

MARCH 4

A Fitting Companion

In our post-college years, my wife and I became aficionados of cheap ways poor married couples can create meals. During that phase of our lives, a new dietary staple for me became Betty Crocker's "Hamburger

Helper." It was not quite the bread from heaven eaten by the Israelites in the wilderness, but it did the job. The idea behind the product was that adding this culinary assistant to one's meat would help the cook rectify deficiencies in skills and arrive at a tasty dinner.

Although most would never make such a silly connection, this understanding of a "helper" (i.e., "a lesser assistant") is the role that many attribute to women in Genesis 2:18, 20, when God declared His intention to make a "suitable helper" for the first human. The Hebrew words used in this phrase are *'ezer kenegdo*. In this article, we will explore the meaning of this expression within the

context of Genesis 2, and the nature of the relationship God desired between the first human couple.

The Incomplete 'Adam

An important element for understanding the role of the helper whom God created in Genesis 2 is the recognition of an ambiguity that most English readers overlook. Although the Hebrew word *'adam* [ah-DAM] is the name of Eve's husband in chapter 3, in the book's first two chapters, it usually appears as a common noun meaning "human." In fact, that is the word's primary meaning (see 6:1-2); it is relatively infrequent as a name.

Throughout most of chapter 2, this word appears with the definite article and is therefore translated "the human." Some interpreters chide the NIV for translating this as "the man" since before the creation of woman, Genesis 2 characterizes the *'adam* as neither male nor female. Nevertheless, the NIV's translation has merit since the larger context indicates that the first human was distinct from the woman created in verse 22. The point of Genesis 2:18-25 is that humanity was incomplete prior to the creation of woman: God looked at creation and observed that it was "not good"; the creation was unfinished. Although "*adam*-the-man" was a breathing lifeform, "*adam*-the-species" required perfecting.

Suitable or In Front Of?

With this background information, we can begin to discuss the meaning of the "suitable helper" mentioned in Genesis 2:18, 20. We will first consider the qualifier "suitable" before asking about the meaning of "helper."

The word the NIV translates as "suitable" is a compound Hebrew word made of two prepositions and a pronoun that literally means "as in front of him." There is no shortage of ways to understand this phrase. The word could mean "suitable" (NIV), "fit" (ESV), "as his partner" (NRSV), or even, "just right for him" (NLT). Each of these captures part of the meaning of the Hebrew text.

The idea is that the person God would create was to stand opposite the first human as an equal, not behind him in a position of subservience. The gender relationships in view here are the same as those in 1:27: "God created humanity [*adam*] in His image, in the image of God He created it; male and female, He created them."¹ The members of the first couple were to relate to each other as partners and co-participants in the image of God. What is more, without one, the other was incomplete.

Helper, Power, or Deliverer?

All of this raises the very significant question of the meaning of *helper*. In English usage, this term often implies an assistant, or someone who lacks the skill and expertise of



While Adam was naming the animals, it became clear that there was "no suitable helper" for him (Genesis 2:20b). God looked at creation and observed that it was "not good" (v. 18). So God "made a woman" (v. 22) to be a companion to Adam.

the person he or she is helping. This reading severely downgrades the role of the woman in Genesis 2. When “helper” is thought to envisage a weaker assistant, then the portrait of Eve that emerges depicts her as Adam’s secretary, diligently taking the official minutes as her boss names the animals.

This is decidedly not what the writer of Genesis had in mind. The Hebrew word in 2:18, 20 is *‘ezer* [EH-zer], which most frequently means “help.” Yet that help is not in the form of an assistant; it rather describes the kind of help one requires when suffering a military attack. The “help” described here is deliverance. It is significant, therefore, that God is the most frequently cited source of this kind of “help” in the Old Testament (1 Sam. 7:12; Isa. 41:10; Pss. 20:2; 70:5; 121:1-2). We are talking about the kind of help the Gibeonites required when they implored Joshua, “Save us! Help us!” (Josh. 10:6).

