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To be different... or not to be at all.

The Bible and the Qur'an on the creation of the first woman

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Riassunto. Bibbia e Corano concordano in molti punti nella narrazione della Creazione. Un evento cruciale è ovviamente il coronamento di essa con l'avvento dell'essere umano. In queste pagine ci soffermeremo su un particolare, non sempre colto dai commentatori con il dovuto interesse: lo iato temporale che separa la creazione della prima donna rispetto a quella del primo uomo. Inserito nel quadro generale della narrazione e a differenza di molta esegesi che ha considerato Eva quasi come un 'male necessario', grazie a un'analisi più attenta ci pare possibile un'altra spiegazione che da un lato aiuta a superare ancora radicati pregiudizi verso il genere femminile e dall'altro rivela la natura 'relazionale' dell'umanità in un gioco di opposizione e complementarità che apre nuovi orizzonti e offre una pista suggestiva nell'affrontare adeguatamente le problematiche di genere oggi tanto discusse in forme spesso aspre e polemiche.

Parole chiave. Creazione, genere, relazione, Bibbia, Corano

Abstract. The Bible and the Quran agree on many points in the Creation narrative. A crucial event is obviously its culmination with the advent of the human being. In these pages we will focus on a detail, not always taken by commentators with due interest: the temporal hiatus that separates the creation of the first woman from that of the first man. Inserted into the general framework of the narrative and unlike much exegesis which has considered Eve almost as a 'necessary evil', thanks to a more careful analysis, another explanation seems possible which on the one hand helps to overcome still rooted prejudices towards feminine gender and on the other reveals the 'relational' nature of humanity in a game of opposition and complementarity that opens up new horizons and offers a suggestive path in adequately addressing gender issues today so much discussed in often harsh and controversial forms.

Keywords: Creation, gender, relationship, Bible, Quran

1 Introduction

It is quite normal to find, even in the Holy Writings, the same subject repeated in separate places and in various versions, with more or fewer details depending on their purpose and with terms and styles that can lead to interpretations that are not univocal.¹

The theory of ‘formularity’² of oral compositions could help us to discover this chronological feature, but as we will see, this important aspect of the written text is also unable to clarify the core subject of this study.

The important theme of the Creation in general, and of the human being in particular, is present in the Bible and in the Qur’an throughout all the texts recalling the role of God as the Creator of everything, but the event of the beginning of the universe is concentrated in some blocks. In the case of the Bible, they are in the very first part of Genesis: a short and more recent account opens the Book, then an older and longer description follows. In the case of the Qur’an, with its particular sequence of chapters which are not in chronological order but are presented from the longest one (the 2nd sura) to the shortest ones (the 113th and 114th), several parts have to be collected from different places to try to organize them in a hypothetical sequence with the aim of having a narration that is as coherent as possible.

2 From Chaos to Order

Whether the existence of anything came *ex-nihilo* (from ‘nothing’) or not is a philosophical-theological issue on which many theories have been proposed and discussed for centuries, but despite its importance, it is not decisive for our subject. What is more important is the Creator’s action in separating, distinguishing and differentiating a chaotic reality into pairs like heaven and earth, water and land, light and darkness and so on. Not only opposite realities, but also complementary ones and with all other kinds of relations (positive, but also negative) with one another.

“God created the air” is not stated, because air is everywhere, so it was senseless to say something about it. Only now do we know that air is absent in outer space beyond the atmosphere, but ancient humanity had no idea of this.

The Qur’an says: “And of all things We created two mates; perhaps you will remember” (51, 49).

Gender diversity is of course common to animals too, but it is only specified in a particular way for humans.

Genesis 1, 27 says: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”, ‘Adam’ in this verse could be interpreted

¹ Cf. A. Bandak, S. Coleman (eds), *Different Repetitions: Anthropological Engagements with Figures of Return, Recurrence and Redundancy*, Routledge, New York 2021.

² Cf. J. M. Foley, John Miles, *The theory of oral composition. History and Methodology*, Indiana University Press 1988.

as a sort of collective term for both: male and female, but in 2, 1ff it is evident that 'Adam' was the first male human being and only later his female was created from him (and not from dust).³

In the Qur'an as well, the result of the first step of the Creation is an undistinguished entity:

"Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one Unit of Creation), before We clove them asunder...?" (21/30)

And at the very beginning, the sky is also presented as a sort of chaotic gas:

"Moreover, He comprehended in His design the sky, and it had been (as) smoke..." (41, 11).

