is often used among Christians to define the role of a woman. She is, according to such interpretations of this verse, a man's "helper."

Again, aside from millennia-old prejudices, I can find nothing in the text that says that this role is meant to be applied to all women at all times. In fact, there is a textual clue that indicates that this may not be meant to apply to all women everywhere. God indicates that the man is "alone." That was literally true in a sense that will not ever be true for any of us. For Adam at that time, there were no other humans at all, and there never had been.

God may not have had only Adam's desire for sexual congress in mind when He said that it was not good for Adam to be alone. He may have had in mind the idea that there were no other humans, and that by giving him a "helper," he would have not only the company of Eve, but also their offspring.

Genesis 2:23

In Genesis 2:23, we see Adam's reaction to the creation of Eve. It is notable that the emphasis in this verse is on the similarity that woman bears to man—not the differences between them. She is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," according to Adam. She is called "woman," and the Hebrew word for "woman" (like the English) sounds like the word for "man." The point of this whole verse is not that men and women have different roles and are fundamentally different. Rather, this passage seems to be trying to explicitly underscore in a beautiful and lyrical way that men and women are in the same category.

Genesis 2:24–25

These verses are often cited as a Biblical definition of marriage. I should make very clear that there is no such thing as a Biblical definition of marriage.

This mistake, I think, happens because of the mention of the man's "wife" in this verse. If you look up the Strong's numbers for "wife" in verses 24 and 25 and then the Strong's number for "woman" in 2:22, you'll find they're all the same number—0802. This word can be translated as "woman" or as "wife," depending on context, just like the Greek word *gunē, gunaikos*. So there are no explicit word-choice clues that there was a marriage here.

We do seem to get some sort of argument in 24–25 regarding men leaving their parents to be joined to their women, though. It is not clear at all what work the "therefore" in verse 24 is doing, though. That said, the reason for man leaving his parents to be one flesh with his woman seems to be the oneness that men and women share by nature.

This verse could be read in the spirit of other creation myths (don't get upset by my use of this word—by "myth," I'm not trying to say that the story is false), who tell stories to answer questions like, "Why does the vulture's skin not quite fit over its body?" In this sort of a reading, the implied question being asked is "Why do men leave their parents to be with something so different and strange as a woman? Isn't that weird?" I add the "so different and strange" part, because the answer is grounded by the "therefore" in verse 23, which was written to drive home the sameness of man and woman. And then, the author of Scripture comes in and gives the answer: men and women are the same sort of thing. One was taken out of the other, even! For that reason, men leave their parents and join women.

Further, it's not clear that the verse is making a normative claim rather than an explanatory one. That is, one could read it in the same way one might read a text that says, "therefore, this is the reason birds fly south during winter," (that would be an explanatory reading) or one could read it in the same way one might read a text that says, "therefore, birds ought to fly south during the winter," (that would be a normative reading). I'm not sure that there is a good reason (other than a prior commitment to finding texts that gender norms) to read it normatively.

Finally, verse 25 serves to emphasise once more the lack of barriers between the sexes. They were naked together and they were not ashamed. On a careful reading of Genesis 1–2 with regard to sex and gender, the overarching theme is not the differences between men and women, it's over and over trying to underscore the fact that men and women are the same sort of thing.

Genesis 3

You only mention chapters 1 and 2 as grounding different gender roles. It is possible and common to argue not only from the pre-Fall Adam and Eve to gender normativity, but also from the curses of God on Adam and Eve from after the Fall. I will address this, just for thoroughness. In particular I have 3:16–19 in mind.

Here, we have God applying different curses to Adam and Eve that seem to be gender-specific. To Eve, He says, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” For Adam, God curses the ground to make it harder to work, and he curses them both with death.

It is possible to construct an argument that because God applied these curses for our correction in a fallen world, we should abide by gender norms—women should be ruled by their husbands and men should be working. In order to make this argument though, we would have to read the curse not as “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you,” but “Your desire should be for your husband and he should rule over you.” Further, on pain of hypocrisy, all the other curses are ones that we should simply accept. We should not wear gloves when working with thorny plants, we should not use drugs for pain during childbirth and death itself should not be avoided. This is ridiculous.