If this is the meaning of the word *‘ezer* in chapter 2, it follows that the woman was God’s means of effecting some kind of deliverance. The question then becomes, “Deliverance from what?” Humanity was not in danger, nor is the common suggestion that the woman delivered the man from loneliness very

compelling. Perhaps a better interpretation is that the woman delivered the first human from incompleteness. God had deemed His creation as “not good” (v. 18). While not exactly broken, humanity was incomplete and could never reach the potential God desired of it. The “helper” in Genesis 2:18 saved humanity from this predicament.

Another option that scholars frequently offer is the possibility that the word *‘ezer* could just as easily mean “power” or “strength.” This reading has merit in its ability to appeal to similar words in other Semitic languages. Be that as it may, there are relatively few passages where *‘ezer* unambiguously carries this meaning in the Old Testament. Thus, in 2:18, 20, it may refer to a “strength” equal to the man, but it is difficult to say this with certainty.

Regardless of whether the word means “power/strength” or “help/deliverance,” the point is that both readings portray the first couple as equals. The *suitable helper* is one who completes the man and stands with him as his partner.

The End of the Matter

As with any important biblical text, it is

difficult to understand the meaning of this “suitable helper” in its entirety. Although much remains obscure about this phrase, it seems clear that the helper was neither a lesser creation nor a mere assistant to the first human. Rather, the two met as equals and worked as partners in the garden.

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Think about it . . .

- ✓ What are some of the common misunderstandings of the relationship between men and women in Genesis 2?
- ✓ Where else does the word “helper” appear in the Bible? (See e.g., 1 Sam. 7:12; Isa. 41:10; Pss. 20:2; 70:5; 121:1-2). How is it used?
- ✓ How did the egalitarian relationship between men and women we see in Genesis 1—2 come to an end?
- ✓ How will this relationship look in the kingdom of God? How should Christians thus live out God’s intention for humanity right now?

COMMENTARY *Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18-25*

Someone has said that there has been more written about Genesis 1 than about any other literary passage. Probably that is true, and no wonder. Genesis 1 and 2 ranks among the most interesting of all literary works, in or out of Christian Scripture. One could argue these chapters raise or make room for every important question we have—and begin to answer some of them.

1. Climax of the Earth’s Creation (Genesis 1:26-28)

26 Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Possibly the most important observation we can make about Genesis 1 as a whole is that it is intended as a summary of the creation of our universe, not a detailed account. Verses 26-28, then, are a summary of God’s origination of the human species, as the climax of the original creation on this earth.

26. *Let us make:* God is speaking here, and the verb is plural. This is not nearly strong enough to count as proof, but Christians are justified in seeing here the Bible’s first very faint “hint” that God is Three, while still being One.

Literally, the Hebrew word *‘adam* means “human” or “earthling.” As we hear conclusively from God’s naming in 5:2, *‘adam* refers to **both** male and female together. This merits repeating: “Adam” is **not** God’s name for the man; *‘adam* is God’s name for humans, individually and collectively. Even you and I, together with all humans ever born,

are *‘adam*, “human,” “earthling.” If we wish to go forward, we must understand this.

In our image, in our likeness: This statement of God’s intention for *‘adam*—together with the report in the following verses of God’s making *‘adam* in fulfillment of that intention—is the real basis for biblical and Christian claims of human uniqueness. Physically, we are of the animal kingdom, but *in imago Dei* (in the image of God), we are more. We are both “physical” and “spiritual”; the physical and spiritual cannot be separated.

27. One of the many ways these verses proclaim their climactic function here is the three-fold repetition of *God [he] created*, each one referencing the human. Our focus is on the third of the three clauses: *Male and female he created [bara’] them*. The object pronoun is plural: **Both** genders are God-created; **both** genders are *in imago Dei*.