Regarding the two genders, we find a similar orientation in the Qur'an, but with a slightly more complicated expression related to the masculine or feminine aspect of the terms used:

"O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate" (4, 1)

In Arabic, 'soul' is *nafs* and is a feminine noun and 'mate' is *zawj* which only means 'partner', therefore it can apply to husband or wife.

Nevertheless, in a more detailed narration, it is clear that the first human created was male (Adam) and the second was female, only after him and from him (in Arabic her name is *Hawà*), but only in commentaries: there is no other woman's name in the Qur'an except *Maryam/Mary*).

³ But the creation of the first man is also proposed in his body parts from various origins: "According to the rabbinic tradition, the powder of 'adamah with which the adam is formed, is taken from each of the four corners of the earth, in order to emphasize its belonging to a universal perspective: "The dust was collected on purpose from the four corners of the earth, so that if an adam from the east happened to die in the west or an adam from the west happened to die in the east, the 'Adamah could not refuse to accept the body and did not tell him to go there from whence he was taken" (Ginzberg L., *Le leggende degli ebrei. I. Dalla creazione al diluvio*, Adelphi, Milano 1995, p. 66 cit. in E. Bartolini, "La relazione originaria: ad immagine di Dio come coppia secondo la tradizione ebraica", in AA. VV., a c. di S. Petrosino, *Il dramma dell'inizio. L'origine dell'uomo nelle religioni*, Jaka Book e Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano 2017, pp. 45-66. In the Islamic tradition we find the same thing: "God sent Gabriel to earth to bring him clay, but the earth said: 'God save me from the fact that you strip me and disfigure me!' So he returned empty-handed and said, 'O Lord, she has invoked Your protection and I have restored her. Then he sent Michael, but she did the same and he too, returned to the Lord and repeated what Gabriel had said. Then he sent the Angel of Death. The earth invoked divine protection against him, but he replied, 'God save me from returning without having done what he commanded me. So he took mixed earth, not from one place, but took red, white and black, so that the sons of Adam were different (...) Then he went up and God asked him: 'You had no mercy on the earth. when she begged you?' He replied: 'Your order was stronger than its words.' Then God said: 'You are therefore fit to bring back (to Me) the souls of his descendants'" (al-Qurtubî, *al-Jâmi` li-ahkâm al-Qur'ân*, Beirut 1985, vol. I, p. 280). NB this paper is not for scholars of Islamic Studies only, so we decided to adopt a simplified system of transcription of Arab terms in Latin characters.

Before Chapter 4, the plurals of *nafs* and *zawj* appear in another part where all commentaries agree on considering the first as males and the second as females:

“And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves (pl. of *nafs*) mates (pl. of *zawj*) that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy...” (30, 21).

3 Giving/learning names

Another shared vision in both Sacred Texts is the importance of the Logos: God only has to say the name of a thing to create it:

God said, “Let there be light” and there was light! (Genesis, 1, 3)

He is the One Who has originated the heavens and the earth, and when He wills to (originate) a thing, He only says to it: ‘Be’, and it is. (Qur’an, 2, 117)

In the Semitic world, then, we find a very special relationship between a thing and its name: nothing seems to be ‘real’ without a name and the name somehow says the ‘nature’ of the named thing.

This is true, generally speaking, but in the case of humans, the Bible and the Qur’an describe their creation starting from something that already existed: Adam from dust and his mate from his ‘side’.

Calling something into existence is thus possible in three ways: naming it, separating an existing thing into two opposite/complementary parts or, lastly, using a concrete thing (or a part of it) to make something new.

To give or to learn names is in addition a unique faculty of Adam:

So, Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field (Genesis, 2, 20).

And He taught Adam the names - all of them. (Qur’an, 2, 31).

In the Qur’an the possibility of learning names is restricted to humans only:

Then He showed them to the angels and said, ‘Inform Me of the names of these, if you are truthful’ / They said, ‘Exalted are You; we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You who is the Knowing, the Wise’ (Qur’an 2, 31-32).

It is only in the Bible that it says:

But for Adam no suitable helper was found (Genesis 2, 21).

One could suppose that all the animals whose names had been given (or learned) by Adam were already created as male and female in order to be able to generate their offspring.

4 The 'difference' in the creation of Adam's mate: the reason, the time and the method

Although Adam needed a female, just as animals did to reproduce, he does not seem to have had her from the very beginning.

It is hard to understand which kind of 'time' we are talking about, but it is evident that the creation of the male and female of human beings was not simultaneous.⁴

It is reasonable then to wonder why...

The Hebrew Bible defines her as help (*ezer*) for him, 'in front/against' (*ke-negdo*) him - much more than a sexual partner and a mother for their children! 'In front' means vis-à-vis and 'against' means a confrontation (not necessarily bad), which are basic experiences for the development of both personalities.

