

# A Man-Woman Shaped Hole in the Heart of Creation: A *Muthos*-logical Reading of Gen 2

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## *Introduction*

There are a number of interesting issues surrounding Gen 2 including source critical issues where the predominant view is that Gen 2 is an alternate creation account to the Gen 1 creation account.<sup>1</sup> There are also interpretive issues. Is Gen 2-3 the story of humanity's fall or is it a story of human maturation?<sup>2</sup> There are also ANE background issues. Does 2:5-6 describe a watery chaos or a dry chaos (von Rad) or something else altogether? What does **אֵלֶּם** signify in verse 5? Is it a stream, a mist, a rain cloud or something else? And there are also methodological issues. Is it helpful to read Gen 2 according to plot as do Jobling, Stordalen and von Wolde?<sup>3</sup> There are more issues surrounding Gen 2 but these are the main issues I plan to interact with in some way by offering a *muthos*-logical reading of Gen 2. That is to say that *muthos* or plot-structure is

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<sup>1</sup>"The cosmological ideas from which our Yahwistic account of creation proceeds are thus very unlike those which we met in P and must stem from a quite different life and tradition." Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, Rev. ed., The Old Testament Library 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 76.

<sup>2</sup>Derek R. G. Beattie, "What Is Genesis 2-3 About?," *ExpTim* 92 (1980): 8-10; David Jobling, "The Myth Semantics of Genesis 2:4b-3:24," *Semeia*, no. 18 (1980): 41-49.

<sup>3</sup>"[T]he idea that the present text is the outcome of a deliberate redactional shaping is not only unnecessary; it is certainly wrong." Christoph Levin, *Re-Reading the Scriptures: Essays on the Literary History of the Old Testament*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 87 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 51. Beattie also thinks that certain aspects of the text are incomprehensible as coming from the pen of a single author/redactor, D. R. G. Beattie, "Genesis 3 Revisited," *The Expository Times* (2014). Beattie suggests in this article that the line about sin's desire for Cain actually belongs to 3:16 and the text got misplaced through a copying error. Terje Stordalen, "Man, Soil, Garden: Basic Plot in Genesis 2-3 Reconsidered," *JSOT* 53 (1992): 5. For a similar analysis see Ellen J. van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 1-11*, Biblical Interpretation Series 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1994). Ramantswana also suggests that the need for a man to till the soil is not met until Gen 3, Hulisani Ramantswana, "Humanity Not Pronounced Good: Humanity's Death Within the Scope of God's Very Good Creation in Light of Genesis 2-3," *Old Testament Essays* 26, no. 3 (2013): 809. Other interpretations also challenge the text's view of God. Beattie suggests that the snake was right, Beattie, "What Is Genesis 2-3 About?"

the organizing principle of the narrative and that when read in an attempt to harmonize plot-structure with grammar, syntax, ANE background, and so on, we can move asymptotically toward a more confident reading. Specifically, I will argue that Gen 2 presupposes the Gen 1 narrative. It is a single and discrete narrative consisting of two parallel plot-structures that work together to create a single whole—a single picture of humanity in creation. Each plot-structure introduces a complication that is the undoing of some specific aspect of creation from Gen 1. Each narrative also comes to dénouement when its complication is resolved by the creation of man in the first narrative and woman in the second. The theological thrust of the narrative is that creation has a hole in its heart that only man-woman can fill.

### *Plot-Structure*

I'll begin with some words about plot-structure. I use plot-structure as a translation of *muthos* from Aristotle's *Poetics* and I mean essentially what Aristotle means. So there are certain assumptions involved that are based on my understanding of Aristotle which is to a large degree indebted to more recent interpreters, especially to Stephen Halliwell and Elizabeth Belfiore.<sup>4</sup> These assumptions include the idea that plot-structure is the organizing principle of the narrative (Aristotle says it makes a single action out of multiple events), that it is essentially a movement from complication to dénouement, and that as a mimesis of action it engenders philosophical or theological claims.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Elizabeth S. Belfiore, *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); "A Theory of Imitation in Plato's Republic," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-) 114 (1984): 121–46. Plot-structure is the locus of the theological claims, it is an isomorphism of reality that bridges Lessing's ugly, broad ditch on solid footing. Plot-structure takes the contingent truths of history and reshapes them into that which inevitably or generally happens, or, as Aristotle claims, makes narrative suitable for teaching ethics and theology.