28. As verse 27 reports accomplishment of God’s intention to create, so this verse reports God’s intention to appoint. We should find ourselves a bit startled to realize that God’s appointment here is framed as a blessing: *God blessed them and said to them*. Properly accepted and executed, God’s stewardship-dominion mandate is a blessing first to humans, then to the whole earth and the rest of its inhabitants.

Essential to our overall understanding is that not only are the first two pronouns plural, *them . . . them*, but also all five of the verbs of command/instruction that constitute the blessing. For clarity, we could translate, “**You-all** be fruitful, and **you-all** multiply, and **you-all** fill the earth, and **you-all** bring it [the earth] under your control, and **you-all** exercise dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the flying creatures of the skies, and over every living creature that moves upon the earth.”¹ God’s creation intention is that the female and the male of the human species share equally in every aspect of this five-fold mandate. No other conclusion is possible from any responsible reading of these words, however one may interpret what comes after.

This understanding is confirmed also by the fact that three verses later, God assessed all that was made, including all arrangements for its ordering, as “very good” (v. 31).

2. A Solitary Earthling (Genesis 2:18-20)

18 The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

19 Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.

20 So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.

As one of its functions, Genesis 2:4 serves as a transition from the summary account of chapter 1, which properly concludes with the seventh-day Sabbath inauguration. From verse 5, chapter 2 provides a closer, theologically vital abundance of detail that would be grotesquely out of place in the exquisite artistry of the Genesis 1 earthly creation summary. As the narrative reaches verse 18, the reader has been told of God’s forming one ‘adam (v. 7), of God’s planting a garden (v. 8), and of God’s placing the one ‘adam in the garden to “serve” it and to “watch over/guard/protect” it (v. 15).

18. God’s *It is not good* is one of the details that would mark the author as a literary hack had he placed it where it seems to belong chronologically—in the narrative of 1:27. Some view this as one of many “contradictions” between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. The truth is that we cannot count the literary examples of esteemed authors backtracking to fill in important and/or interesting detail after first providing a broad overview. This author is one of the first to do so.

What was *not good* was the ‘adam being by itself. One human, and one human only, was not yet God’s finished creation of the human species. Of course, this is self-evident to us, but it may not have been to the one human with whom God was dealing.

Helper: This translation of the noun ‘ezer (EE-zuhr) is problematic at best. The issue is that this noun is more accurately two nouns. The two nouns are spelled the same everywhere in the Hebrew Bible because of the early conflation of two letters into one. The English word “bear” is a similar analogy: “Bear,” the animal, is from the Old English word *bera* (BIHR-uh); “bear,” the verb meaning “to carry,” is from the Greek word *pherein*.

Context tells us which of these two meanings is correct. In the same way, context is the deciding factor in each of the 21 occurrences of ‘ezer.

In eight of these occurrences, ‘ezer probably does mean “help/helper”; in every case, the “Helper” is God. It would need very strong evidence to make the “helper” not God in this context (see also v. 20).

In the other 11 contexts, ‘ezer means “a strength” or “a power” in the sense of a self-directed entity. The two occurrences here and in verse 20 also mean “a strength, a power.” Most important of these is the single Hebrew word *kenegdo* [keh-nehg-DOE] that follows ‘ezer in these verses. The first syllable *ke-* is a preposition meaning “like, as, according to.” Whatever the ‘ezer would be, it would be “like” the ‘adam that God already had formed; it would be the same species. The second element, *neged*, is another preposition, “facing.” The post-biblical rabbis used *kenegdo* to refer specifically to one facing another as an equal, not as a subordinate. We have not begun to lay out all the evidence, but that must be its meaning here as well. The phrase ‘ezer *kenegdo* means, “a power/strength that is like/corresponding/equal to him.”

Of course we are not autonomous with respect to God. This phrase teaches, however, that the one whom God would create as the ‘ezer *kenegdo*, the *helper suitable for him*, would be autonomous with respect to the one already formed, as that one would be to this one. In and through this creation text, God intends to teach that no human

or group of humans has the right—existentially, by virtue of creation—to rule over any other human or group of humans. Forceful rule is a later construct—a construct of sin, no less—born of our failed attempt to establish our independence from God.