God expected to give Eve to Adam as a mate maybe for a psychological reason: only after he first felt his loneliness, and in a way prepared himself to accept another 'like' him, not a photocopy of himself but someone of the same nature and diverse in gender, not only to have children but for something 'more' and 'different.'

In addition, God created Eve not from dust or any other matter, but from the 'side' of Adam himself.

5 Stop and go

Everything happened in six 'days'... we are told, but the kind of 'time' the Texts are talking about is an ancient and unsolved issue. The discoveries of modern quantum physics suggest we avoid a similar challenge.

At the level of 'space' and especially of 'movement', on the other hand, it is possible to underline their presence in both the Sacred Texts: a gradual transformation of creation is evident not only after its very beginning, but also later and continuously. Maybe the mysterious 'time' could be interpreted as a 'measure' of this movement, step by step, in a 'discrete' way. One could wonder why the Creation was not a single moment instead of a progressive action... The reason could be because life is movement, in both positive and negative ways: immobility does not fit with living beings, but any transformation also

⁴ E.g.: "But if the angels were created before everything else, it may be asked: were they created in time or before time or at the beginning of time? If they were created in time, time existed before the angels were created; and since time is also a creature, we see ourselves in the precision of admitting that before the angels something began to exist; and if we say that they were created at the beginning of time in such a way that at the same moment that time began to exist, we will say that what some claim is false is that time began when heaven and earth were made," in *Augustine's Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis*, III, 7.

means a certain lack of stability and endurance. It is no coincidence that philosophers and theologians defined God as the ‘unmoved mover’, ‘the very perfect being thinking of himself thinking’ or in other ways, but always excluding any change or movement, considered the results of some needs, which are characteristic of imperfection.

How can we reconcile this static idea with: “And God made man in his image, in the image of God made him...” (Genesis 1, 27)?

To be different from each other and to move among other things seem to be the basic features of every living creature and when they come to a complete standstill, it is death. However: “Because God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living” (Wisdom, 1, 13).

In Greek, ‘anastasis’ (stop of the stasis) means ‘resurrection’, so it is no coincidence that in Christianity, as well as in Judaism and Islam, the hereafter is present, although in non-identical forms.

This after-life is often described with multiple and various details, but compared with the variety of our world, it is even odd or paradoxical: its static-eternity could be understood as repetitive or even boring... as Oscar Wilde wrote, “I don’t want to go to heaven. None of my friends are there”, despite the weather in Hell being anything but amusing!

6 Jewish Tradition

It is well known that there are countless greatly varied Jewish commentaries on the Bible, so we will try to present only some of them, especially the most ancient and original* ones, emphasizing the differences between them and those we are going to provide in the next two paragraphs. We must recall, however, that only early Jewish literature on this subject is quite different and the later literature is very similar in many cases to Christian and Islamic commentaries⁵ where a negative role of Eve became increasingly evident.⁶

Ramban (XIII century) on Genesis 2:20:1 *“But for Adam there was not found a help mate for him.” Rashi (XI-XII century) comments: “When He brought them, He brought them before him as male and female. Thereupon Adam said, ‘All of them have a mate, and I have no mate!’ Immediately, the Eternal G-d caused a deep sleep to fall upon him”. Rashi explained it well by Scripture’s bringing the verses concerning “the calling of names” into the matter of “the help” that G-d gave Adam, it proves that this interpretation mentioned above is correct. (...)*

In my opinion it is correct to say that it was His will, blessed He be, not to take Adam’s

⁵ See J. T. A. G. M. Van Ruitten, “The Creation of Man and Woman in Early Jewish Literature”, G. P. Luttikhuisen (ed.), *The Creation of Man and Woman. Interpretations of the Biblical Narratives in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Brill, Leiden 2000, pp. 93-106 G. P. Luttikhuisen (ed.), *The Creation of Man and Woman. Interpretations of the Biblical Narratives in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Brill, Leiden 2000, pp. 34-62.

⁶ See C. Meyer, *Discovering Eve. Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Oxford University Press, New York 1988.

rib from him to make him a wife until he himself knew that among the created beings there is no help suitable for him and until he craved having help suitable for him like her. This was why one of his ribs had to be taken from him. This is the meaning of the verse, But no help mate was found for Adam; that is to say, but for the name Adam (man), he found no help suited to be opposite him and to be called by his name so that he should beget children from that "help".

As already said, the meaning of the term translated by 'help' is also 'opposite' and we find that very realistic in any kind of relationship, where the difference is at the same time a sort of complementarity but also sometimes like a confrontation: the honey and the salt of everything.

