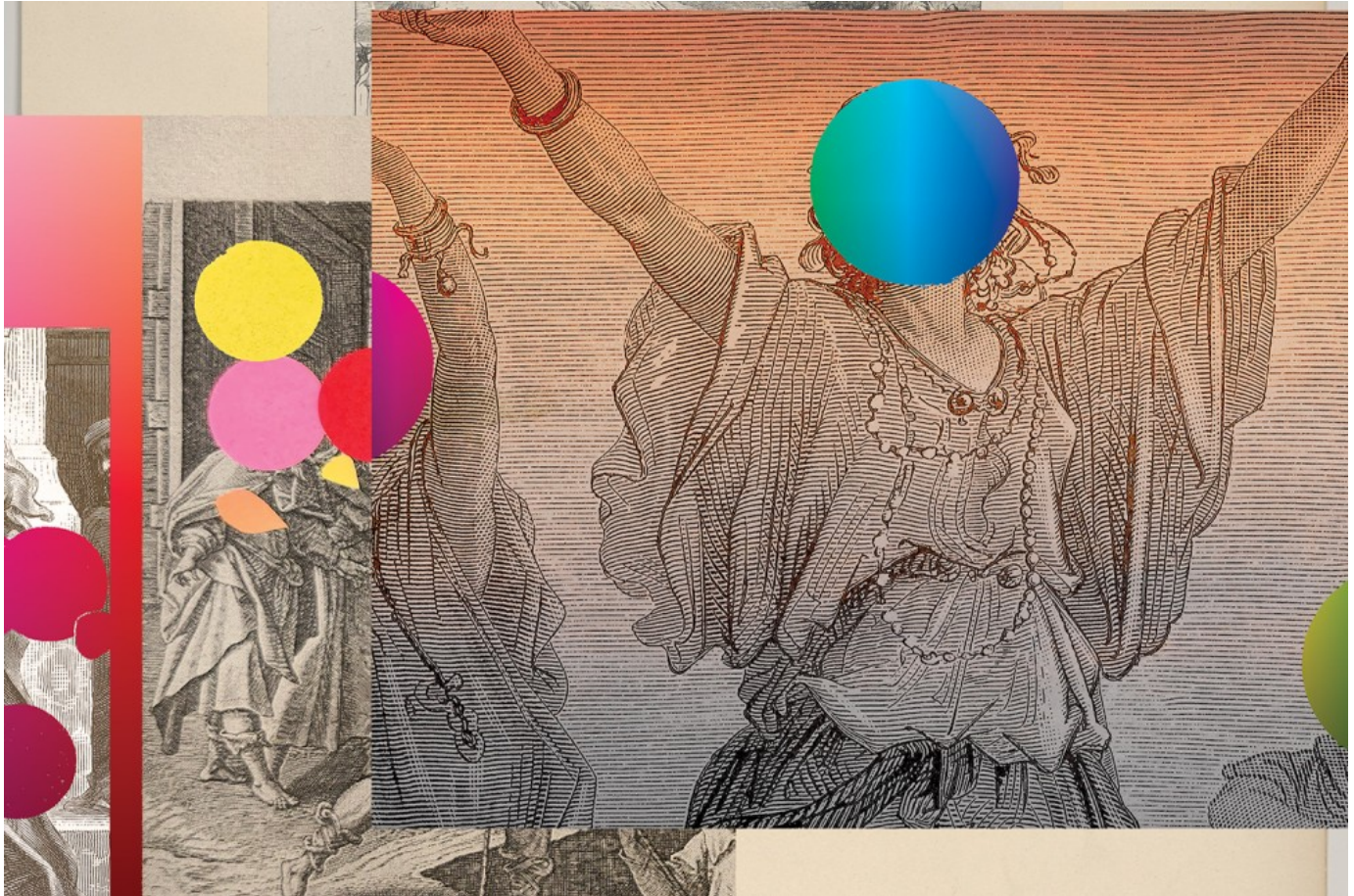


In the Bible, gender is not binary

The Bible employs many merisms, in which two contrasting words stand in for a whole spectrum. “Male and female” is one of them.

by [Julie Faith Parker](#) in the [June 2025](#) issue

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I'm not proud to admit it, but the first time I met a trans person, I felt awkward. It was 1999, and I was visiting my friend Jean in the hospital. Sitting up under a canvas of clean white sheets, she was telling me about a friend of hers who had recently transitioned from male to female. As if on cue, that friend appeared. Bounding with energy, she swept into the room. Tall and lanky, with long, curly, strawberry blond hair, she wore jeans, a crisp white blouse with the top three buttons undone, a

simple gold chain, and dangling gold earrings. “You look great,” Jean pronounced from her hospital bed.

