

Why is it the Man rather than the Woman who Leaves Father and Mother in Genesis 2:24?

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Date: 15 May 2018

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[0 : 00] Hello, today I'm answering my second question that has been left by people. I'm going to be doing these questions hopefully every single day for the next week or so. The question today was left in a comment on my blog.

The question is, in Genesis 2, why is it the man who leaves his father and mother to cleave to his wife? The dynamic we see in scripture in various marriage narratives, as well as in something like Psalm 45, seems to focus on women leaving their parents, and fathers in particular, not vice versa. We see this continued in many cultures today, and our traditions in the West certainly focus on this. The groom asking for the bride's hand, the father of the bride giving his daughter away, etc. So what's the significance of it? How does it play out throughout the rest of scripture?

And what is its continuing relevance in humanity, households, and the church? I thought that would be an interesting question to answer, a very good question to ask. There's a lot going on within Genesis 2, as I'm sure you know, but I'll read the passage from Psalm 45 that is referenced, just to give you an idea of the sort of thing the questioner is referring to.

Listen, O daughter, consider and incline your ear. Forget your own people also, and your father's house. So the king will greatly desire your beauty, because he is your lord, worship him.

[1 : 24] And the daughter of Tyre will be there with a gift. The rich among the people will seek your favour. The royal daughter is all-glorious within the palace. Her clothing is woven with gold.

She shall be brought to the king in robes of many colours. The virgins, her companions who follow her, shall be brought to you. With gladness and rejoicing they shall be brought. They shall enter the king's palace.

Instead of your fathers shall be your sons, whom you shall make princes in all the earth. I will make your name to be remembered in all generations. Therefore the people shall praise you for ever and ever.

And then the passage in Genesis 2 will also give helpful context for the question. And the Lord God said, It is not good that man should be alone.

I will make him a helper comparable to him. Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name.

[2 : 25] So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam and he slept.

And he took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man he made into a woman and he brought her to the man.

And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman because she was taken out of man. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and they shall become one flesh.

And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. So I think just reading Genesis 2 you should get some sense of the answer to this question, which is in the immediate context.

The question in the immediate context is, Can a suitable counterpart be found for the man? And where will such a creature be found? And when such a creature is found, what should the man do?

[3 : 31] And so when the woman is created, the man leaving father and mother and being joined to her is the answer. The woman is the answer to the man's problem, that he needs a suitable

counterpart and helper.

And then the pattern that that provides is a man leaving his father and mother and being joined to his wife. Because the man's action is the big question.

Who is going to be there as a helper to the man? Who is going to be there for the man to recognise and cling to? And so that the man should be the one who leaves father and mother and is joined to his wife is not surprising.

Because the man is centre stage within that passage. Adam or the Adam needs to find a partner. And when he has found a partner, he must leave and be joined to her.

And so if it were to say, for instance, just imagine it was the other way around, that the man has finally had this partner brought to him after he'd been, God has brought him around all the animals, he's named all the animals, not found anyone suitable.

[4 : 37] And then God forms this woman. And then it says, therefore, a woman should leave her father and mother and be joined to her husband. That wouldn't make sense within the immediate context.

And so there is the immediate context as the first part of the answer. But I think there's much more to it than that. Another thing to bear in mind is that the leaving and cleaving should not be confused with a position on patrilocality versus matrilocality.

It's not the question of where should you live primarily. It may have ramifications in that area. But the issue is not primarily that. The issue is something far bigger than that.

Marriage is the engine of history. It's the place where old flesh is put off. There's a rupture with the old flesh. And then a new flesh is formed in its place. They become one flesh, the man and the woman.

And there's a break with the old and the establishment of something new on the other hand. And every marriage involves a leaving and cleaving for both parties. The man and the woman both leave their fathers and mothers and are joined to each other and both cling to each other.

[5 : 44] And so there's a degree of similarity in what it involves for both man and woman. But the shift that does take place in marriage is not a symmetrically undertaken one for the man and the woman.

The rupture with the old flesh for the sake of the new is primarily something that's undertaken by the man. And it should be noted here that when you actually look at the passage that I read earlier in Psalm 45, the focus upon the man, the woman leaving her father and mother, or in the story of Rebecca, for instance, the rupture with the past, in both cases, it's principally the work of the man. But the woman is brought to the man in these cases. The rupture is, in some senses, less pronounced in her case. She is brought to the man by father or mother.