Another example is Alshich (XVI century) on the Torah (Genesis 2:21:1-5) about "One of his ribs" where the following is added "Not only was Chavah's body created from Adam's, but her soul was originally contained within his as well", where the presence of Eve is considered in Adam even before God used his rib to create her.

Here attention is paid to Eve's soul, which is already present in Adam before her creation.

In Yevamot 61b:16, marital status is presented not only as permissible but compulsory for everyone:

"The Gemara infers from the mishna's wording that if he already has children he may neglect the mitzva to be fruitful and multiply, but he may not neglect the mitzva to have a wife. This supports what Rav Nahman said in the name of Shmuel, who said: Even if a man has several children, it is prohibited to remain without a wife, as it is stated: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18)".

Celibacy is not appreciated in Islam either, and we consider that this depends on the Semitic attitude towards sex in marriage, much less problematic than in Christian thought, or even not problematic at all.

As far as the value of woman is considered, this story is to be found in Sanhedrin 39a:2: "The Roman emperor said to Rabban Gamliel: Your God is a thief, as it is written: "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man and he slept; and He took one of his sides, and closed up the place with flesh instead" (Genesis 2:21). The daughter of the emperor said to Rabban Gamliel: Leave him, as I will respond to him. She said to her father: Provide one commander [*dukhus*] for me to avenge someone's wrongdoing. The emperor said to her: Why do you need him? She said to him: Armed bandits came to us this past night, and took a silver jug [*kiton*] from us, and left a golden jug for us. The emperor said to her: If so, would it be that armed bandits such as these would come to us every day. She said to him: And was it not similarly good for Adam the first man that God took a side from him and gave him a maidservant to serve him?."

This is a rare example of self-defence of her value on the lips of a woman and the self-comparison with a golden object is incredibly significant. But as in Christian and Muslim commentaries, someone underlined the negative role of Eve in the first sin: Chizkuni on Genesis 2:20:1, "but Adam had not found a suitable partner for himself;" why did G-d

not create Chavah at the same time as He had created Adam? G-d had known that the time would come when her husband would blame her for his own sin. (3,12) This is why He delayed creating her until Adam had expressed an explicit wish for her. (Compare B'reshit Rabbah 17,4) As soon as Adam had expressed his wish for a suitable partner, G-d put him to sleep and proceeded to fashion Chavah from him.

As far as the part of Adam's body from which Eve has been taken is concerned, the 'rib' is only one of the possible interpretations. The important thing is that she was taken from his 'side', near his heart... we actually find in the Qur'an: "And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought" (30, 21).

Here we can finally find an answer to the delay in Eve's creation, related to Adam's loneliness, but also to the future role of woman in the first sin... this second view, as we are going to see, was destined to become increasingly important with the passage from Judaism to Christianity and Islam, but also in some Jewish thinkers influenced by Greek philosophy like Philo we can find something in the same direction:

"Since none of things created are steady, and mortal things necessarily move and change, the first human being also had to have the pleasure of some misadventure(s). Woman becomes for him the beginning of a fault life. For until now he was one person alone; in his solitude he was made like the cosmos and God, and his soul was stamped with the impression of the nature of each – not all of them but as many as a mortal constitution can hold. But after woman too had been modeled, he, gazing at her sisterly shape and kindred form, accepted the sight with gladness and went up to greet her. She, seeing no other creature more similar to herself than he, is delighted and returns his greetings respectfully. Love befalls them and brings and fits together two divided halves of one creature, as it were, establishing in each a longing to be together with other for procreation of their like. This longing also produces bodily pleasure, which is the beginning of wrongdoing and violation of the law, through which they exchange their immortal and blissful life for a mortal ill-fated one."⁷

7 The Ancient Church Fathers

As all know, Christianity maintained the cosmogony of the First Testament, trying to find in it a kind of prophecy about Jesus. In particular, relations between genders have been applied as a symbolic figure of the tie between Christ and the Church, but "in spite of the fact that marriage is recognized as a sacrament by the Church, the attitude of Christian thought towards the sexual relationship and its spiritualizing potentialities has in practice been singularly limited and negative. From the start Christian authors have been ill at ease with the whole subject. First, supported by a literal interpretation of Christ's words about those who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, as well as by St. Paul's commendation of the single state (1 Cor. VII), early

⁷ Cit. in A. Van Den Hoek, "Endowed with Reason or Glued to the Sense: Philo's Thoughts on Adam and Eve", in G. P. Luttikhuisen (ed.), cit., p. 72.

