

# Union with God

*Karam Ram*

Scripture, “given by the inspiration of God”, is refracted through the lens of many cultures, whose world-views are profoundly different from our own. This does not mean that the Bible has nothing to say to us today or that we should be oblivious to its strangeness. In fact, we need to be aware of our own peculiarity too, and how profoundly the world in which we live has changed over the last century, shaping our cultural setting, with its own values and attitudes. The Bible consists of records of ancient cultures, societies, families and situations where patriarchy is assumed and misogyny is often rife: stories of fallen humanity outside the garden. While that is true, the Bible is also much more than that. It is sacred history through which God has passed and left his trace in the form of narrative and legal texts; poetry, wisdom literature, prophecy, hymns and letters.<sup>1</sup> It contains categories of thought whose intertwined logic may perplex us; with literal, figurative and allegorical ways of thinking, whose purpose is to help us share in the Life of God<sup>2</sup> and the Word made flesh. This is the grand narrative of the Spirit that we should try to recover and understand: this is scripture’s subtext.

The story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis is a good example of these layered and complex texts. It would be fair to say that, more than any other biblical story, it has had a deeply negative impact on women throughout history. For at least 2,000 years it has been interpreted in terms that all women have been identified with Eve in Genesis 3. The over layering of Genesis 3 with a patriarchal ideology has obscured the fact that the Apostle Paul, first and foremost, regarded the events of Genesis 3, as Adam’s failure, a human failure, when he laid out the theology of salvation through Christ in Romans 1-8.<sup>3</sup> Adam has never been regarded as a

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<sup>1</sup> The Levinas Reader by Sean Hand, The Call to Exegesis, p 193

<sup>2</sup> Eph 4:17-20 cp 1John 1:1-4 The Life of God made flesh is our central theme

<sup>3</sup> Rom 5:12-19 “through one man sin entered the world”

representative of male humanity in the way that Eve seems to have been of female humanity. This is profoundly ironic, since Adam's disobedience was an act of rebellion, and rather than accept personal responsibility, he accused God: "The woman whom You gave to be with me".<sup>4</sup> Here too was the first act of misogyny. Subsequent readings of these passages illustrate how subject the Bible is to cultural refraction and how distorted and damaging those images can be.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the bible has been subjected to feminist critiques for over a century now, as first, second and third wave feminisms have arisen and have articulated a variety of positions with regards to scripture. Those stances vary from conservative to radical.<sup>5</sup>

Conservative feminists attempted to accommodate biblical values and feminism, so that no text, however challenging was rejected but re-interpreted. Other feminist critics, while maintaining an allegiance to a particular tradition, have argued that texts that appear to denigrate women and support misogyny are 'time-bound' and not universally prescriptive. At the other end of this spectrum, we have feminist positions that completely reject biblical texts along with the traditions they represent, regarding them as irredeemably male-centred and misogynistic.

These critiques should be welcomed as they articulate another useful diagnosis of the problems of religion and culture. In fact, these critiques present a profound opportunity to re-think our relationship with God and each other, in terms, that are authentically in keeping with the Life of the God.

## The maleness of God

The "maleness" of God in the Bible may be problematic for some as the root of patriarchy. The dominant pronoun used in relation to God in the Bible is "he" and virtually all the synonyms used about God are male. Indeed, whereas the God of Israel was always referred to in male terms, it was apostate Israel and the Gentiles who worshipped female deities. Here was a clear and unambiguous line of difference between the "one true and living God" and the polytheistic systems of the heathen that incorporated both male and female deities into their systems of worship and cultures. The question is, why is this monotheistic, gendered concept of

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<sup>4</sup> Gen 3:12

<sup>5</sup> The Bible and Culture: edited by John F.A. Sawyer p 464-477

God significant, and how does it relate to the question of what it means to be in the image of God?

## Union with God

One of the Bible's most striking claims is that men and women became alienated from each other as a result of their alienation from God.<sup>6</sup> The recovery of the world then takes place through the re-uniting of God and Humanity representing male and female principles.

Revelation 21 states,

*And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. (Rev 21:2-3)*

The goal of history, the consummation of God's purpose in the Kingdom of God, is compared to a bride and groom on their wedding day. This is not just poetic license or a rhetorical flourish, for God recognises himself as a relational God all the way through scripture: it is the reason why he created the universe, humanity, made promises and has a future in mind for the world. Books like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea describe God's relationship with Israel as a marriage: God is the original husband. The language is often passionate and intimate; love, tenderness, hurt, anguish, vulnerability and most of all the desire for union. But are we guilty of anthropomorphising God? Are we assuming that God has human characteristics? From scripture's perspective, the truth is the other way round: we are made in his image. He formed the capacity for his characteristics in us when he created men and women.

