

# Creating Woman

The idea that Eve was created not from a rib but from the *os baculum* (penis bone) of the *Adam* (man) can't be proved, as Ziony Zevit acknowledges,<sup>a</sup> but it's plausible. The main problem is the wording of Genesis 2:21, which specifies that God took "*one* of the *tse/aot* [plural]." This implies that there



were multiples of whatever a *tse/a'* [singular] was. That the *tse/a'* was likely a bone can be deduced from the man's description of the woman in Genesis 2:23 as "bone of my bone." Still, as Zevit explains, *tse/a'* never means "rib" elsewhere in the Bible, instead designating a room or structure on the side of a building or a literal "side" as of a hill. Zevit proposes that *tse/aot* are "side parts," body parts like arms that branch off from the trunk of the standing body. One such branching body part could be male genitals.

To my mind, this theory has several things going for it, most notably what I call the "etiological logic" of the Garden of Eden story. A primary function of Genesis 2–3 is etiology, that is, explaining the origins of things: living things, farming, clothing (and the necessity for wearing clothes), pain in childbirth, weeds, patriarchy, death and even why humans don't (mostly) like snakes. Now, consider the creation of the woman in this light. The narrator treats the creation of the woman as a key event, crowned by the man's recognition of her as "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." Given the many etiologies in the Garden story, the male body ought to display evidence of the woman's creation in some osteologically relevant way! In fact, this "etiological logic" was so compelling that it generated the longstanding popular assumption that this story explained "why men have one less rib than women"—I remember hearing it myself as a child. Yet men and women have the same number of ribs, and ancient Israelites would have known this.

Israelites would also have known that human males lack the *baculum* that is part of the anatomy of familiar mammals such as cats, dogs and rats. Furthermore, unlike male genitals, ribs have no particular cultural, symbolic or theological significance anywhere in the Hebrew Bible or in ancient Israel or Canaan.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the “logic” of the story makes Zevit’s *baculum* idea plausible.

In addition, Zevit’s attention to the story as an etiology for the *raphé* (the seam created when the two sides of the developing male urinary cavity come together in the developing fetus in the mother’s womb) is worth considering in light of the word “under”—Hebrew *tachat*—in Genesis 2:21. The Hebrew literally says, “[the LORD] closed flesh under it.” *Tachat* can mean “under” or “instead of/in place of,” but *always* means “under” in relation to body parts elsewhere in the Bible. Where is the *raphé* but “under”? The use of the word “under” also contrasts with the directional connotation of *tse/a’* as somehow emerging from a side (again, Zevit sees this “side” as branching off from the trunk in any direction). All this also reinforces the likelihood that with the “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh” description of the woman in Genesis 2:23, the narrator is punning with the word *basar*, Hebrew for “flesh,” which—Zevit reminds readers—clearly refers to male genitals in several Biblical passages (Exodus 28:42, e.g.). If the woman is made from the *Adam*’s “bone” (the usual Hebrew word for “bone” in Genesis 2:23) and “flesh” (*basar*—the word that can mean genitals), the phrase would reinforce the suggestion that Eve was made from Adam’s genitals.

Another approach that Zevit covers and that I see as important has to do with the consistent and varied use of euphemisms in the Hebrew Bible for male genitals. *Basar* is one of these. Others are “foot” (see Exodus 4:25; Ruth 3:7; Isaiah 7:20), which is the most common, but also “thigh” (Genesis 24:2; probably Genesis 32:25 [Hebrew v. 26]), “hand” (Isaiah 57:8; Song of Songs 5:4–5) and “heel” (Jeremiah 13:22; likely Genesis 25:26).<sup>2</sup> It would hardly be surprising to discover that the word for “side” in Genesis 2 could

be another euphemism for male genitals.

Zevit's article also set me thinking in a couple of other directions. From the perspective of a patriarchal society, it would make sense for Eve to be formed from male genitals. First, ancient "biology" viewed the male as providing the "life force" for conception, while the woman provided the growth medium.<sup>b</sup> The Biblical narrator may well have considered male generative power essential to bringing a human, woman or otherwise, to life. A fellow human for the *Adam* couldn't be created from soil like the animals, and the Hebrew makes this clear in the storyline—animals could not provide companionship—and in the wording: God *yatzars* (shapes, as a potter) the *Adam* and the animals from earth, but in Genesis 2:22 he literally *banahs* (builds) the *tsela'* from the *Adam* into a woman.