Christian theologians did not hesitate to affirm that celibacy is *per se* superior to marriage; and, second, they have seemed incapable of envisaging any aspect of sexuality other than its purely generative (not to say genital) expression, and towards this they display an antipathy obsessive to a degree scarcely less than vicious (...).⁸

We can understand these ideas only by paying attention to the social and philosophical context of that time and its sensibilities that they imported into their interpretation of biblical text. Some assumptions were explicitly taken from ancient Greek physicians and philosophers: “The difference between male and female bodies, whether described as radical (difference in nature) or relative (greater or lesser degree of perfection), is always presented in these texts by reference to the male body, compared with which the female body is thought of in terms of incompleteness or inversion. Such difference also carries connotations of hierarchy.”⁹

“Two fundamental qualities distinguish this natural un-fallen life: immortality and incorruptibility; and, St. Gregory argues, the presence of these two qualities presupposes the absence of sexuality. In his original state as he is created “in the image”, man is free from sexuality. There is not even a division between the sexes. There is no man and woman. (...) [Sexuality] is one of the most disastrous consequences of the fall because it is the source of the passions, and it is the passions which lead to sin. “I consider it to be from this principle (the sexual life) that the passions as from a fountain-head flow over human nature”, writes St. Gregory; while for St. Maximos the fall itself is due precisely to bodily desire and a search for sensual pleasure, and this is confirmed most fully in the sexual relationship. Hence the importance of virginity. Virginity is a condition of man’s return to his original state. A true Christian, St. Gregory maintains, must choose between two forms of marriage, one “bodily” and the other “spiritual”. (...)”

Even the distinction between man and woman only exists or is only established because God foresees that man is going to sin and so to fall and therefore will be in need of a mode of propagation which will make it possible for him to continue the human race under new conditions. But the Pauline phrase (Galatians III:28) is adduced to confirm that in Christ there is “neither male nor female” (the alternative Pauline phrase (I Cor. XI.11) to the effect that “neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord”, tends to be ignored); and the scriptural passage (Matthew XXII:30) in which Christ tells the Sadducees that in the resurrection people neither marry nor are married is taken to signify that man should live without marriage. This does not mean that the value

⁸ Ph. Sherrard, “The Sexual Relationship in Christian Thought”, in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 3, passim. See also H. S. Benjamins, “Keeping Marriage out of Paradise: the Creation of Man and Woman in Patristic Literature”, in G. P. Luttikhuisen, cit., pp. 93-106.

⁹ Bonnard, Jean-Baptiste. “Male and Female Bodies According to Ancient Greek Physicians.” *Clio: Women, Gender, History*, 37, 2013. Cfr. also: “As human nature was of two kinds, the superior race would hereafter be called man... He who lived well during his appointed time was to return and dwell in his native star, and there he would have a blessed and congenial existence. But if he failed in attaining to this, at the second birth he would pass into a woman...” (Plato, *Timaeus*); “For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.” (Aristotle, *Politics*, I, V).

“Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.” (Aristotle, *Politics*, I, V).

of marriage is totally denied. It cannot be totally denied because without it man cannot be born into this world. But, according to St. Maximos, at best it constitutes only the lowest and most external of the unions which man must experience before he can be restored to the spiritual state. Even so, a generic sin is always at work within the sexual relationship and this can only be extirpated on condition that sexuality itself is extirpated. (...) Only through monastic celibacy can man recover that natural - and sexless - state for which he was originally created “in the image”.¹⁰

Here is an excerpt from Book I of Tertullian’s (III century) “On the Apparel of Women”:
“And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil’s gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert - that is, death - even the Son of God had to die. And do you think about adorning yourself over and above your tunics of skins?”

Another by John Chrysostom (IV-V century), from *Homily 26 on First Corinthians*:
“This is again a second superiority, nay, rather also a third, and a fourth, the first being, that Christ is the head of us, and we of the woman; a second, that we are the glory of God, but the woman of us; a third, that we are not of the woman, but she of us; a fourth, that we are not for her, but she for us.”

Augustine (IV-V century) wrote in his “Literal Commentary on Genesis”:
“If it were not the case that the woman was created to be man’s helper specifically for the production of children, then why would she have been created as a ‘helper’ (Gen. 2:18)? Was it so that she might work the land with him? No because there did not yet exist any such labor for which he needed a helper, and even if such work had been required, a male would have made a better assistant. One can also posit that the reason for her creation as helper had to do with the companionship she could provide for the man, if perhaps he got bored with his solitude. Yet for company and conversation, how much more agreeable it is for two male friends to dwell together than for a man and a woman! . . . I cannot think of any reason for woman’s being made as man’s helper, if we dismiss the reason of procreation.”

