Holy Happy Hour—June 11, 2026

St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Church and Pro-Cathedral

The Gender World of the Bible and Early Christianity

Ancient Israel: Male and Female ... or More?

The Hebrew Bible generally speaks in terms of male and female (Gen. 1:27). Yet some Jewish and Christian interpreters have noted that the creation narratives leave room for greater complexity.

In Genesis 2, the first human (*ha-'adam*, "the earth creature") appears before the emergence of sexually differentiated "man" (*'ish*) and "woman" (*'ishah*). Some scholars argue that the story can be read as the division of a single undifferentiated human into two sexes rather than the creation of woman from an already-male Adam.[1]

Later rabbinic interpreters went further, suggesting that the first human was created as an androgynos—a being containing both male and female characteristics. For example, in the second century CE, Rabbi Yirmeya ben Elazar said: "Adam was first created with two faces (one male and the other female). As it is stated: 'You have formed me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me' (Psalms 139:5)."

Rabbinic Judaism and Multiple Sex/Gender Categories

The rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud (multiple texts compiled between c. 200 and 600 CE) recognized seven designations that today we would call sex and/or gender. From the online article "The Seven Genders in the Talmud," by Rachel Scheinerman, in *My Jewish Learning*:

1. *Zachar*, male
2. *Nekevah*, female
3. *Androgynos*, having both male and female characteristics
4. *Tumtum*, lacking sexual characteristics
5. *Ay'lonit*, identified female at birth without developing secondary female sexual characteristics at puberty

[1] Ken Stone, "The Garden of Eden and the Heterosexual Contract," In *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, pp. 48–70 (Columbia University Press, 2006)

6. *Saris hamah*, identified male at birth without developing secondary male sexual characteristics at puberty
7. *Saris adam*, identified male at birth without developing secondary male sexual characteristics because of castration

The article continues: “The rabbis did not use the word gender as we do today, as referring to a cultural construct distinct from biological sex. The seven genders they describe are distinguished by physical and biological realities, not culturally conditioned categories. But because gender has many implications in Jewish law, how the rabbis understood these categories has consequences for the rights and responsibilities such individuals enjoy in the community.”

Eunuchs in Scripture and Beyond

The ancient category of "eunuch" was much broader than the typical image of a castrated man and may be most closely analogous to our contemporary conceptions of gender diversity. Depending on the time and place, eunuchs might include people who had been castrated involuntarily, those who lacked expected reproductive capacity, or those who occupied social roles distinct from ordinary men and women. Jesus himself distinguishes between "eunuchs who have been so from birth," "eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others," and those who have "made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12).

Eunuchs often served as trusted court officials, such as Ebed-melech, who rescued the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:7–13), and the Ethiopian eunuch baptized by Philip in Acts 8, who served in the court of Queen Candace. Across the ancient Mediterranean, eunuchs could also occupy unique religious and social roles. In the Greco-Roman world, the *galli*, priests (or priestesses?) of the goddess Cybele, were often castrated and adopted clothing, hairstyles, and behaviors associated with women.

While ancient people did not use modern categories such as "transgender" or “nonbinary,” these examples demonstrate that gender was understood in more complex ways than a simple male-female binary. The biblical story itself traces a movement from exclusion (e.g., "No one whose testicles are crushed" may enter the assembly, in Deuteronomy 23:1) to

inclusion, as Isaiah promises eunuchs "a name better than sons and daughters" (Isaiah 56:3–5) and Acts presents the Ethiopian eunuch among the earliest converts to Christianity.

Rather than reflecting a single, unchanging understanding of gender, the ancient world contained multiple ways of understanding bodies, social roles, and identity. The presence of eunuchs in Scripture reminds us that people who did not fit conventional expectations of sex, gender, marriage, and reproduction have always been part of the human story—and part of God's story.

Gender, Sex, and Power in the Greco-Roman World

The ancient Greco-Roman world did not organize people into categories such as "gay," "straight," "homosexual," or "heterosexual." Instead, sex and gender were closely tied to social status, citizenship, and power. A free male citizen was expected to be active, dominant, self-controlled, and capable of ruling both his household and himself. Women, enslaved people, foreigners, and others occupied different positions within this hierarchy. As one scholar puts it, "gender roles—masculine or feminine, active or passive—were more important than object choice."[2]

As a result, ancient ideas about masculinity and femininity depended not only on one's sex but also on one's social role. In sexual relationships, the penetrating partner was associated with masculinity, authority, and citizenship, while the penetrated partner was often associated with femininity, submission, or lower status. A free male citizen could engage in sexual acts with women, enslaved persons, or other men without necessarily being understood as belonging to a distinct sexual identity. What mattered most was not the sex of one's partner but one's place within a broader system of power and social hierarchy. For the Romans, the opposite of "man" was not necessarily "woman." It was often "slave," "foreigner," "boy," or anyone who occupied a subordinate position.

These power dynamics shaped the world of the New Testament and likely inform several passages later interpreted as blanket condemnations of homosexuality. When Paul addresses same-sex behavior, he is writing within a culture where sexual relationships were often

[2] Ruth Mazo Karras, "Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities," quoted by Ibrahim Ibrahim in "From Ancient Greco-Roman Culture the Contemporary LGBTQ Community: The Transfer of Sex and Power Dynamics," in *Denison Journal of Religion*, Vol. 15 (2016), Art. 4

structured by domination, exploitation, enslavement, and unequal status rather than by modern ideas of mutual, committed same-sex relationships.[5] The existence of eunuchs, the galli (priests of Cybele), enslaved persons, and others who occupied ambiguous social positions further demonstrates that ancient understandings of sex and gender were more complex than a simple male-female binary. While these categories do not map neatly onto modern concepts such as transgender, nonbinary, or queer identities, they remind us that human societies have long recognized a wider range of embodied experiences and social roles than we often assume.

Early Christianity and the Future of Gender

Several early Christian texts imagine a future in which earthly distinctions lose their significance. Paul writes, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Likewise, Jesus teaches that in the resurrection people "neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Matthew 22:30), suggesting that the social structures surrounding gender, marriage, and reproduction belong to the present age rather than the age to come.

The fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa developed this idea further in *On the Making of Man (De hominis opificio)* (c. 379 CE). Drawing on earlier theologians such as Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215 CE) and Origen (c. 185 – c. 253 CE), Gregory argues that humanity was created in the image of God, but sexual differentiation was added in anticipation of mortality and reproduction after the Fall. Because God transcends sex and gender, Gregory believed that our ultimate destiny is not to remain bound by these distinctions but to grow ever more fully into the divine image. For Gregory, spiritual maturity involves moving beyond the limitations of gendered existence toward deeper participation in the life of God.

Gregory saw Christ as the clearest revelation of this transcendent humanity. In Christ, human beings encounter a form of life that is not defined by reproduction, social hierarchy, or gendered roles, but by perfect union with God. Thus, for Gregory, the goal of the Christian life is not simply salvation from sin but transformation into the likeness of Christ, in whom humanity's deepest identity is found beyond all earthly divisions.