<sup>5</sup>Contra the more prevalent opinion that narrative is one step removed from dogma, as expressed in this statement from von Rad, "The text of chs. 2 f. presents a *narrative*. It is not doctrine (at least not in a direct sense), but rather it tells a story, a part of a traveled road that cannot be traversed again." Von Rad, *Genesis*, 75. In Aristotle's view of mimetic narrative, the fact that mimesis shapes the narrative means that it expresses

One more thing about plot-structure as the organizing principle of the narrative. This is especially vis-à-vis a chronological reading of the text. In the case of Gen 2, when you begin the narrative at Gen 2:5 you encounter a tension between what Gen 2 is saying about creation and what Gen 1 has already said. Some people will say that Gen 2 offers another view of creation that complements the view offered in Gen 1. I would argue that even according to this view the primary organizing principle of the narrative is chronology. So if someone says, “Look here’s a problem, Gen 2 is inconsistent with Gen 1 because it’s talking about creation that’s already been completed,” you may respond “Well, it’s not really a problem because Gen 2 is going back and taking another look at creation from a different perspective.” However, in doing so you resolve the tension between Gen 1 and Gen 2 by explaining that there is a secondary organizing principle that overrides chronology, but chronology is still, ultimately, in play. Also, by doing that you set aside the tension and do not allow it to direct the reading of Gen 2. What I am saying is that the tension has a purpose that we should not set aside but we should allow it to direct our reading of the text. That is what I mean by a *mythos*-logical vis-à-vis a *chronos*-logical reading of Gen 2.

### *Delimiting the Text*

And now quickly let me explain my delimitation of the text. The text stretches from 2:4a (not b) all the way to the end of the chapter in verse 25. It divides into three parts. We have the title of this תולדות section in verse 4, the narrative set up in 5-6 and the mainline of the narrative stretching from 7-25. That’s basically the way the syntax divides the text.

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what inevitably or generally happens and therefore it is philosophical. That is, it describes a road that is generally or inevitably traversed.

### *The Complication*

The crux of interpretation for any narrative organized by plot-structure is the identification of the complication that drives the plot from beginning to end. Jobling, for example, who is the springboard for studies by von Wolde and Stordalen, suggests analyzing the text like a Proppian folktale. He rejects the traditional creation and fall interpretation of Gen 2-3 and argues that the main complication of the narrative is that the soil lacks a man to till it. <QUOTE>The earth needs a skilled workman; but the only one available is stolen by a villain, who wishes to make selfish use of his services in his private garden.<UNQUOTE><sup>6</sup> When you identify the plot in this way, the villain is YHWH who wants the man for his own personal garden but his plans are thwarted by the fall. Both Stordalen and von Wolde react to this reading but they stick essentially to a similar identification of plot. In their analyses, the complication begun in 2:5-6 is not resolved until after the curse of the man and after he is exiled from the garden when he finally returns to the ground to till it in Gen 3:23.<sup>7</sup>

For my interpretation of the complication I find Tsumura's comments on these verses convincing. He points out the following structure. We begin with two disjunctive *waw*+noun clauses that begin in the same way: וְכַל שֶׁחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם and וְכַל עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם. So there is not yet any bush of the field and there is not yet any plant of

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<sup>6</sup> Jobling, "The Myth Semantics of Genesis 2," 42.

<sup>7</sup> In Stordalen's interpretation, for example, this means that the ground is not made for man but man for the ground and "YHWH himself only 'accidentally' and 'unwittingly' supported that plot." Stordalen, "Man, Soil, Garden," 25. Von Wolde's take on plot also has implications for the theology she brings from the text. Similarly, it seems we could say she has a view similar to Stordalen's, that the earth was not made for man but man for the earth. In her article on the tower of Babel she interprets this text therefore as a sort of emancipation of the earth. She says, "one cannot restrict the earth's perspective to the human one. ... The earth cannot be restricted to 'human environment.' Being in a relationship with the earth does not mean that the human beings determine that what suits them is also best for the earth." E. J. van Wolde, "The Earth Story as Presented by the Tower of Babel Narrative," in *Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 156. These interpretations are weakened by an uncomfortable distinction between the soil inside the garden and the soil outside the garden and by the fact that I think it's possible to find a complication that more easily explains the progression and climax of the narrative. To do that we'll take a closer look at Gen 2:5-6.