She is brought to the man by her brothers, perhaps. There are other parties involved. Whereas the man, there is the presumption of a far more intense rupture with the past, that he initiates the union. And then the woman is brought to him, that there's a handing over of the woman to the man. But the man is the one who's made the primary breach or break with the past flesh union, the union with his father and mother.

[7 : 06] So the man doesn't need to be given away in the same manner, because his leaving of his father and mother is far more a matter of his initiating action and decision. He is the one who is generally pursuing the woman.

And so his rupture from his father and mother is pretty much taken for granted. You don't have to have father and mother giving the husband, giving the man as a husband to his wife.

That breach has already taken place. And it's taken place in the man's initiating action in pursuing that wife. And on the other hand, there's an asymmetric character to the cleaving too.

So the woman is not just in the same position as the man with respect to the cleaving. That there is a directionality there. The man leaves father and mother and he clings to or cleaves to his wife.

Now, it doesn't say anything about the wife cleaving to the husband, but of course she does cleave to the husband. But there is not a symmetry there. The cleaving is primarily something or the union is primarily something that is created by the woman.

[8 : 15] And the man clings to that union, but the union is formed in the wife. If the man is the chief person creating the rupture with the old, with the old flesh and creating that barrier between the old flesh and the new, the woman is the chief person creating the union represented in the new flesh.

So the man may be the head of the household, but the woman is its heart. She is the one who is the chief creator of its bonds, the things that hold everyone together. Her body is the site of marital union.

Her body is the site where the two are united in the fruit of, in the one flesh of children. The one flesh union finds its centre of gravity in her.

And so it's not, again, it's not a symmetrical thing. That the man is the one who chiefly creates the rupture, the leaving the father and mother, which is something that both parties do.

And both parties are implicated in the union, but the union finds its centre of gravity in the woman. The good passage in Robert Capon's book, *Bed and Board*, I'll read, that he talks about the significance of the woman in the life of the family.

[9 : 22] To be a mother is to be the sacrament, the effective symbol of place. Mothers do not make homes. They are our home.

In the simple sense that we begin our days by a long sojourn within the body of a woman. In the extended sense that she remains our centre of gravity throughout the years. She is the very diagram of belonging.

The where in whose vicinity we are fed and watered. And have our wounds bound up and our noses wiped. She is geography incarnate. With her breasts and her womb, her relative immobility, and her hands reaching up to us, the fruitfulness of the earth.

And then he goes on later to say, The mother is the geographical centre of her family. The body out of which their diversity springs. The neighbourhood in which that diversity begins.

Ever so awkwardly to dance its way back to the true body which is the mother of us all. Her role then is precisely to be there for them. Not necessarily over there, but just there.

[10 : 27] There-ness itself, if you will. Not necessarily in her place, but place itself to them. Not necessarily at home, but home itself. And so the woman, as the site of union, as the one who represents the union of the one flesh, represents one aspect of this asymmetry.

Just as the man is the one who primarily initiates this new union, initiates this new reality in history, this break with the old and this foundation of the new, as he leaves his father and mother, pursues a wife, and joins to her, and then she forms that new reality, there is a movement there that is significant.

And the asymmetry between the man and the woman here is also significant. It's part of how it works as an engine of history. It's also one of the reasons why same-sex marriage is just a parody of the real thing.

It can't be marriage in the same way as the man and the woman joining together in union, because each one of them brings something different to that. There's an asymmetry in that union that involves two parties, and if those two parties are the same, it does not work in the same way.

So that is a second aspect. The first aspect is the immediate context, and then the second aspect is the asymmetry of the union. So both parties leave, both parties cleave, but they do so in different ways.

[11 : 57] The movement, again, it should be noted, is from the man to the woman, one beginning with the man and reaching its completion within the woman. The man takes the lead in the initiating and the foundational action, but the woman stands for the glorious future of the union and the fullness of it.

We see this pattern in places like the book of Proverbs. In the book of Proverbs, you have at the very beginning, the young man with his father and mother, and the quest for wisdom.

Wisdom being represented as a woman on the one hand and folly on the other hand. And then he's also looking for a wife. Is it going to be the wise wife of youth, or is it going to be the adulterous woman?

And the person he chooses will have deep consequence for his future destiny. At the end of the book, it's the fullness of the wise wife that we see.