That is why the Apostle Paul sees human marriage as a simile of nothing less than the Life of God himself. In Ephesians 5, Paul, quoting Genesis 2, and the story of the creation of Eve, states:

*For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. (Eph 5:30-32)*

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<sup>6</sup> Gen 3:6-11, contrast this to their state in 2:23-25

## Genesis 2

The Bible's conception of humanity is unique because the primal human story in Genesis 2 has at its core a mystery, a deeper truth than is first appreciated, the truth about God himself.

*And the Lord God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him." (Gen 2:18, NKJV)*

*And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman,<sup>7</sup> because she was taken out of Man.<sup>8</sup> Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. (Gen 2:18-25)*

God had declared his intention to make Adam in his own image, in Genesis 1, and God's pleasure in the act of creation had been complete because the phrase, "it was good" is repeated seven times.<sup>9</sup> But here, in Genesis 2, for the first time, there is something that does not please the LORD God: "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him."

The LORD God is the 'I' that understands that it is not good that Adam should be alone – the 'I' that understands Adam's need before Adam himself does.<sup>10</sup> The shared identity between God and Man (the one being the image of the other: a living soul of Spirit) means that both share an inherent quality that God recognises in himself. This inherent quality is that "the self cannot find meaning with its own being-in-the-world". This is true most of all for God himself.

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<sup>7</sup> Hebrew: Ishshah

<sup>8</sup> Hebrew: Ish

<sup>9</sup> Gen 1:3,10,12,18,21,25 & 31

<sup>10</sup> In Genesis 2, the 'LORD God' is Yahweh God himself.

For how could God demonstrate his attributes; faithfulness, compassion, long suffering, grace, goodness, truth, mercy, forgiveness, and justice with only himself?<sup>11</sup> God's attributes necessitate beings to whom such qualities could be demonstrated and understood by, and so likewise without Eve, what would Adam be?

Adam, made in the image of God, is divided into two separate beings, Adam and Eve. God divided his image. God did not clone Adam into two Adams. Adam was not created to be a narcissist. He did not create Eve separately from the dust of the earth. Eve was a unique being taken from his living tissue. They were from the same whole, complementary, mirrored out of each other: a masculine Adam and a feminine Adam. They were part of each other in a way that no other animal pairs were. They were necessary to each other, in a way that no other animal pairs were. Animal pairs only came together for procreation but Adam and Eve were necessary to each other to reflect their Maker, because together they were the "Adam" in the image of God.<sup>12</sup>

No corresponding companion was found for Adam from all the animals that he'd named. Naming signified his dominion over the animals. But Adam did not name Eve, not here, not yet. Love, in order to be love, has to be love of the other, the one that can challenge us and make us suffer. She was his other, his complementary. She was not taken from his head or his feet. She was not his superior or inferior: she was not his pet or object. Rather, she is described as being built from his side. This is temple language.<sup>13</sup> They were the first temple because their life together was meant to be a vessel for the Life of God: his characteristics of compassion, graciousness, long suffering and faithful loving kindness, to each other.<sup>14</sup>

There is that profoundly sublime moment when Adam recognising part of himself says "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh". I am thou and thou art I. It's the most moving thing that Adam ever says. No culture, distance, fantasy, lust, or foreknowledge interfere here between

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<sup>11</sup> Genesis 1:1 Psalm 136; 145:8-16; Romans 1:20 – Paul says, For, since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature —have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made... so that creation is the context against which God reveals his divine nature or character – Exodus 33:18, 19 cp 34:5-9

<sup>12</sup> Gen 1:27, 5:1-2

<sup>13</sup> The word "rib" or "side" in Gen 2:21 is used extensively in the context of the tabernacle and its furniture; Ex 25:12; 25:14; 26:20,26,27,35; 27:7; 30:4; 36:25,31,32; 37:3,5, 27; 38:7. The word "made" in Gen 2:22 is the word "built" and along with "rib" or "side" is used in many times in the context of Solomon's temple in 1Kings 6:5,15,16.

<sup>14</sup> Ex 34:5-8 This is the name or character of God that was represented by the glory of God, or the Shekinah, over the Mercy Seat above the Ark of the Covenant.

the husband and his wife except this primal recognition: “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh”. Naked before each other’s faces they feel no shame in this state of total disclosure; they are insensible of each other’s otherness. No shame of nakedness, of revelation, existed in this innocent identification with each other.