In his commentary, “On the Trinity,” Augustine asserted that women alone were not the image of God but could become the image of God if they married a man:
“when I was treating of the nature of the human mind, that the woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that the whole substance may be one image; but when she is referred separately to her quality of *help-meet*, which regards the woman herself alone, then she is not the image of God; but as regards the man alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman too is joined with him in one.”

A bit further in the same paragraph, he reasoned,
“when as a whole [the human mind] contemplates the truth it is the image of God; and in the case when anything is divided from it, and diverted in order to the cognition of

¹⁰ Ph. Sherrad, cit., passim.

temporal things; nevertheless on that side on which it beholds and consults truth, here also it is the image of God, but on that side whereby it is directed to the cognition of the lower things, it is not the image of God.”

Later, Thomas Aquinas (XIII century) said in his writings:

“As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence; such as that of a south wind, which is moist, as the Philosopher observes (*De Gener. Animal. iv, 2*). On the other hand, as regards human nature in general, woman is not misbegotten, but is included in nature’s intention as directed to the work of generation. Now the general intention of nature depends on God, Who is the universal Author of nature. Therefore, in producing nature, God formed not only the male but also the female.” *Summa Theologica, Q. 92, Art. 1, Ad. 1.*

“Subjection is twofold. One is servile, by virtue of which a superior makes use of a subject for his own benefit; and this kind of subjection began after sin. There is another kind of subjection which is called economic or civil, whereby the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good; and this kind of subjection existed even before sin. For good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates.” *Summa Theologica, Q. 92, Art. 1, Ad. 2.*

“The father and mother are loved as principles of our natural origin. Now the father is principle in a more excellent way than the mother, because he is the active principle, while the mother is a passive and material principle. Consequently, strictly speaking, the father is to be loved more.” *Summa Theologica, Q. 26, Art. 10*

“Therefore, if there were no other natural influence at work tending toward the conception of female offspring, such conception would be wholly outside the design of nature, as is the case with what we call ‘monstrous’ births.” *De Veritate Q. 5, Art. IX, Diff. 9*

“Where the western Christian tradition is concerned the scene is dominated by the imposing figure of St. Augustine (...) This theology - as western Christian theology in general - presupposes an anthropology different from that of the Greek Patristic tradition. In western theology, man by nature - as he is created “in the image” - is a union of the animal or organic life and the intellectual life. The animal or organic life is not superadded to man as a consequence of the fall. On the contrary, it is the spiritual life which is superadded to man’s natural state. Man is not spiritual by nature, as he is in the eastern Christian tradition. He is spiritual through a supererogatory act of grace. This difference modifies the perspective within which St. Augustine writes. But in common with theologians of both traditions, he too is almost exclusively concerned with the purely genital aspect of sexuality and is acutely embarrassed by the fact that in this world the good work of generation cannot take place without “a certain amount of bestial movement” and “a violent acting of lust”. Indeed, that the genitals are no longer under

control is for St. Augustine one of the most evident consequences of the “fall” of man. (...)

By such argument, then, St. Augustine and his theological successors (who include practically every mediaeval theologian in the western Christian tradition) separated the idea of marriage from that of the sexual relationship and set the first over against the second so radically that only through contortions of the most devious kind have those who have accepted their views been able to reconcile the demands of the one with the prescriptions surrounding the other. Indeed, as these views did in fact become the guiding principles for those most responsible for the moral conduct of the Christian community - the officers of the Church - it is hardly surprising that the modern heirs of this community should suffer from an in-built schizophrenia in all that concerns this most intimate and personal aspect of their lives. (...)

This placed Christian theologians in an untenable position. They were obliged by scriptural authority to accept that the procreation of children was an end good in itself and that by becoming one flesh man and woman partook of a “great mystery” and possessed the sign of a supernatural union; yet they were persuaded that the act which determined both procreation and this *sacramentum* is tainted with evil. They had to conclude that the act of coition is necessary to marriage so long as its motive is to produce children; but even this motive did not in their eyes exonerate the act itself from impurity and shame. Such an attitude not only involved them in the absurdity of attributing to God the willing of something - the procreation of children - which could be achieved only through means that contributed to human degradation; it also compelled them to pretend that the main motive for sexual intercourse between man and woman must be the wish to produce offspring. (...)