the field. This is followed by an explanatory clause which states the reason, namely that God has not sent rain. The first and last of these three clauses end with the word  $\text{יָרַח}$ . Next come two more *waw*+noun disjunctive clauses that also have similar beginnings, that is, they begin with the similar sounding words  $\text{וַיִּשַׁח}$  and then  $\text{וַיִּשַׁח}$ . These are then followed by a subordinate clause that is parallel to the previous explanatory clause and states that the  $\text{יָרַח}$  (stream or mist) waters the whole surface of the ground. The first and third clauses both end in  $\text{וַיִּשַׁח}$ . All together we have a literary structure we could summarize as A-A-B || C-C-B so that 5-6 holds together as a literary unit.

This structure suggests that verses 5-6, which are six offline clauses that set up the narrative of the whole chapter, need to be read as a unit and as a unit they describe the background situation that is the complication that the narrative sets out to resolve. This observation allows us to argue against Futato's view that the  $\text{וַיִּשַׁח}$  of verse 6 is a resolution to the deficiency of rain expressed in the third clause. There is some debate about what the word  $\text{וַיִּשַׁח}$  signifies. Is it a mist, a stream, or rain or something else? Whatever our interpretation, it needs to submit to the more clear syntactical and literary structure of these verses which suggest that all four disjunctive clauses (no shrub, no plant, no man, and a stream or mist)—all four, including the stream, express a deficiency in creation.<sup>8</sup> Also, the structure suggests that we not take these as a list of four specific deficiencies where each one needs to be resolved and checked off in order to come to a happy end. The whole of 5-6 works together to describe a situation at odds with the completed creation described in Gen 1.

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<sup>8</sup>It might possibly be noted that the verb  $\text{שָׁקַח}$  is used here and that this implies irrigation or at least the giving of drink and so it has a meaning that would go against the idea of a watery chaos. See Gen 13:10 where the noun  $\text{מִשְׁקָח}$  is used to describe the land east of the Jordan and when it is also compared to the garden of YHWH. However, it is also interesting to note passages such as Gen 19:32-35 where the connotation is not necessarily positive and especially Ez 32:6 where the usage is practically as "inundate." In other words, the meaning of the word itself seems to be neutral and thus able to be used in a variety of contexts. The comparison in Gen 13:10 to the garden of YHWH gets its positive connotation and comparison with the garden not so much through the use of  $\text{שָׁקַח}$  as through the explicit comparison.

So let's follow the text and see how that happens. Let's not skip over the title. Gen 1:1 says "In the beginning God created *the heavens and the earth*." Genesis 2:4 says "this is the genealogy of *the heavens and the earth*." Gen 2:4 clearly connects us to chapter 1 as if we were going to continue with the narrative begun there. We should not ignore the connection the author is making, it should guide our reading. Then, right away, the first two clauses of verse 5, are at odds with what we have just read in Gen 1. Starting in verse 21 of Gen 1 there are 17 occurrences of the word כָּל. In Gen 1 God creates **every** sea creature, **every** bird and **every** creeping creature, and **every** plant (29: עֵשֶׂב, 30: אֶת-כָּל-יִרְקַע עֵשֶׂב) and **every** tree has been given to people for food, and they have dominion over **all** the earth and God rests from **all** his work. But verse five says that **every** plant is not yet. I would argue that what we see here is a deliberate lexical and logical contrast to Gen 1. Contra Levin, I do not see any reason why I should read this text as the accident of redaction rather than the purpose of plot.

