

Toward a Jewish Ecofeminist Reading of Genesis 1-2

By Wendy Zierler

In August of 1895, “chief philosopher of the woman’s rights and suffrage movements”¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton published *The Women’s Bible*, a path-breaking collaborative re-reading of the Bible by suffragist women. “From the inauguration of the movement for woman’s emancipation,” wrote Stanton in her introduction to the commentary,

the Bible has been used to hold her in the ‘divinely ordained sphere’...The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned, and sentenced, Marriage was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering an anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man’s bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home. Here is the Bible position of the woman briefly summed up.²

To be sure, the Bible is a more variegated document than Stanton admits in this polemical encapsulation of the biblical view of women.³ Her core argument, however, that the effort to uproot systemic discrimination of American women could not proceed without addressing the religious origin and underpinnings of this discrimination remains sound and enduringly relevant. “When in the early part of the Nineteenth Century,” writes, Stanton, “women began to protest against their civil and political degradation, they were referred to the Bible for an answer. When they protested against their unequal position in the church, they were referred to the Bible for an answer.”⁴ Given this, Stanton argued, any political or activist effort on behalf of women’s rights would be at best partial or at worst ineffective until the Bible was made to yield a different sort of answer.

Stanton’s effort to “revise” the Bible as a means of addressing the systemic deprivation of women’s rights could not be more relevant today, as our society seeks to confront systemic racism, social inequities and environmental disaster. If we hope to continue living with the Bible as a source of wisdom and as an *Etz hayyim* (Tree of Life), it remains incumbent upon us to identify those places where the biblical text or readings thereof have contributed to the problem. Nowhere is this more critical than in the case of our reading of Parashat Bereishit, a portion that presents God’s founding, even ideal view of the world at the very moment of its creation.

¹ As described on the website of the National Women’s History Museum. See <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/elizabeth-cady-stanton>.

² Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Introduction,” *The Woman’s Bible* (European Publishing Company, 1895), p. 7.

³ It is also critical to note that in several places the Woman’s Bible disturbingly lays the blame for biblical antagonism toward woman solely at the feet of the Hebrew Bible and the Jews. For more on this see Claudia Setzer, “A Jewish Reading of The Woman’s Bible,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27: 2 (Fall 2011), pp. 71-84.

⁴ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Introduction,” p. 8.

It is impossible, of course, in the context of a short essay to address all of the ramifications of the Biblical Creation story on human life. Given our current climate crisis, a situation made more salient by recent epic raging fires in the American West and devastating hurricanes and flooding in the South, I'd like to look at the implications of the parashah with respect to the nexus of feminism and ecology.

What does a feminist reading of Bereishit have to do with wildfires and hurricanes? In order to explain how these issues come together in our Parashah, I need first to lay out first principles with regard to the feminist encounter with the two very different versions of the Creation Story that we find in Genesis 1 and 2, respectively.

Even a casual reader of the Bible will immediately notice the significant differences between these two accounts: the first account, an orderly description of the creation of the world by divine speech over six days, culminating with the creation of Ha'adam, male and female; and the second, an account of the formation of *Ha'adam* from the dust of the earth, the placing of this earthling in the Garden amid the trees and animals, and finally, the creation of woman from of a "tsela" (side? rib?) taken from Adam (now a proper name).

It is common among feminist readers of the Bible, beginning with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, to champion the account found in Genesis 1 over that of Genesis 2. If Genesis 2:22-23 makes woman derivative of and secondary to man, Genesis 1:27 offers the more egalitarian image of simultaneous male and female creation. As Stanton argues, "Here is the sacred historian's first account of the advent of woman; a simultaneous creation of both sexes, in the image of God...and their equal importance in the development of the race. All those theories based on the assumption that man was prior in creation, have no foundation in Scripture."⁵

Against the grain of those feminist partisans of Genesis 1, however, I'd like to point out some of the negative implications of this account with respect to its presentation of Creation as abstraction, based on divine utterances and conceptual, binary divisions between night and day, heaven and earth, animal / vegetable and human. It is no accident, I would argue, that it is in this version of creation that one finds the following charge by God to humankind, in Genesis 1:28, to proliferate and dominate the living environment:

כֹּה נִבְרָךְ אַתֶּם, אֱלֹהִים,
וַיֹּאמֶר לְكָם אֱלֹהִים פָּרוּ
וְרָבֵי וּמְלָאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ,
וּכְבָשֵׂה; וּרְדוּ בְּדִגְתַּת הַיּוֹם,

28 And God blessed them; and God
said unto them: 'Be fruitful, and
multiply, and replenish the earth, and
subdue it; and have dominion over the

⁵ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, p. 15.

**וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמִים, וּבְכָל-חַיָּה,
הַרְמַשֶּׁת עַל-הָאָרֶץ.**

fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth.'

Scholars have long noted that Genesis 1 is best understood as an anti-mythological polemic against prior Ancient Near Eastern polytheistic cosmogonies. As Nahum Sarna contends, Genesis "is part of the biblical polemic against paganism...and tells us about the nature of the one God who is the Creator and supreme sovereign of the world and whose will is absolute. It asserts that God is outside the realm of nature, which is wholly subservient to Him."⁶

Part of this polemic against polytheism, it would seem, is a repression of any trace of the *Adamah*—the feminized Earth or land-- in the creation of *Ha'adam*. It is remarkable that the word "Adamah" appears nowhere in Genesis 1, the text instead using the words "aretz" and "yabeshet" to denote earth or dry land. The absence of the word "Adamah" from this account literally detaches Ha'adam from Mother Earth, while the designation of humankind as created uniquely *Betselem Elohim* (in the image of God), places people in something akin to the sovereign position of God, with respect to the rest of the created environment.

One can certainly understand the importance of ingenuity, technology and know-how to human survival and development. Mounting evidence about climate change, however, has shown the undeniably deleterious effects of unbridled human exploitation of the resources of the earth. In this sense, the uncoupling of *Ha'adam* from *Adamah* threatens the very future of human life on this planet.

It is on this context that the Creation account in Genesis 2 can serve as a useful, corrective resource. In contrast to Genesis 1, which excises *Adamah*, with its potential associations with feminine Goddess worship, Genesis 2 places this word at the forefront.

If Genesis 1 sets creation against the abstract nothingness of "tohu vavohu," Genesis 2 projects the lack that is addressed by Creation in concrete terms that link from the outset human / earthling and earth:

**ה וְכֹל שִׁימַת הַשָּׂדָה, טָרַם
יָהִיא בָּאָרֶץ, וְכֹל-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדָה
טָרַם יִצְמַח: כִּי لֹא הַמְּטִיר הָיָ**

5 No shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet sprung up; for the LORD God had not

⁶ Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), p. 3.

**אַלְקִים, עַל-הָאָרֶץ, וְאָדָם
אֵין, לְעֹבֵד אֶת-הָאָדָם.**

caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not an earthling to work the earth;

It is important to note that in Hebrew the word “la’avod” means to work, but also to serve and to worship. The laying out of the design of human creation as such, as the creation of an earthling with the capacity not just to work but also to serve the earth suggests a human capacity to venerate the earth without necessarily sliding into the kind of paganism considered anathema to biblical religion. In this sense, Genesis 2, which unapologetically describes the creation of “*Ha’adam afar min ha’Adamah*,” out of the dust of the earth (Gen. 2:7), offers a crucial counter-source to the ideology of human domination of the environment advanced in Genesis 1:26 and 1:28. The additional reference in this chapter to creation of the trees (2:9) and animals (2:19) from “*Adamah*” further strengthens the connection and interdependence between human and other forms of created life. The placement of *Ha’adam* in the garden of Eden in Gen 2:15, “*le’ovdah uleshomrah*,” to work and watch over it, further solidifies this bond.

Any investigation of a system and its ideology runs the risk of oversimplification if it reduces all phenomena to one origin, or examines only one set of sources. The complexity of the biblical Creation account, which extends not just over two chapters, but through Genesis 5, and includes a variety of competing or differing details, may vex those who want to boil things all the way down. But for those of us who want to see our values reflected in the text this complexity is precisely what enables us to continue to hold fast to the Torah as an eternal Tree of Life.