

In Genesis 1, we're all royalty

The creation story and the divine right of everybody.

by [Shai Held](#) in the [November 7, 2018](#) issue



Painting of Adam and Eve in a copy of *Manafi al-Hayawan* (The Useful Animals) from Maragheh in present-day Iran, 1294-1299.

If we truly took the Bible seriously, I'm not sure we would ever get past the first chapter.

Consider: in ancient Near Eastern societies, it was the king who was thought of as an image of God; it was he who was appointed to rule over others and to mediate God's blessings for them. This meant that from the very creation of the world, some people were destined to rule over others.

Genesis 1 will have none of this. It is not the king who is the image of God but each and every human being, male and female (Gen. 1:26–28). To put the point starkly, the dramatic claim of Genesis 1 is that we are all kings and queens. No one is destined to rule over anyone else; no one is born with the right to control or dominate others.

And the text goes further. When other ancient Near Eastern societies speak of creation, the narrative culminates in the creation of the civilization that is telling the story. The Babylonian creation story, for example, culminates in the creation of Babylonia. But the Bible rejects this path: the creation story told by ancient Israel makes no mention whatsoever of ancient Israel. Genesis 1 culminates with the creation of Adam, not Abraham, and its focus is on the creation of the earth, not the land of Israel. Neither the people of Israel nor the land of Israel is primordial. The Bible scholar Jon Levenson thus speaks of the “universal horizon of biblical particularism.” As important as Abraham is, it is Adam whom we must meet first.

How profound is the Bible’s commitment to a sense of shared humanity? Genesis 1 is like a hymn to biodiversity. The text tells us that God creates fruit-bearing trees “of every kind” and vegetation of “every kind”; God makes creeping creatures “of every kind” and winged birds “of every kind”; God creates animals “of every kind” and wild beasts “of every kind.” By the time God creates Adam, the careful reader (or listener) expects to hear that God created human beings “of every kind”—and yet the refrain is missing. The earth-shattering implication is that there are no kinds of human beings.

To be sure, the Bible will soon narrow its lens and place the spotlight on Israel and its unique covenant with God. Moreover, Genesis 11 will emphasize that God embraces and defends cultural, linguistic, and geographical diversity. No monolithic society with few words and limited thoughts is theologically tolerable. But before celebrating human diversity, the Bible first seeks to instill a sense of shared humanity. We are all, first and foremost, children of Adam (the Hebrew word for a human being is *ben Adam*, a child of Adam).

In the spirit of Genesis 1, rabbinic tradition teaches that God created Adam singly “so that no one may say to another, ‘My father was greater than your father.’” Just as theologically speaking we are all descended from one Father, so humanly speaking are we all descended from one father. And biblically speaking, racism and bigotry in all their forms are both an abomination and a heresy, indicative of a

brazen denial of God as creator of all.

The text goes out of its way to stress that “male and female [God] created them.” Sexism and misogyny thus have the same moral and theological status as any other form of bias: they are nothing less than an obscene desecration of God’s name.

Imagine what our lives would look like if we took all this to heart. How would we comport ourselves if we internalized the idea that every human being we come across—black or white, male or female, hedge fund manager or homeless man—is royalty, worthy of being treated like a king or a queen? Genesis 1 issues a breathtaking call to place human worth and dignity at the very center of worlds both public and private. A Talmudic sage teaches that as a person makes their way in the world, angels walk before them and proclaim, “Make way for an icon of the Blessed Holy One.” It is hard to imagine a more revolutionary claim than that—or a more powerful command.

We have a long way to go toward realizing that vision. White people often still struggle to see that people of color are no less human and no less precious than themselves; people who are wealthy often still forget that people who are poor are no less human and no less precious; people who are able-bodied often fail to see that people with disabilities are no less human and no less precious; people who are heterosexual frequently forget that people who are not are no less human and no less precious. Men often still forget that women are no less human and no less precious—that women are subjects, not objects, and have a right to walk through the world without being demeaned or degraded, assailed or assaulted.

To our eternal shame, religion often ends up on the wrong side of the struggle for human dignity. Beware of bigots bearing texts, of clergy who imagine that God hates all the same people they do.

Genuine religion is countercultural; it rebels against any and all assaults on human beings and their dignity. To serve God authentically, we are often required to speak painful truths to political leaders; no less, we are often obligated to dissent from corrupt religious leaders.

There is another radical implication to Genesis 1. In the ancient world it was the king who was responsible for protecting and defending the widow and the orphan; it was he who was accountable for their well-being. Recall where we started: according to Genesis, we are all kings and queens. That means that we are all responsible for the

fate of the vulnerable and downtrodden. What we encounter in the very first chapter of the Bible is a momentous democratization of moral responsibility. It is not just the king (or whatever other kind of political leader we have) who is responsible; you and I are too.

In these days, rankest forms of racism, misogyny, and xenophobia prevail in the very highest reaches of our nation's government. "Racial resentment" (a polite term for racism) is everywhere afoot. And like the false prophets of old, many religious leaders seek to bless and protect the powerful in their disdain for the weak and marginalized. In such a time it is easy to lose hope.

But Genesis 1 still beckons. Or perhaps I should say, the God of Genesis 1 still beckons. The only question is whether we have the faith and the courage to respond.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "We're all royalty."