And now the picture that we have in Gen 2:5-6 is one of a watery chaos. I'm drawing once again from Tsumura. The תַּיִם is <QUOTE>water flooding out of the subterranean ocean.<UNQUOTE><sup>9</sup> This is not exactly the primordial chaos of Gen 1, however. Here I think von Wolde is right that the title in 2:4 already suggests a shift in focus to the earth—not the earth as main character, as she says, the only character with a face and a mouth, but earth as the place inhabited by humanity.<sup>10</sup> The chaos in Gen 2 is presented as a world without plant for food, without man to work the ground and with a source of water that is untamed for agriculture. It is an agricultural chaos, a creation prior to the habitation of humanity.

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<sup>9</sup> David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Investigation.*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 161.

<sup>10</sup> Wolde, *Words Become Worlds*, 13.

We know this is not the end state of God's creative activity and so this creates a tension. As readers we can and should expect that this creation deficiency will be rectified and so as we read further we will pay attention to how this tension or complication moves to dénouement.

### *The Creation of the Man*

In doing so, I'll be trying to show that we have a two stage resolution within one narrative block that stretches from 7-25. The first movement is the creation of man in 2:7-17 and the second is the creation of woman in 2:18-25.

In Gen 2:7-17 the text describes God bringing order to the watery chaos by creating man, by planting a garden, by putting man in it with its trees for food and its rivers, and by putting him there to work it and watch over it. The description here is of a very habitable and even luxurious existence. In the midst of God's creative activity, the man is the focus of the narrative. There is quite a bit of detail in this text but if we pay attention to the structure we see there are just nine *wayyiqtol* clauses that make up the main line of narrative and man is the subject or object of seven of these clauses. Also, though God is the one who tames the watery chaos of the ground by planting the garden with the rivers to water it, he puts man in charge of it so that the man is responsible for its upkeep. In other words the narrative creates a picture where man is the focus of the resolution because God has created him and placed him in the garden to work it and to keep it.

I would argue that the description of God's creative activity in 7-16 is really enough to bring closure to the complication as described in 5-6 because God has essentially restored agricultural order to creation. But the author does not think like I do and so the narrative continues. We read that God had put two trees in the middle of the garden and now in verse 17 we read that if the man eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil then he will surely die. This section of the text ends on a note of ominous foreboding. I'll talk more about this later but for now simply point out that this short narrative has three

sections. First we have the complication which arises because of an intentionally created, literary tension with Gen 1. Second we have the resolution to the tension which is the taming of the watery chaos and the creation of man to maintain a state of order. Third, we have the ominous foreboding of disruptive potential.

### *The Creation of the Woman*

So now we turn to the second stage of movement toward dénouement in vv. 18-25. Once again we have these same three sections. We have a new complication in 2:18, a new resolution in 19-24, and a new ominous foreboding in 2:25.

Once again, when we read Gen 2:18 we find a statement that introduces the complication because it is in explicit tension with Gen 1. In Gen 1 the statement “God saw that it was good” occurs seven times and in such a way that it helps to shape the literary structure of the text and it helps the text to move toward its literary climax when God looks at his creation and sees that it was “very good.” Now, in 2:18, God himself says, “it is not good.” I’m suggesting, once again, we need to read Gen 2 in juxtaposition with Gen 1 so that once again we have a complication and a new plot-structure and again, we will let the narrative resolve the tension and we will not impose our own external solution by suggesting that this is a complimentary creation account.

Right away the author lets us know where we need to look for resolution. And yet he’s coy about it. He doesn’t say I’ll create a woman, he says I’ll create a helper that corresponds to him. It’s important to note that he doesn’t explicitly say he will create a woman. By doing it this way, the narrator presents us with a riddle: What does it mean “a helper that corresponds to him?” It’s important to note that the riddle and the complication of the plot are tied up in one. When the tension is resolved, then at that same point we also discover what he means by a helper that corresponds to him. But look what he does next. Next the author says that God forms the animals and brings them before the man to name them. Why does he do that? Is this mere chronology where the author records what

happened next? The idea seems absurd but the narrative itself plays on this possibility since at the end it explicitly states that no helper that corresponds to the man was found among the animals. But why does the narrative offer this possibility? Is this God's feeble attempt at creating a helpmate and not quite getting it right? No, this is plot-structure as organizing principle of the narrative, this is the author saying this (the animals) is not what I mean by a helper corresponding to the man. It's also a narrative tactic whereby he increases expectation, anticipation and tension. Since the answer to the riddle and the tension of the plot-structure are intertwined, by feigning resolution the author increases the tension and increases our curiosity about the answer the riddle. He's underlining the importance of finding the right answer. Then, finally, he resolves the tension by creating the woman and at this point we have the complete resolution to the complication introduced in 2:5-6. Creation has once again become complete just as we had read about it in Gen 1. We started the chapter with a watery chaos and we've ended with a complete creation.