A second patriarchal theme relates to the uniquely male "problem" of not being the actual bearer of one's child, something Zevit brings up. Many traditional cultures prescribe a ritual by which the role of the mother as the child-bearer is erased or dismissed in favor of the father as the symbolic bearer of the child.<sup>3</sup> An example from Judaism occurs in the traditional *Berit* (Yiddish, *Briss*) or circumcision ceremony for eight-day-old boys; the mother hands over her baby to male officiants who return him to the mother only after the ceremony is concluded. This is the ritual by which the child gains his identity in the family (he gets his name) and within Judaism. Scholar Nancy Jay analyzed this topic in her influential *Throughout Your Generations Forever*,<sup>4</sup> which discusses the ramifications in various cultures (including Judaism and Christianity) of a tendency to see the "mother part" as polluting the child; a sacrifice of some sort (such as the shedding of blood in the circumcision ceremony) becomes necessary for purification and for incorporating the child into his father's bloodline, the only DNA that mattered. In the Garden of Eden, this problem doesn't arise because the man *does* give birth. Like Athena and Dionysus, born from the god Zeus in Greek mythology, in Genesis 2 the female is literally born out of the body of the male.

If these sorts of patriarchal thinking are at work in the Adam and Eve story, then I see another intriguing angle on the creation of the woman. As I observed in a column in *Bible Review*,<sup>4</sup> the “punishment poem” in Genesis 3:14–19 ([see sidebar](#)) reverses to negative effect all the positive relationships that prevailed before the humans disobeyed God. Humans and God, man and woman, humans and animals, humans and the earth now become alienated from each other where before all was harmonious. The most famous negative effect of the human disobedience is the woman’s pain in childbirth. At least theoretically then, before the punishment, childbirth in Eden should have been painless. If the father-as-child-bearer principle is hovering in the background of the creation of the woman, then the difficult childbirth promised to the woman in Genesis 3:16 reverses the painless “birth” in Genesis 2, where not only does a man—rather than a woman—give birth,<sup>5</sup> but thanks to the anaesthetic “deep sleep” (*tardemah*), the man suffers no pain.

Other negative effects—in addition to pain in childbirth—of the couple’s disobedience, as reflected in the Punishment Poem (Genesis 3:14–19) include enmity between man and woman; you must toil all your life; to dust you shall return (you will die).

Finally, let me branch out into Christian symbolism. I noted above that neither ribs nor side-buildings have any special theological connotation in the Hebrew Bible. This is also true for the New Testament. (The explicit “rib” meaning comes from the Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek in the third century B.C.E.) However, by at least the early third century C.E., Christian Church Fathers, who used the Greek and not the Hebrew Bible, interpreted the creation of woman from Adam’s rib in Genesis 2 as a foreshadowing of the creation of the Church, which was always personified as a woman. Beginning with Paul, Christians viewed the Hebrew Bible as a divinely coded text full of foreshadowings and prophecies of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> In 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, Paul draws a parallel between the first man, Adam, who literally brought death into the world



(Genesis 3:19b), and the new Adam, Jesus, through whom “all will be made alive” because of his death on the cross: “For since death came through a human being [Adam], the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being [Christ]; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:21–22).

Once interpreters linked Adam and Jesus, it was not long before Christians found a connection between Adam’s rib and Jesus’ side, which was pierced by a spear at the crucifixion, and, according to John 19:34, “at once blood and water came out.” The fourth-century preacher and bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, worked it out very clearly: “I said that water and blood symbolized baptism and the holy Eucharist. From these two sacraments the Church is born ... As God then took a rib from Adam’s side to fashion a woman, so Christ has given us blood and water from his side to fashion the Church. God took the rib when Adam was in a deep sleep, and in the same way Christ gave us the blood and the water after his own death” (*Baptismal Instruction* 3.17).

Crucifixion scenes, especially Byzantine ones, echo this interpretation as, for example, in this 11th-century mosaic from the Church of the Dormition at Daphne, Greece. Christ’s blood drips down onto Adam’s skull at the base of the cross. The water and blood erupting from Jesus’ side explicitly fall like an arrow in the direction of Mary. Appropriately enough, since not only was Mary called the “new Eve” from as early as the second century,<sup>7</sup> but even more often Mary was considered to personify the Church. Once again, a man gives birth to a woman!