“Thanks,” this beautiful woman beamed. “I didn’t even get any strange looks on my way over here. . . . But it was my first time riding a bicycle since the operation.” Then she added a monosyllabic reflection on the experience: “Ouch.” I had no idea how to respond, so I offered a small smile that I hoped would suggest support more than shock. The idea of someone undergoing gender confirmation surgery was new and almost alarming to me then.

My understanding of gender identities has expanded greatly in the intervening years. Reading books by transgender writers, especially Jennifer Finney Boylan’s *She’s Not There*, helped me to appreciate how hard it can be for trans people—and for queer people more broadly—to live into themselves. People who have the courage and support to claim their sexual orientation or gender identity often face discrimination, recrimination, and even criminalization. The violence done to queer people, especially those who are trans or nonbinary, can be physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual.

Much of this violence could also be characterized as biblical, since it utilizes the Bible to justify harm. Many Christians believe that scripture sanctions the existence of just two, binary genders: male and female. Citing the Bible to justify their views, some Christians promote anti-queer beliefs, actions, and legislation that can have devastating and even deadly ramifications for trans and nonbinary people. In many churches, the Bible has been weaponized to deny basic human rights, like the right to safety.

Any biblical text can be understood on various levels and in multiple ways. An anti-queer biblical interpretation, like any other, stems from the reader’s own presuppositions and biases interacting with a specific passage. Interpretations take root and have life when there is a community to adopt and share them. In this way, damaging interpretations of the Bible have been wielded against queer people through churches, often without any recognition that there are other ways to read these same texts.

The Bible’s own genesis begins when God mythologically forms the universe in seven days, as told in Genesis 1:1–2:4a. Day one: light and dark, giving evening and morning (1:1–5); day two: the dome separating the waters above and below (1:6–8);

day three: seas, dry land, and vegetation (1:9–13); day four: sun and moon (1:14–19); day five: birds and swarming sea creatures (1:20–23); day six: land animals and humans, both male and female (1:24–31). After all this labor, God wisely takes day seven for self-care and rest since creation is complete (2:1–4a).

Much is missing from this account. Evening and morning have been formed, but is there no midday? The seas hold water, but where are the rivers, lakes, and marshes? The planets and stars are not mentioned—did God create them? What about amphibious creatures? Elements absent from the text are undeniably present in the world and integral to God’s creation.

Instead of attempting an exhaustive catalog of everything in the universe, the writers instead offer a series of merisms. This literary device names two ends of a spectrum and implicitly includes all that lies in between. An example of a merism can be found today in traditional wedding vows when people pledge to stand by each other “for richer or for poorer.” No one assumes the marriage should break up if their financial situation stays the same! Rather, the merism conveys totality by mentioning opposite parts to signal expansive inclusion.

The Bible employs merisms repeatedly. For example, the Israelites recurrently long for the land flowing with milk and honey (e.g., Exod. 3:8, 13:5; Lev. 20:24; Num. 13:27). These two foods can be read as a merism: that which spoils quickly and that which lasts indefinitely. In Psalm 139:2, the prayer affirming God’s omniscience (“You know when I sit down and when I rise up”) clearly suggests the Deity’s awareness of all actions, not just these two. God’s authoritative assertion as “the Alpha and the Omega” (Rev. 1:8, 21:6, 22:13) indicates not solely the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet but an all-encompassing power.

The creation of male and female (Gen. 1:26–27) can also be read as a merism, consistent with the rest of this account. On day six, God makes these distinct humans as ends of the gender spectrum. In between are the people with other identities: transgender, intersex, nonbinary, and all gender-expansive people. Recognition of this fullness may be why God speaks of creating humans “in *our* image” (Gen. 1:26, emphasis added), underscoring inclusion. The binary language of male and female doesn’t happen until the following verse, establishing the polarity as another merism. God then pronounces this spectrum of human genders, along with the rest of this day’s creation, as “very good” (Gen. 1:31).

The second creation myth that follows in Genesis 2 offers another possibility for gender inclusivity. As Phyllis Tribble points out in her foundational study *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, the person formed in this account is “sexually undifferentiated.” The Hebrew word used to designate this original human is *ha-adam*, closely translated as “the earth creature” made from the *adamah*, or “earth.” (Another way to convey this pun in English is to translate *ha-adam* as “the human” from the *adamah*, “humus.”) While Hebrew nouns are gendered and the word *adam* is masculine, the grammatical form of this noun does not convey corporeal gender. Similarly, the word *behemah* in Hebrew is feminine and means “large animal,” but obviously not all large animals are female.