And so there's the movement from the young man with his father and mother, having to leave his father and mother and pursue the wife. And then it moves to the fullness of the wife, as she has formed this union around herself.

[13 : 01] So the work of the woman is not just this work of this individual who's good at multitasking, can do many different activities. She's someone who has formed a home, a world around herself.

And this world is something that has, in its seed form, as it were, her husband has pursued her. He pursues her in order that this world might be built up.

And then at the end, we see the fullness of that. That's what the fruit of wisdom looks like. So going back to Genesis 2, we see it begins with the context of the passage, and then it deals with the more general paradigm for human relationships, and marriage as an engine of history, a movement from the man to the woman, where both parties are involved at both poles, but there is a definite waiting in different respects.

So the man, the initiating action, the rupture with the past, is primarily worked by the man, as is the foundation. And then the union and the fullness of the household is primarily something associated with the woman.

One final thing to note. If you actually look at this passage within its broader context, there is a context of maturation and growth that provides a world within which this statement makes sense, not just as its immediate level in reference to the man, or its higher, more archetypal level as a reference to every man and every woman who enters marriage, but also as a reference to humanity itself.

[14 : 39] So the man in the garden is placed there by his father. He's created by God. He's created of the womb of the earth, the Adam from the Adam.

And then he's created by God, and he's placed within this garden, and he's apprenticed to God. He's given his father's work to do. So his father has formed the world and filled the world, and now he's placed within the garden to God and to tend his father's work, and then to learn how to do his father's business within the world more generally.

And so there's a familial type setting that's set up for us. It's a kindergarten. It's a realm of childhood, a garden for children. And it's a realm where they're naked, and they're not actually engaged with the wider, more dangerous, more challenging, the world where you need wisdom, and you need maturity, and you need all these skills that you've learned as you grow up through childhood.

No, it's a very simple realm. It's a realm where things are generally provided for them. And as they learn within this realm, they'll be prepared for the wider world. And so that context is part of the context for the leaving father and mother and being joined to the wife, because that is a move of maturation, a movement from the realm of the childhood union, with father and mother, to the realm of forging a new world of their own.

If you look back then, what does that mean for Adam? The man must leave the garden, and he must go into the wider world. He must go there with his wife as well.

[16 : 20] Part of the movement away from the garden and into the wider world, and humanity's calling, is a leaving of that realm of childhood, a leaving of the realm of the son just working with his father alone, to a realm where he is actually forming a world of his own, where he's not just a servant under God, working within God's household, but he's someone who has a house of his own.

He's someone who works with God as a co-ruler, one who rules under God, like the king, not just a priest tending the divine palace, but someone who's learnt from that and has gone on to rule within the wider world.

And so the bringing of the woman to the man, again, is the action of a father within that society. The man has his wife brought to him by his divine father in preparation that he should spread out and move into the wider world as he matures in union with his wife.

So he moves from the realm of childhood into the realm of adulthood and greater dominion within the world. And part of that movement will be joining with his wife. As we look through these passages more generally, from Genesis 1 to 3, we see themes of wisdom very much playing in the background in these texts.

Walter Mobley has some very good treatments of this in his work on the subject. I'd recommend you read that. But questions, for instance, why doesn't the man die immediately after eating the fruit?

[17 : 53] These sorts of questions are supposed to prompt the reader to think about what is going on here. In the same way, this movement from childhood or this movement from the realm of the house of the father and mother to the realm of a house of your own and a wife and a new union of your own, this movement forward in history, this progressive engine of history, this is something that needs to be seen not just on an individual level for each individual couple, but as something that represents the movement of history that humanity as a whole is engaged in.

And that Adam is experiencing this as he learns in his father's house and then as God prepares him to have a house of his own. So I think that gives some of the background for the order here.

I think the order is significant. It's not just accidental, nor is it just something that arises from the immediate narrative constraints of the passage that I mentioned at the very beginning. I think it's more, there's more to it than that.

As we look through scripture and as we pay attention to society and our lives, I think it will be borne out that this pattern is a significant one and that it's not accidental that it occurs from man to the woman and that there is a waiting and the different poles.

The union waited with the woman and the initial rupture and the leaving waited with the man. So I hope that helps and that maybe gives some degree of an answer to your question.

[19 : 23] Please leave any further questions that you might have in the comments below or any follow-up thoughts on this particular question. And I look forward to answering another question, Lord willing, tomorrow.