Adam’s union with Eve is a picture of God’s desire to be with us in the most deep and intimate way. In Deuteronomy 10:20, Moses exhorted Israel to cleave to the LORD their God, using the same verb that speaks of Adam and Eve cleaving to each other; and likewise in Hosea, God, passionately expresses his wish to erase the boundary between himself and his people: ‘You will call me Ish’, my husband and not my lord, echoing the language of Genesis 2 in which there was no boundary between Adam and Eve!<sup>15</sup>

## The Covenant

The language and imagery of Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel demonstrate how deeply poignant God’s feelings were about his betrothal to Israel at Mount Sinai. The relationship was understood as a marriage whose greatest blessing would be that he would dwell or tabernacle with them.<sup>16</sup> The Ten Commandments were the basis of the union between God and his people. They were called, ‘The Covenant’.<sup>17</sup> We need to reflect on this in the light of Genesis 2 and, indeed, the way we think about faith, religion, and what it is that we think God wants from us.

The Ten Commandments were not a credal document or a statement of faith. They were not a set of agreed facts or propositions about God. They were not a set of promises made by God to the patriarchs, or a divine programme for the future.

They are about justice and righteousness and are unique in how they combine obligations to God and our fellow human beings in a single document.<sup>18</sup> They present union with God as a simile based on justice for those made in his image. They serve as a concrete, physical expression of the Glory of God, the Shekinah,<sup>19</sup> representing his name or his character, above the Mercy

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<sup>15</sup> Hos 2:16, and not my lord

<sup>16</sup> Lev 26:11-12, compare Rev 21:2-3

<sup>17</sup> Deut 9:9-11 compare Ex 20:1-17, marriage = vows + consummation; so likewise, here the union between God and Israel = vows (commandments 1 to 4) + consummation (commandments 5 to 10)

<sup>18</sup> John Barton, Ethics and the Old Testament, 2nd Edition, p12

<sup>19</sup> Compare Ex 33:18-20; 34:5-8; 40:34-35; 1Kings 8:10-11 with 8:16-21

Seat over the Ark, in which they were housed. They were a lived expression of God's character through which you could know God rather than just know about him.<sup>20</sup> That is why they were 'The Covenant': the basis of the union between God and Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Genesis 2 and the Ten Commandments present a radical alternative to 'knowing' in the object orientated epistemological tradition that has reduced knowledge, in the West, to the status of simply possessing facts, or having an experience.<sup>22</sup> Genesis 3 identifies that moment when human consciousness shifted from having a relationship orientated mode of being, to one of experiencing and using the world. Man's "original sin" was to choose to be defined by lust and pride, using and experiencing the world, and not fellowship or relation with God. And so they experienced the nakedness and pathos of alienation becoming self-conscious and hiding themselves from God. Since then, God has been made into a thing and the history of that objectification, continues not just through misogyny and homicide but in the passage of God through religion.<sup>23</sup> God wants more from us than just knowing about him. Genesis 2 is the closest picture that we'll get, before Jesus returns, of the relationship that God wants with us.

## The New Covenant

When two people meet for the first time, they might know about each other but to be man and wife, they have to *know* each other. The most profound and intimate act of relation between a loving husband and a wife is described in the Bible as knowing, knowledge or disclosure — to become one flesh. And this is exactly what God wants with us! To Israel he said "only you have I known". The verb is the same one used to describe the act of union between a husband and his wife. In Jeremiah 31 God promised a New Covenant marriage in which his people would know him.

*Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their*

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<sup>20</sup> Hos 4:1-2, here God says, "There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, Killing and stealing and committing adultery..." In other words, their ignorance of God's character was manifest by their violation of the six commandments in Ex 20:12-17.

<sup>21</sup> Hos 2:19-20

<sup>22</sup> Martin Buber, I and Thou, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, p55-57

<sup>23</sup> Amos 5: 21-26; Karam Ram, <https://www.pressjournal.org/blog/beyond-religion>

*fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, **although I was an husband unto them**, saith the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: **for they shall all know me**, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer 31:31-34)*

Under this New Covenant marriage God says, “I will put my law in their minds and in their inward parts and they shall know me”. The law was no longer going to be written on tables of stone and be external to them! God was going to put his law inside them, that’s how they would know him! The Ten Commandments contained God’s seed, his DNA! And what is the structure of God’s DNA – a double helix? No. Isn’t it rather his Spirit, conveying his characteristics; his compassion, graciousness, patience and faithful loving kindness? This is precisely what God wants for us, not just for us to know *about* him, but *to know him*. This is the grand narrative of the Spirit, the subtext of scripture, to achieve union with God and to have God inside us. The New Covenant is a Covenant of the Spirit!

Knowing about each other helps to build a relationship but it isn’t the essence of it. Marriage involves knowing another in a far more intimate way. That act of knowing alters those in that relationship profoundly: emotionally and spiritually. It will change the way they feel about the other and themselves so that they become one flesh: it changes their identity.

And this is the knowing that God wants of us, not mere facts or apologetics, but to fill us so that we are altered mentally, emotionally and spiritually. In the real encounter between God and ourselves, our identity, cannot but be changed.<sup>24</sup> This then is the true knowledge or knowing of God; a radical conception of knowledge that takes us beyond creeds, statements of faith and laws: it is life eternal.