Yet most readers presume that the first human created in this account is male because translators render *ha-adam* as “the man,” imposing maleness on an ungendered human. Of the 15 times the phrase *ha-adam* appears in the Hebrew of Genesis 2:7–25, the NRSV and NRSVue render it as “the man” 13 times and “man” the other two. This translation not only magnifies maleness but reinforces the gender binary by linguistically erasing the possibility of a person who is nonbinary as our common mythological ancestor.

Granted, the writers of this ancient text likely had a male person in mind as the first human, because they were men and perceived the world through their own physical bodies. Most people in the ancient world woke up every morning with the same goal: try not to die that day. Only the cultural elite had the time and resources to acquire expensive writing materials and the skills of literacy. They wrote about a powerful male God and a first human who mirrored themselves. And yet, biblical texts invite a wide range of interpretations that are sustained by a close reading of their original languages. The beginning of the Bible offers promising possibilities for exploring and affirming gender identities beyond the binary.

Perhaps eunuchs are the most obvious examples in the biblical world of people not limited by the gender binary. Jeremiah 41:16 separates eunuchs from males and females by listing soldiers, women, children, and eunuchs, signaling awareness of gender ambiguity that we might describe as nonbinary. Typically born male, a eunuch would become part of another gender category upon castration. Clearly, a trans or intersex person today is not the same as a eunuch in antiquity, nor can we assume that our standards of sexual identity are “normal” or “timeless,” as scholars like Joseph Marschal (in *Intersex, Theology, and the Bible*), among others, have pointed out. Still, biblical eunuchs disrupt the binary categories that are often used

to harm trans and intersex people.

The eunuch's gender ambiguity can also be seen in ancient Near Eastern iconography, notably neo-Assyrian bas-reliefs, in which eunuchs appear like women with beardless faces and like men with wide-shouldered physiques. In her doctoral dissertation on eunuchs in the Bible and the wider ancient Near East, Janet Everhart points out, "As non-procreative males who are sometimes attractive sexual partners for both men and women, and sometimes celibate, eunuchs destabilize the binary concepts of both gender and sexuality." (For this reason, I use the pronoun *they* when referring to any biblical eunuch.)

Eunuchs appear with surprising frequency in the Hebrew Bible. They are mentioned 45 times, often as court personnel with high rank. Their presence can be obscured in English since the Hebrew word for eunuch, *saris*, is repeatedly rendered in the NRSV as "official," "court official," and "officer." (See, for example, Genesis 39:1, in which Potiphar, a *saris* of the Pharaoh, purchases enslaved Joseph. Potiphar's status as a eunuch helps to explain why Potiphar's wife lusts after handsome Joseph in the following verses.) Additionally, translations of compound terms that suggest a eunuch in a position of authority take out the word *eunuch* entirely. In 2 Kings 18:17 and Jeremiah 39:3 and 39:13, the words *rab-saris*, which mean "great eunuch," are simply transliterated as "the Rab-saris" in the NRSV, a term devoid of meaning in English. Similarly, a key court official in the book of Daniel (1:3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 18) is the *sar ha-sarisim*: "chief of the eunuchs." The NRSV translation of "palace master" erases the gender ambiguity of this respected person. Yet in other passages, both in Hebrew and in translation, the presence of a eunuch stands strong.

Jeremiah 38:1-13 tells the story of Ebed-Melech, a eunuch whose name translates to "Servant of the King." The prophet Jeremiah infuriates the king's advisers by urging the people of Jerusalem to submit to Babylon in the face of inevitable conquest (vv. 1-3). Seeing this counsel as tantamount to treason, the advisers (with the king's passive permission) throw Jeremiah into a muddy cistern (vv. 4-5). He is left there to die of dehydration, starvation, or suffocation as he sinks in the mud (v. 6). The mortal superhero who enters the scene to rescue the prophet is Ebed-Melech, an African eunuch from Cush, south of Egypt (v. 7). They leave the palace, where we infer they worked as a court official, and find the king at the gate to entreat him on Jeremiah's behalf (v. 8).

This eunuch has not only name, speech, action, and accessibility to the highest power in the land, they also have what the king's lackeys lack: compassion. Ebed-Melech fearlessly condemns the advisers as having done evil in leaving Jeremiah to die (v. 9). Hearing the eunuch's appeal, the king immediately commands them to take three men to pull Jeremiah out of the cistern (v. 10). In Hebrew, this instruction specifies that Ebed-Melech should take three men "in his power" (*beyadcha*), a phrase omitted in English translation that further testifies to Ebed-Melech's status. Ebed-Melech gathers the necessary supplies (rags and worn clothes to place under the armpits) and instructs Jeremiah so he can be safely raised out of the cistern (vv. 12-13). Thanks to the eunuch, the prophet lives.

