

Sam Sedaei on Genesis's prejudice against women.

MYTHICAL PREJUDICE

By Sam Sedaei

The first book of Moses, commonly called Genesis, is a story told by humans to explain and reveal unknown aspects of life and its philosophy, such as humankind's destiny and the origins of life. Such stories are usually in the form of tales, stories about a higher being's venture to create life and give it purpose. In the Genesis, a similar story is told where the writer tells the story of the creation of man and woman, and serpent's influence in taking them apart from God's purpose and intention. A thorough reading of this writing makes clear that this story is written with a prejudice against women, and the writer could be seen as using God's voice to legitimize the establishment of a patriarchal society and placement of man's place above woman's in the social order.

In Genesis, women's inferiority first emerges when God speaks about the creation of a man. Genesis tells the reader that God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion" over every living being on earth. This segment is most often interpreted in a way that expresses man's superiority over all creatures on earth, including woman. It is first important to note that when God says, "Let's make man in our image, after our likeness," this implies that man embodies God. Therefore one can interpret the statement as saying God himself is a man. The effect of this statement on defining a place for men and women in societies is significant, because, when a man is interpreted to represent God himself, that indicates that man is closer to God than any other being, including woman. To many, the closeness of man to God indicates the superiority of man above all beings. Such reading of Genesis results in it being used in societies to legitimize the patriarchal social codes that have been directing men toward behaving superior and women inferior. It is also important to note that such interpretations are one of the major reasons why many contemporary feminist leaders seek to re-read this part of Genesis to offer different interpretations of it.

The second case in Genesis where the inadequacy of a woman is implied is that about the philosophy behind her creation. Genesis speaks about how after the creation of man, God says, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." The implications of this statement fit well into the prejudice that is said to have affected the writing and interpretation of Genesis in ancient and modern patriarchal societies. Genesis expresses the idea that man was alone on earth and a woman was created with the sole purpose of accompanying him. Such an idea implies that a woman was not made like man, representing God after his likeness, but that the only purpose of her creation was to make a man's life better. The second part of the statement – "I will make him a helper fit for him" – further reinforces the idea that a woman by design was created to help the man.

The actual process of woman's creation also implies her inferiority. Genesis explains that a woman was created from a man's rib. If one takes this statement to be true, one could argue that, while a man was created from scratch and could have been created whether a woman was or wasn't created prior to him, a woman is "made" of man and her very creation was not only to serve the purpose of making a man's life more suitable, but it actually depended on the man's body and creation. The Genesis story regarding both the process and the purpose of a woman's formation have led societies to assert dominance over women and define the role of a woman in society as one that serves men's ends.

The third significant part of Genesis which has contributed to the societies' intolerance and misconceptions toward women is that piece of story involving the dialogue between the serpent and the woman. Initially, God tells the woman, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden... lest you die." However immediately following this segment, the serpent is said to have told the woman she would not die if she eats from the tree, but "will be like God, knowing good and evil." Thus, the woman has two choices: listening to God, or following the serpent. However, according to Genesis, the woman chooses serpent's command over God's. This part of the story implies three significant points about the woman. The first is that the serpent choosing to go to the woman – and not the man – implies that he naturally assumed a woman is one that could more easily be fooled. Secondly, Genesis implies that the woman's choice to follow the serpent demonstrates the naivety of her nature. By drawing the image of the woman as one who so readily believes the words of the serpent, Genesis also implies a woman's tendency to lean toward the devil and depart from God's purpose. Finally, the man trusted the woman and ate from the tree of knowledge, a decision that cost him God's trust. By telling this part of the story, Genesis comes across as carrying a lesson for the man: Do not trust the woman. These three points are significant because they help one understand how Genesis has been used to categorize females as the weaker, more naïve, and more untrustworthy sex. Patriarchal societies have often used this part of Genesis to justify poor treatment of women and establishing dominance over them.

The last part of Genesis which most clearly supports the story's overall prejudice against women involves God's response to the woman's act of eating the fruits from the tree of knowledge. According to Genesis, God responds by saying to the woman, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing... your desire shall be your husband, and he shall rule over you." The first part of this statement reflects God's anger at the woman and his retaliation. Genesis claims that the pain a woman suffers when going through labor is God's intention as God intended her to be in pain. Such assertion could dangerously be interpreted as saying if God can justly cause pain to the woman, then man – who is "made in God's image, with all his likeness" – can also cause pain to the woman as punishment when he sees necessary. This interpretation allows for problems such as male violence against women that even modern societies still struggle with. Even though most abusive men in patriarchal societies do not refer to Genesis directly to justify violence, interpretations of this and similar sections from holy books have had great effect in garnering cultures of violence against women over long periods of time. As if the entire Genesis did not already establish God's intention for males to be superior, the last part of God's statement – "your desire shall be your husband, and he shall rule over you" – clearly defines a man's place above a woman's. By saying in God's voice that a woman's desire shall be her husband, Genesis practically places the life of a woman in the hands of her husband. This part of the story could also be used to legitimize males' control over females in chauvinist cultures and societies.

Genesis offers a story about the creation of earth and living beings. The story begins by naming the elements God created. But it gradually develops into describing the purpose of men and women's creation, and their relationship to God. Some individuals believe Genesis to be a true story while others consider it nothing more than a myth. However one aspect of the story remains clear and that is the fact that generations of humans throughout the world have used Genesis and similar prejudicial stories about humans' creation to justify sexism, violence against women, and establishment of patriarchal social systems.