Neither in the thought of St. Augustine nor in that of the later scholastics is there any recognition that the relationship between man and woman is capable of attaining a sacramental dignity in this sense. Mediaeval theologians like William of St. Thierry and Aelred did elaborate a rich understanding of the significance of friendship and saw in it a way of return to the state of Paradise. But there is no doctrine in which sexual love is recognized as providing the basis of a spiritualizing process whose consummation is the union, soul and body, of man and woman in God, a revelation of the divine in and through their deepening sense of each other's being. The idea that the sexual relationship might create a metaphysical bond which death itself is powerless to destroy is alien to the mind of mediaeval theology as a whole. Marriage is regarded above all as an ecclesiastical or social institution designed for procreation. It is not regarded as a unique personal relationship and, as we have seen, the sexual element in it is considered only in its purely generative or genital aspect and even then with an undisguised hostility. (...) Woman in her relationship with man is regarded as little more than at best a collaborator in the work of generation or a safety-valve for excess sexual pressures and at worst a pawn of the devil. For Fathers of the Church like Tertullian, it is woman who, profaning the Tree of Life, disfigures that exclusive image of God which is man, and drags him with her out of Paradise; and St. Augustine's own attitude towards and treatment of the woman with whom he had been living for thirteen years and who was the mother of his son, amply

illustrate what little recognition a woman might expect as a person in her own right. (...)"¹¹

8 Tafsir

The same subject has been studied by Muslim commentators of the Qur'an with many elements of the Jewish tradition, but also following some original tendencies belonging to the Islamic way of life.

Fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate (Qur'an 4, 1).

The interpretations of this verse are a good example of the Islamic exegesis on this subject: some explain the verse as a historical fact, others go deeper into its meaning.

Almost all agree that Eve was created from Adam's rib (even though this is absent from the Qur'an) and was like Adam. Many exegetes' interpretations bear a resemblance to the second biblical account of human creation which speaks of the creation of woman from Adam's side while he sleeps.

The Aramaic Targum actually says that the rib is Adam's thirteenth rib on his *right* side, whereas in Muslim exegesis, she was created from a rib on his left side.

Al-Tabari (IX-X century), as usual, cites many others, among them al-Suddi who describes how Adam dwelt in the Garden alone:

Adam was living in the Garden, and he was walking around in it all alone, without a companion (*zawj*) to live with him. So he slept deeply, and when he woke there was a woman sitting by his head. God had created her from his rib. Adam asked her, "What are you?" She said, "A woman." He said, "Why were you created?" She answered, "For you to dwell with me."¹²

Unlike in the Bible, here Adam asks Eve who she is and why she has been created, and cites the experts in the Torah reporting what Adam said after Eve's creation.

God cast a deep sleep upon Adam, according to what has reached us on the authority of the People of the Book, from the experts in the Torah (lit: People of the Torah) and other learned people, on the authority of 'Abd Abdallah ibn 'Abbas and others. Then [after making Adam sleep] God took one of his ribs from the left hand side and he healed where it had been. [All of this occurred] while Adam was sleeping, and he did not wake up until God created his wife Eve from the rib, and he made her into a woman, so that they could dwell together. Then the sleep was lifted from him, and he awoke, and saw her by his side, and said – according to what they claim, and God knows best if this

¹¹ Ph. Sherrad, cit., passim.

¹² Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil al-Qur'an*, Mahmud Muhammad Shàkir & Ahmad Muhammad Shàkir (eds.) Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1950-60, v. 7, 515-16.

is true – “My flesh! My blood! My wife!” And he found rest with her (*sakana ilayha*).¹³

Al-Tabari collected many other views and at the end he writes as usual “they claim” and “God knows best.”

Quite different is the interpretation by the shi'ite Imam Ja'far al-Bàqir (VIII century):

On the authority of 'Amr b. Miqdam, on the authority of his father, he said, I asked AbūJa'far “From what thing did God create Eve?” He said, “What do they say regarding this creation?” I said, “They say: ‘God created her from one of Adam’s ribs.’” So he said, “They are wrong (*kadhab*)! Was He incapable of creating her from anything other than a rib?” I said, “I am your servant, O descendant of the Messenger of God, from what thing was she created?” So he said, “My father told me, on the authority of his fathers, that the Messenger of God said, ‘God Blessed and Almighty took a handful of clay, and mixed it with his right hand – and both of his hands are right – and created Adam from it. And there was some leftover earth, and from that he created Eve.’”¹⁴

Also Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's (XII-XIII century) account is more detailed:

The meaning of the term *mate* is Eve, and concerning the creation of Eve from Adam, there are two doctrines. The first, which is adopted by the majority, is that when God created Adam, he cast a deep sleep upon him, then he created Eve from one of his left ribs. When he woke, he saw her, inclined towards her, and became fond of her, because she was created from a part of him. The saying of the Prophet supports this interpretation: “woman was created from a crooked rib, and if you try to straighten her, you will break her, and if you leave her crooked, you can enjoy her.”¹⁵

Another comment is more original, the one by Muhsin al-Fayd, another shi'i who died in 1680:

God, Blessed and Almighty, when He created Adam from clay, ordered the angels [to prostrate themselves before him,] and they prostrated themselves before him. Then God cast a deep sleep upon him, and created Eve for him, making her from the hollow of his abdomen. That is so that women are subservient to men. Eve began to move, and Adam paid attention to her, until she was called upon to go away from him. When he looked at her, he beheld a fair creation, which resembled him except in its being female. He spoke to her, and she spoke to him in his language. He asked her, “Who are you?” And she said, “A creation which God has made, as you can see.” Adam then said, “Oh Lord, who is this fair creation who has kept me company, who I gaze upon?” God said, “O Adam, this is my servant, Eve, would you like her to remain with you, being your companion, and obeying your orders?” Adam

¹³ Ibid., v. 7, 516.

¹⁴ Al-Ayyish, *al-Tafsir*, Dept. of Islamic Studies, Qum 2000, v. 1-3.

¹⁵ Fakhr al-Din al-Ràzì, *Al-Tafsir al-kabir*. 'Abd al-Rahman Muhammad (ed.), Cairo: Matba'at al-Bahiya, 1938, v. 9, 161.

responded, “Yes, my Lord, and because of this I owe you thanks and praise.” God said to him, “Ask me for her hand in marriage, for she is my servant, and she is suitable for you also as a mate for your sexual desires,” and God bestowed upon him sexual desire. Before that, he had made him know everything [else]. Adam said, “O Lord, I ask you for her hand in marriage, so what would you like for that [as a dower]?” God said, “I would like you to teach her about my religion.” Adam said, “If you wish it, I owe you that, O Lord.” God said, “I wish it, and I give her to you in marriage, and join you to her.” Adam said to her, “Come to me.” Eve responded, “No, you must come to me!” [So] God Almighty ordered Adam to go to her, and he did. If he had not done that, then women would go out, and even ask for men’s hand in marriage by themselves. This is the story of Eve, may God’s prayers be upon her.¹⁶

It is evident that this view is a product of the development of the Islamic law on the rights and duties of husband and wife, but here she seems to know the rules better than him.

Only in a report by al-Suddi (VIII century) do we find a description of the psychological status of Adam in the Garden before Eve was created:

Adam was living in the Garden, and he was walking around in it all alone, without a companion (*zawj*) to live with him. So he slept deeply, and when he woke there was a woman sitting by his head. God had created her from his rib. Adam asked her, “What are you?” She said, “A woman.” He said, “Why were you created?” She answered, “For you to dwell with me.”¹⁷

Some Shiites, on the authority of ‘Ali b. Abu Talib, cite a hadith related to women’s natures and interests, “*Who created you from a single soul meaning Adam, and from it created its mate meaning Eve, whom God created from his [Adam’s] lowest rib*” (al-Qumm, *Tafsir al-Qummi*, 1, 130. X century).

He cites two hadiths on the authority of ‘Ali: “Eve was created from the side of Adam, and it is the smallest rib – and God put flesh in its place. Eve was created from the side of Adam while he was sleeping” (Ayyash, *Tafsir*, v. 1, 361. X century)

Abū ‘Abd Allah said, God Almighty created Adam from water and earth, so the sons of Adam [men] are interested in water and earth, and God created Eve from Adam, and so women are interested in men, and they should be kept inaccessible indoors.”¹⁸

9 Conclusions

Finally, with these pages, our hope is only to open the door on to further reflections about the subject. The creation of the first woman obeys a certain logic depending on the

¹⁶ Muhsin al-Fayd, *Kitāb al-asfā fi tafsir al-Qur’ān*, Muhsin al-Husayn al-Amīn (ed.), Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1998, v. 2, 176-7.

¹⁷ Al-tabarī, cit., v. 7, 515-16.

¹⁸ ‘Ayyāsh, cit., v. 1, 361.

relationship between male and female humans for mutual fulfilment, even in their differences. It would be hard or quite impossible to say 'I' without any 'You' and vice versa.

To have children is only one consequence among others of this relationship: we are not only sexual beings, but relational ones. A couple could have no babies, but this does not mean that the relationship between them is less important or even decisive for both their personalities. When commentators of Sacred Texts looked for a more detailed comprehension of these Scriptures, they concentrated their interest on formulating a hierarchy or an order, defining the position and the role of men and women. The reason is evident and comprehensible, but we are still wondering why the simple explanation of Adam's loneliness without Eve and its consequences was given so little consideration. Maybe it is time to read our Holy Scriptures again, finding in them something else, more subtle and deeper, especially vis-à-vis modern sensibility and challenges in gender issues.