Conclusion

There doesn't seem to be much of a case for finding gender normativity in the Biblical accounts of the creation and the Fall. There is no evidence that this text was meant to support such an agenda outside of an interpretation that presupposes a commitment to heteronormativity.

2. Redeemed sex and genders

You also argue that gender roles are not just a part of God's original pre-Fall creation, but also a part of God's redemptive design for the world.

Jesus' explicit teaching

This is not the case. You are wrong because you know neither Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. (Matthew 22:29–30)

(For the record, Phil, you know I hold you in the highest respect and do believe that you know both the Scriptures and the power of God. I wrote like that for rhetorical effect. I've just always wanted to use that line in an argument!)

There is a serious point here, though. Jesus Himself tells us explicitly that in the resurrection, we will be "like angels in heaven," and that the categories of "husband" and "wife," two of the pillars of heteronormativity, will not apply. To reiterate for emphasis, in God's perfect redeemed new world, marriage itself will not exist at all.

Galatians

Another place to look for clues regarding God's ultimate intentions regarding gender would be Galatians 3:28. This verse seems at least on first glance to be instructive on this matter. It tells us, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

I notice that we are explicitly told that in some sense, we are one in Christ Jesus. You could argue that this only means equality as far as salvation is concerned. Personal salvation is certainly the major point that Paul had in mind when he wrote this passage, but then it's curious that he chose to indicate that this case was analogous to that of slavery.

If we read this verse in the context of the whole book, we see that Paul chewed Peter out for failing to eat with Greeks. (Galatians 2:11-14) Peter wasn't denying that the Greek believers would be saved. He was just eating somewhere else. This might be part of the unity that Paul is trying to get at by denying the Jews vs. Greeks distinction in 3:28.

Not only is Paul saying that Jews and Greeks are both eligible for entry to heaven, but he is saying that the social distinctions between these two groups should be eliminated and that they should be treated as "one" because in a spiritual sense, they are one. Paul applies this to the case of slaves vs. the free. As you point out, Paul urges Philemon to accept his runaway slave "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother." (Philemon 15-16) This is not just a case of the believing

slave being admitted to heaven, this is a matter of denying one's "rights" under the current sinful social system in order to treat another human being with love.

Perhaps we are meant to read this verse as actually endorsing the position that women and men are equal, that they should be afforded equal rights and that having different gender roles for men and women is immoral in the same way that having different roles for Jews vs. Greeks or slaves vs. the free would be.

Teachings on marriage

Another place in the New Testament where we see a push away from heteronormative institutions like marriage is in the teachings of Paul, who recommends that Christians do not marry. Paul's instructions regarding marriage are a concession, not a command. (1 Corinthians 7:6) He indicates that he would have all Christians be as he is, unmarried. (1 Corinthians 7:7-8)

It's surprising how many passages of Scripture that teach on the subject of marriage and divorce are "concessions," if you think about it. Moses' policy on divorce was a concession as well. (Matthew 19:8)

Conclusion

It doesn't seem to be the case that God has gender roles in mind at all in His conception of a redeemed world, and that much of the teaching regarding marriage is meant as a concession for an imperfect world (like a runaway slave being welcomed as a brother), not as an ideal solution and something that God would actually want in a perfect world (like a world in which slavery is abolished).

3. Misreading of texts

You cite a number of passages, which I will address in turn. In each of these, a Scriptural authority, Jesus or Paul, seems to endorse heteronormativity. This sort of reading of Scripture is what I was talking about when I mentioned earlier that it is a common error to read back issues anachronistically onto a text where the original author never meant to discuss them.

Matthew 19

In this passage, the Pharisees corner Jesus and try to put Him in bad light. You can see that in verse 3. They're "testing" Him. So, Jesus responds, and responds on their terms, just for style points. He proves that he knows His AWANA verses and that He can quote Scripture with the best of them, but quickly indicates that He's not interested in that sort of contest.