19-20. *God had formed the other animals and now brought them to the one ‘adam to name.* The important reason here is that, in studying them carefully enough to name them, the ‘adam also saw that none was a “power” like and corresponding to the ‘adam. None was another ‘adam. Now the one ‘adam was ready for what God would do next, as the culmination of God’s creation of the human species.



The Latin phrase above this panel on this bronze, 12th-century Italian door describes Eve as Adam’s servant. When “helper” (Genesis 2:18, 20) is thought to envisage a weaker assistant, the portrait of Eve that emerges depicts her as Adam’s secretary, diligently taking the official minutes as her “boss” names the animals. This is decidedly not what the writer of Genesis had in mind.

3. Completion of the Species (Genesis 2:21-25)

21 So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh.

22 Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

23 The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.”

24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

25 Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

21. With the one 'adam now understanding that the human creation was not yet complete, God acted one more time. Mercy dictated the state of deep sleep until the wound was closed.

The noun *tsela'* (tsay-LAH) occurs 40 times in the Hebrew Bible. Nowhere else is it translated *ribs*, nor should it be here. God "took one of its [his] sides,"[†] or "took from one of its [his] sides."[†] Whatever God took from the one 'adam, it was more than a single rib, as the man's words in verse 23 affirm (there we can call him "man").

22. *Made*: The verb reporting God's work here is better translated "built."[†] Up close and personally, God had "formed" the first 'adam as a potter forms a vessel or an artist a clay sculpture (v. 7). Now, again up close and personally, God "built" the "side"[†] taken from the first 'adam into a woman. The loving, intimate care with which God formed the first God now used in building the next. God was hands-on throughout the extended process. From our creation, whether male or female, we matter to God.

The text continues, "and [God] brought her to the [first] 'adam."[†] The reader is not wrong to see in this statement a testament to God's joy in bringing together these two as the culmination of the original creation on this earth. All species designed to be paired now were paired. These two, now (finally!) together, were simply the last and the best. And God was happy!

23. This verse begins, "Then the 'adam said."[†] In a moment, he would make his own happy pronouncement that the woman also was 'adam. This introduction to his small elegant poem, however, reminds the reader (we do tend to forget the important stuff too quickly!) that he also still remained 'adam. Whereas there had been one, now there were two.

The man's poetic proclamation of the woman as *bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh* confirms what we noted above: What (whom) God would make would be the *ezer kenegdo*, the "power/strength that is like/



Adam and Eve by Derek Anson (ca. 1885), a painting in St. Nicholas' Church in Essex, England.

corresponding/equal to him," that the man had not been able to find among the animals he had named (v. 20). Of course, God had known what God was doing. It was important, though, for the man to recognize his own kind and his equal when she appeared before him for the first time.

Another evidence that this passage is intended to teach gender equality ("egalitarian," not "complementarian") is that the man identified them both here using common nouns, not proper names. Neither did he use the entire vocabulary necessary for a formal naming in the Hebrew Bible. This was **not** a naming, only an announcement of common noun referents for each.

24-25. Verse 24 does not continue the man's mini-poem; it is an editorial comment. Perhaps because of its positioning almost as an aside, it becomes a vivid, powerful statement of God's creation intentions. It stands against the family and other hierarchical systems that became almost the universal cultural norm following our fatal rebellion in Eden. Custom often dictated, and still does in some cultures, that the bride joins her husband's family in a new marriage. The groom is subject to his

father until the father's death; the bride becomes subject, not only to her husband and his father, but to all the women of the household who "outrank" her.

God's creation intentions for human autonomy, with respect to each other, stands these kinds of cultural traditions on their heads. God's plan for humanity is that upon their marriage, a man would leave the authority of both his father and his mother. The newlyweds would establish their own household, accountable equally to each other, and both of them accountable, together, to God. A worthy goal for every household, in every time!

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