Acts 8:26-40 also tells of a respected eunuch from Africa. While not named in the text, the Ethiopian eunuch nonetheless has an impressive job description: they are the mighty ruler (Greek: *dunastes* from *dunamis*, meaning "power" or "force," like "dynamite") of the Ethiopian queen Candace's treasury (v. 27). After worshiping in Jerusalem, the eunuch is returning home, riding in their chariot and reading the scroll of Isaiah (v. 28). The acts of riding and reading attest to their wealth and erudition. Instructed by the Spirit, the apostle Philip approaches the eunuch and offers to interpret the passage they are reading, known to us as Isaiah 53:7-8 (vv. 29-33). These verses describe the "suffering servant"—a figure who endures pain and even dies for the sake of others.

The eunuch respectfully asks, "I pray of you, about whom does the prophet say this, himself or about another one?" (translation mine). This same question has stymied Hebrew Bible scholars for centuries! But Philip is quick to answer with the convictions of a Jesus-follower, proclaiming the gospel of Christ. Hearing this testimony, the eunuch acts as an exemplar of faith and asks Philip to baptize them when they encounter water. Philip does so before being "snatched away" by the Spirit (v. 39). The episode ends with the eunuch rejoicing, inferably feeling fully accepted as a baptized believer in Christ (v. 39).

Queer biblical interpretation plays with imaginative possibilities in the text, destabilizing conventional expectations to yield fresh readings. We might therefore envision the Ethiopian eunuch continuing the study of their scroll as the chariot proceeds and soon discovering the passage we know as Isaiah 56:3-5. In those verses, God affirms eunuchs: "Let not the eunuch say, 'Look, I am a withered tree'" (56:3b, translation mine). We might imagine the voice of the Lord thus encouraging our Ethiopian eunuch, averring that they are judged by the same standards as

everyone else: keeping the sabbath, pleasing God, and maintaining God's covenant (v. 4). Their fidelity to God will be rewarded: "I will give in my house and my walls, power and a name better than sons and daughters" (v. 5a, translation mine). While the NRSV says that the eunuch will receive a "monument," the Hebrew word *yad* usually means "hand" or "power." A eunuch having power in YHWH's house is consistent with the recurring role of eunuchs as court officials, in this case with God as the divine monarch. Isaiah's prophetic blessing ends with a promise of perpetuity for the eunuch: "I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off" (v. 5b).

Jesus, who knew the scroll of Isaiah (see Mark 7:6; Luke 4:16–21), was likely familiar with this blessing for eunuchs. The most concentrated reference to eunuchs in the Bible comes from Jesus' lips in Matthew 19:12. Jesus is teaching about interpersonal relationships and naming people of various sexual and gender identities: divorced women (vv. 1–8), adulterous men (v. 9), celibate people (vv. 10–11), eunuchs (v. 12), and children (vv. 13–15). His understanding of eunuchs is bolder in Greek than in English. A close translation renders verse 12a as follows: "For there are eunuchs who, out of their mother's womb, were born that way." Might Jesus be aware of congenital eunuchs or babies with ambiguous genitalia? He then acknowledges that most eunuchs have experienced castration: "And there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 12b). In no way does Jesus condemn eunuchs—people who transcend the limits of the gender binary. Rather, he acknowledges them as part of God's realm, then adds this final exhortation: "Let anyone accept this who can" (v. 12c).

Two thousand years later, Jesus' call to accept all people in God's realm—including those who are trans, nonbinary, queer, intersex, and gender expansive—remains urgent. To be a queer, trans, or nonbinary person can mean risking attack simply because of who you are in your God-imaged self.

This article ends the way it began: with a confession. I am a cisgender heterosexual woman in a long-term marriage to a cisgender heterosexual man, with two cisgender children, a son and a daughter. Our family portrait appears almost anachronistically conventional. I do not presume to speak for anyone in the queer community. Nonetheless, I have shared my readings of these biblical texts hoping they might serve others who, like me, seek ways to affirm the goodness of scripture for all God's children and prevent its misuse. The efforts of those of us who are allies

with our queer siblings will not always be perfect or land as we intend. Yet innocent people are being made to suffer due to toxic biblical interpretations, so we need to try.

Let anyone accept this who can.

This essay is an expansion of a section of Parker's book Eve Isn't Evil: Feminist Readings of the Bible to Upend Our Assumptions, published in 2023 by Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group. Used by permission.

The *Century's* community engagement editor Jon Mathieu speaks with Julie Faith Parker about her article and more.

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