The normal (and incorrect) way to read this passage is to take it as Jesus' new moral code regarding marriage and divorce. On this reading, we had an old moral law: divorce by certificate; now we have a new moral law: divorce under no circumstances. On reflexion, this is not what Jesus meant at all, even though that is what His words seem to say.

I know it is difficult to do because we have been trained in the Inductive Bible Study method, but sometimes if you want to "see the forest" in what Jesus was saying, you have to ignore a few "trees." This is made even worse by the fact that more than a few commentators can't even see the trees for the dryads—imagining non-existent layers of meaning hidden in the fine details and missing the point of Scripture which is often in plain sight.

If you want, I can point out a number of parables of Jesus that make no sense if you try to stretch the analogy beyond the main point of the story. Most of Jesus' parables and a lot of His teaching are like a joke in that only the punch line matters.

The whole point of this passage is that Jesus raises the theological stakes on the Pharisees. Basically in verse 9, Jesus says, "This isn't about tricky word games and the Law. This is about being absolutely morally pure in the eyes of God." That's the punch line. That's the take-home message. Jesus is saying that if you want to be in right relation with God, you have to eliminate any selfishness and sin that might cause division between you and your wife. Reconciliation is what we should aim for. Providing a divorce certificate is not the perfect righteousness that we should aim for. Jesus' whole point was about personal morality.

If you heard Jesus' speech and afterward you came up to Him and said, "Gee thanks for clarifying the new rules on divorce," Jesus would shake His head and probably say something like, "Were you even listening? If you think I was giving a new law regarding divorce you totally missed the point."

The disciples' reaction was very telling. They were so scared by the prospect of having to have such high standards for personal morality that they thought it would be better not to marry at all. (19:10)

Why did Jesus do this? Jesus was completely uninterested in debating the fine details of the Law. His main goal in much of His teaching was to raise the moral stakes so high that everyone has to ultimately say, "I cannot achieve what God requires of me." Jesus was entirely focussed on the gospel. Admitting that you're entirely in need of God is the first step to accepting Christ as one's Saviour.

Similarly, if we were present at this exchange and afterward went to Jesus and said, "Gee thanks. Your appeal to Genesis endorses my conception of gender roles," Jesus would say something like this to you:

"Were you paying attention at all? You completely misrepresented what I said. I only referred to those verses so that I could prove to these people that I know the Scripture, and that they couldn't just dismiss me as a crackpot or a heretic. The point of what I said was that morality is not just about following the law, but about being good, and that being good is really hard."

If you interpret Scripture in the fine-grained way that the first reading would suggest, then you will miss Jesus' gesture toward the gospel here, and end up back in legalism. This is a severe perversion of Scripture. Similarly, it is the same fine-grained technique that would wrongly interpret this passage as being instructive regarding gender roles.

1 Corinthians 11:2–16

You indicate that this passage seems to give instructions that define different gender roles. Please refer to verse 16, which says, “If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.”

Ephesians 5:22-33

You also indicate that this passage seems to give instructions that define different gender roles for husbands and wives. Unfortunately, this is not borne out by the text. Verse 32 tells us, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Paul explicitly tells us that the comparison that he was drawing before between the church-Christ relationship and the wife-husband relationship is meant to be instructive regarding Christ and the church. The passage is framed in terms of instructions to husbands and wives (this mystery is profound), but that is not the main point of the passage. The main point of the passage is to illustrate the gospel (it refers to Christ and the church).

1 Timothy 2:11–15

This appears on first glance to be an endorsement of gender roles on Paul’s part. However, the earlier part (2:9–10) refers to “women,” but then Paul abruptly switches and starts talking about “a woman” and “a man.” This is Paul’s usual way of referring to a single individual without naming him or her. (Compare to 1 Corinthians 5:1 and 2 Corinthians 12:2, 5) This interpretation is consistent with the context of the preceding chapter. (See 1:3, 7) Paul has charged Timothy with dealing with particular cases of false doctrine. He’s not talking about the nature of manhood or womanhood. Paul is certainly not making a universal prohibition on women teaching sound doctrine here. One way to read his appeal to Genesis is as a “this sort of thing has happened before between a man and wife—why shouldn’t it happen again?” rather than a “this sort of thing always happens when a wife teaches.”