After that we have the curious statement about the man leaving his father and mother and the two becoming one flesh. Why is that here? I'll come back to that.

Finally the text then ends when the man and woman are naked and are not ashamed. This is a blissful state of existence that is foreign to our experience of reality. Once again, just like in the first plot, we end with an ominous foreboding of disruptive potential.

### *The Narrative as a Whole*

So let's take a step back and look at what these two plots do for the theology of the text. I want to point out three things.

**First**, Gen 2 presents us with one plot-structure with one complication. Despite what we know about creation from Gen 1 we start Gen 2 with a watery chaos. This cannot be the way this narrative ends. The text resolves the tension in two stages. In the first stage God forms the man, plants a garden and places man in the garden to work it and

watch over it. The man was the key element in this resolution. This would seem like a fine resolution to the complication introduced in vv. 5-6 except that v. 18 introduces a new twist and points out that the man still needs a helper for this task of working and watching over the garden. This is where the author's feigned resolution comes into play. By doing this the author implicitly argues that no other part of creation will complete God's creation order except the woman. This plot-structure with resolution in two stages says this: creation has a hole in its heart that only man-woman can fill. Man and woman are the ones responsible for working and keeping God's creation order—nothing else.

**Second**, we need to look at these ominous forebodings of disruptive potential. Each stage of resolution brings us back to a perceived state of creation order or equilibrium. But each narrative ends with this ominous foreboding that warns us—it can all fall apart. The creation order of Gen 2 is an unstable equilibrium. You probably remember from high school math or physics that there is a difference between a stable and unstable equilibrium. A stable equilibrium can be pictured like a ball at rest at the bottom of a valley. If you apply a force to the ball it will move from its position but when you let go it will go right back to rest in its original position. That is a stable equilibrium. An unstable equilibrium is pictured by a ball resting on top of a hill. If you apply a force to the ball then it will roll downhill and will not, of its own accord, come back to rest at the top of the hill. These statements of ominous foreboding provide the sense that there is a real possibility of returning to the chaos of the beginning. Man and woman are responsible for maintaining God's creation order so that we do not return to chaos.

**Third**, after the woman is created the text states that the man leaves his father and mother and the two become one flesh. Adam does not have a father and mother. So why this diegetic intrusion? I think this statement is crucial for a biblical anthropology because it bridges the fall. If this statement were not here, then the logic of this narrative would stop with Adam and Eve. **The** man and **the** woman have responsibility to maintain God's creation order. But this statement distributes that responsibility to every man and

every woman—to every family unit, even after the fall. As a result, all people, especially every man-woman unit, have responsibility for maintaining God’s creation order in the specific context of their family and this is their portion of maintaining God’s overall cosmic creation order.

### *Conclusion*

My goal has been to offer a *muthos*-logical reading of Gen 2. There is much to gain by paying attention to plot as the organizing principle of this narrative. First off and least important, we can see that Gen 2 is related not only to Gen 3 but also to Gen 1—and in a very organic way. Just like Gen 3 assumes the trees and the command given in Gen 2, so Gen 2 assumes the order and goodness of Gen 1. In the interpretation I’ve suggested, Genesis 2 wouldn’t quite work without Gen 1.

Secondly, because plot is the organizing principle of the narrative, because the movement from tension to resolution creates a single action that carries with it the force of what inevitably or generally happens, it is true also that the plot is the locus of theological meaning in the text. It is not mere aesthetic. In this case the plot teaches us that in the very fabric of God’s creation is a void that only humanity can fulfill whereby humanity has the responsibility in God’s creation not just for subduing the physical world, not just a responsibility for creation care, but for striving against a return to physical, moral, and spiritual chaos. That actually seems to be in the design of creation from the beginning and the mandate does not appear to be mitigated by the fall.

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