

Gender Identity and the Bible: Jewish & Christian Perspectives

Rev. Chris Glaser, M.Div.

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Scripture is so often used against a new idea or experience that progressive people often feel forced to take a defensive posture toward it. But the Bible records the reflections of people across millennia applying their faith to a myriad of new ideas and experiences. These faithful people model for us how we may respond with justice, compassion, and welcome to transgender people. This brief paper suggests possible ways to begin the conversation in the context of biblical themes.

“No Longer Male and Female”

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27-28)

The writer of this passage, the apostle Paul – himself a Jewish Christian free male – neither denies nor diminishes various identities, but affirms here that unity in spiritual community trumps cultural, ethnic, economic, and gender divisions – for all are one.

Those in our own time who do not fit absolutely into the categories of male and female remind their congregations to practice what they proclaim: that our spiritual unity with one another and with God transcends matters of gender identity and expression.

Those who know themselves as transgender reveal that there is a spectrum that stretches between the experiences of male and female, a spectrum of gender identity. Positive references to “eunuch” in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures may be said to resemble this experience, but, more explicitly, the Mishna and Talmud (the earliest Jewish law and folklore) have terms for differently gendered individuals between male and female.

“Male and Female...One Flesh”

Interpreting the second creation story in Genesis, chapter two, the Bereshit Rabah, a midrashic text, suggests that the first human creature (“Adam”) was androgynous, and the reference to taking a rib is more accurately understood as taking a side of the first to create the second human creature. Thus male and female come from one flesh. Remembering that “male and female” are complementary features in the imago dei (the “image of God” in which human beings were

created in the first creation story of Genesis, chapter one), may help us accept gender as a spectrum of experience as well as complementary features in an individual human being.

Male and female “become one flesh” in Genesis 2:24, a view of marriage apparently shared by Jesus when questioned about divorce in Matthew 19:3-12. Thus, male and female blend into a single unit in marriage. This suggests that, **just as binary distinctions between male and female are transcended in spiritual community, so they are transcended by the spiritual union of marriage.** Thus, marriage is not dependent on gender.

Jesus implies that the distinctions of male, female and marriage do not exist in heaven. When asked about marriage in the resurrection, Jesus says in Luke 20:35-36, “Those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage...because they are like angels and are children of God.” **Thus, in spiritual union with God, distinctions of male and female are also overcome.**

“Be Fruitful and Multiply”

Sometimes opposition to transgender people comes from God’s mandate, also in Genesis, “to be fruitful and multiply” – procreation. Sex reassignment surgery (not always a part of transitioning) may disable procreation in the sense of bearing children, but not in other ways of creating family. At the same time, the Bible contains **positive references to eunuchs**, who were castrated and unable to procreate, and thus considered unacceptable spiritually.

Through the prophet Isaiah, **God defends eunuchs** and welcomes all such outcasts to the temple: **“For thus says the Lord, ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off’”** (Isaiah 56:4-5). Jesus quotes this same chapter of Isaiah when he clears the temple, saying “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7, Mark 11:17).

Jesus also defends eunuchs in his teaching on marriage, clarifying it doesn’t apply to everyone: “For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12). And in the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the account of the early church, **Philip baptizes and Ethiopian eunuch** who is reading Isaiah.

All these references portend a welcome to those who could not procreate and whose bodies were surgically altered in a way that would exclude them from the temple at Jerusalem. Another surgical procedure, circumcision, was even *required* for males to enter the temple.

“The Lord Looks on the Heart”

It is in this context – a broader understanding of gender and of an inclusive and welcoming spiritual community – that two other verses of the Bible about gender expectations need to be interpreted. Deuteronomy 22:5 says, “A woman shall not wear a man’s apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment, for whoever does such things is abhorrent [against custom] to

the Lord you God.” And Deuteronomy 23:1 says, “No one whose testicles are crushed to whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.”

These ritual laws appear alongside other applications of a Holiness Code that are no longer followed by even the most religious. The spiritual goals of the Holiness Code were *separation* (“holy” means “set apart”) as well as *wholeness*, manifest in *personal integrity* and *social harmony*. The latter goal of wholeness may be achieved by transgender persons seeking *gender integrity* and by a community that supports and protects their rights and dignity to achieve *social harmony*.

Consider when God charged the prophet Samuel to find a new king. All the sons of Jesse were brought forward, and all appeared to Samuel more like a king than the small, ruddy youngster named David. But God declares to Samuel, **“The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart”** (1Samuel 16:7). **The sex of a person may be culturally determined by externals, but gender is a matter of the heart.**

What allowed the early church to become more inclusive was witnessing the Spirit at work in the lives not only of circumcised Jews, but also of uncircumcised Gentiles. In Acts 10 and 11, Peter, “the rock on which [Christ] would build [his] church,” explains to the first church council that he could not refuse the welcome of baptism to those that God had given “the same gift that God gave us when we believed” (Acts 11:14). For Christian congregations, this may serve as a model for the inclusion of transgender people.

In the view of many Jews and Christians alike, **what mattered to God was not the externals such as circumcision, but rather, “real circumcision is a matter of the heart”** (Romans 2:29, but a concept also in Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 9:29; Acts 7:51). This too may guide congregations as they welcome transgender members and work for their equality before the law.