It would be an insulting and terribly sexist reading of the text to assume that Paul means that women are, because of the order of creation, more susceptible to

deception, even if that is only applied to spiritual matters, and that on the matter of teaching, women should be excluded entirely.

4. Physiological and psychological corroboration of gender roles

In the same way that it's possible to construct an arguably sexist argument that men and women differ in some physiological and psychological ways that make gender norms appropriate, it's also possible to construct a racist Rushton-type argument that there are differences between races that might be used to ground terrible and racist slavery or class divisions. Aristotle thought that there were some people who were suited to slavery. Nietzsche (although I confess I really don't understand him, so be kind on this point) argued for a master and a slave morality.

First off, it's not clear how much of our gender differences are based on social conditioning and how much is based on actual biological differences.

Second, I can't think of any roles, aside from child-bearing for women and sperm donation for men that are unique to our biological sexes. It has long been held that women are less intelligent. That is manifestly not the case. It has long been held that women are less apt for leadership or for activities that require physical strength. Women have proven themselves to be the equals of men again and again in any area I can think of.

The facts just don't support the view that you're suggesting, any more than the facts support the view that black people are less intelligent than other races, despite what Dr. Rushton says.

5. Argument from Huckleberry Finn

I will conclude where you began. You wrote, "I do regularly find myself second-guessing my current stance on the issue of gender norms." I think I know what you're talking about.

I have spoken to a number of people on these issues: conservative Christians, non-Christians, liberal-minded Christians and what I might call "post-Christians."

Something remarkable comes up nearly every time I speak to someone who has ever been a conservative Christian—a sort of “Huckleberry Finn” reaction to Christian gender norms.

Huckleberry Finn experienced an interesting phenomenon in our moral experience. Philosophers often refer to it as “inverse akrasia.” Akrasia is when you do something wrong even though you know it’s wrong, just out of a lack of willpower. (Dr. Hurley always used the example of chocolate cake—“I know I shouldn’t eat the cake, but I do it anyway!”)

Inverse akrasia is when you think something good is wrong but then you do it anyway, out of a lack of willpower. For example, when the fictional Huckleberry Finn ran away with a slave, he thought he was doing something seriously wrong. But he ran off with the slave anyway, regardless of what his moral reasoning told him. We enlightened outside observers might say that he’s doing something morally praiseworthy, but for clarity, Finn does not escape with the slave out of some moral duty, as if he were headed to the underground railroad. He does it because the slave is his friend, and he feels guilty about it sometimes, because he thinks he’s stealing.

For many people who are conservative Christians, they feel the same way as Huckleberry. Their reason tells them that it’s wrong for women to teach in church, or that other divergences from heteronormativity are wrong, but then they often try to find loopholes—a strong woman leader can be a “programme director,” not a “pastor,” right? Or they feel really embarrassed about the fact that they can’t just be happy for two gay people who love each other. They have to walk the terrible line of trying to condemn it morally while still trying to be “loving” somehow.

Then when I speak to people who are “post-Christians,” they speak of the joy and the release of being able to be friends—really friends—with homosexuals. They don’t have to see them as “projects” or as “deceived people who need to be saved.” They can look at a homosexual couple and be happy for them, for who they are, without any qualification.

If there is any virtue in you, you will be profoundly disturbed by doing what is wrong, even if you think you have good reason for it. If you are a virtuous person to any extent, you will also be attracted to what is good, even though you may not be able to give a good reason why, and you might even mistakenly have some ideas to the contrary. Whether you want to call this a moral intuition, virtue, your conscience, or the movement of the very Spirit of God, it is pointing you toward what is right.

Just imagine how much more humble you could be if you were able to just drop the pride you have in being a man, and the position you hold over women. Think about how loving you could be if your main moral concern with your gay friends was not where they put their penises, but whether you had been compassionate toward them. And if you ever plan to be a parent, it will be so much easier for you to deal with a child who is transgendered, intersexed, homosexual or otherwise queer if you don't take genders as normative.