*And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. (John 17:3)*

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<sup>24</sup> 2Cor 5:17



The ideal marriage then gives a new richer life brimming over with joy. John uses this as a metaphor in his gospel, for eternal life, a new kind of life that comes through this relationship with God. Right at the heart of this gendered conception of God then, is the assumption that just as men and women were taken from the same whole, so God and Christ are not complete without us, and we are not complete without them.

## The Bridegroom

*He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore, this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. (John 3:29-31)*

Jesus is the Bridegroom: the one who comes from heaven and is above all. The Gospel of John is full of echoes of the Old Testament in its imagery and figurative ways of thinking. The Word of Life, God's life,<sup>25</sup> that brought the world into existence,<sup>26</sup> had been manifested and was dwelling with them in the person of Jesus Christ. The glory of his Father's character, the Shekinah, was visible in him because his body was the true tabernacle,<sup>27</sup> the true temple.<sup>28</sup> When John is told that Jesus was baptising and that "all people come to him" his reply is one of deep joy: "he that hath the bride is the bridegroom". He recognised Jesus for who was: the bridegroom from heaven.

The first "sign" presented in the John's Gospel is at a *wedding* in Cana of Galilee,<sup>29</sup> on the third day,<sup>30</sup> with the turning of water into wine. Here Jesus assumes the responsibility of the bridegroom even though his "hour had not yet come". He provides the best possible wine, symbolising the most satisfying relationship with God so revealing his glory. His disciples are

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<sup>25</sup> 1John 1:1

<sup>26</sup> Gen 1: 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, "And God said, let there be..."

<sup>27</sup> John 1:14 Young's Literal Translation

<sup>28</sup> John 2:19-21

<sup>29</sup> John 2:1-11

<sup>30</sup> Luke 24:7, 21

transformed. This beginning, or principle of signs,<sup>31</sup> pointed forward to the coming of his time, when he would be joined to his bride on the third day.

The Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus in John 4 is also deeply relevant in this context. This area with Jacob's well was full of historic resonances for both Jews and Samaritans. Both claimed Jacob as their ancestor. It was here, in Genesis 34, that Jacob's only daughter, Dinah, was treated as nothing more than a symbol of her family's honour, when her brothers Simeon and Levi butchered Shechem and his family after he had raped and then pledged to marry her. This was patriarchy, red in tooth and claw. Married to two sisters, with two concubines, Jacob's life had simply conformed to the patriarchal patterns of the time and often with the complicity of his male and female relatives. We know of the effect of Dinah's rape on Jacob and his sons, but her voice is absent from the text — she is given no voice in her own story! The Samaritan woman encounters Jesus at Jacob's well, a single woman without honour and with a stranger, but instead of violation, censure or judgement, he meets her with respect. Her voice is fully present, she has agency, and effectively becomes an apostle. This is one of the longest recorded conversations that Jesus has with anybody. The bridegroom motif is also present here. Jacob met Rachel at a well; Abraham's servant met Rebecca; and Moses met Zipporah. The subtext here is marriage too, or at least its failure. He subverts social conventions by addressing her, a woman, a social pariah, and a Samaritan whose allegiance was to the first five books of the law.

*Jesus said to her, "You have well said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly."*

*The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." (John 4:17-20)*

Gerizim was the mountain venerated by Samaritans, where the Sinai Covenant was renewed by Joshua.<sup>32</sup> Their relationship with the house of Israel was fraught with hostility. The book of Kings presents them as foreigners transplanted in the land by the Assyrians<sup>33</sup> but nothing

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<sup>31</sup> John 2:11, Greek 'arche' signifies its place and rank in the order of signs: the arch-sign.

<sup>32</sup> Josh 24

<sup>33</sup> 2Kings 17

in their practice suggests any foreign origin or influence. Indeed genetic studies have demonstrated that they share common ancestors with the Jewish people dating to at least 2,500 years ago.<sup>34</sup> Their religious practice was more conservative than the Jews, accepting only the Pentateuch. They observed sabbath and ritual requirements with greater strictness, demonstrating that their relationship to the Jewish people was perhaps much closer than was first appreciated. At some point, then, a separation, a rupture, occurred between two parts of the same whole: an alienation that Jesus comes to address.

And just as she had been married five times, and been unable find lasting happiness, so their loyalty to the Old Covenant, Jesus is telling her, symbolised by Jacob's well, would lead to constant thirst. He offers her living water, a transcendent relationship in which they would know God, so that she can become a fountain of life. That deep joy and satisfaction is available to all: Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, women and men, regardless of our situations by accepting him as the Christ, the Saviour of the World.

*But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:23-24)*

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<sup>34</sup> <https://blog.23andme.com/ancestry-reports/more-than-just-a-parable-the-genetic-history-of-the-samaritans/>