



12 THE FIRST LADY

(Gen 2:21–23)

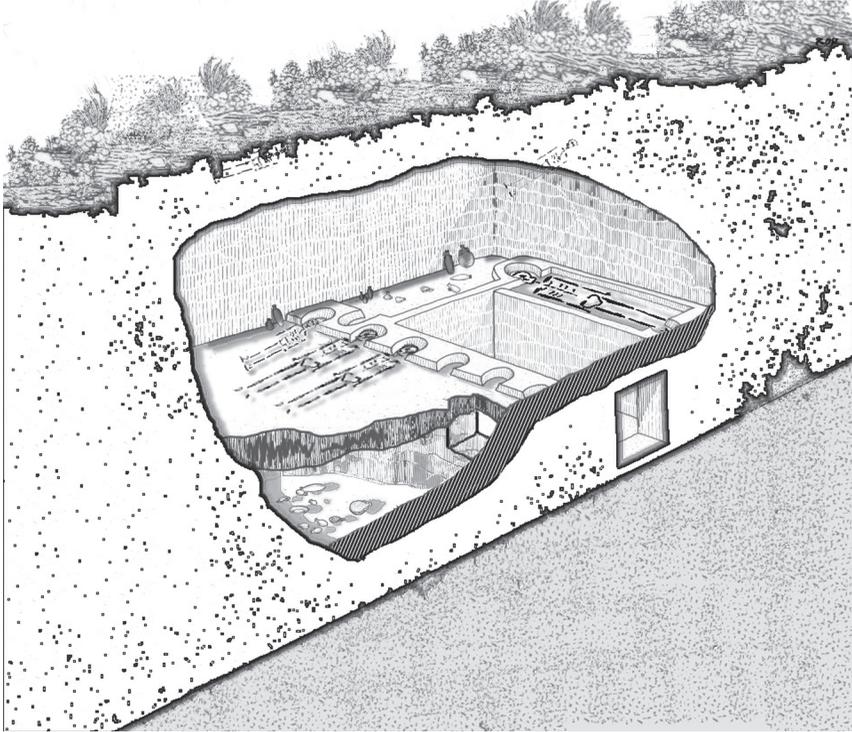
Genesis 2

- 21 And (so) YHWH god made a heavy slumber fall on the human and he slept; and he took one *miššal'ōtā(y)w* and he closed flesh beneath it.
- 22 And YHWH god built the *šēlā'* that he took from the human into a woman, and he brought her to the human.
- 23 And (then) the human said:
This one. This time. Bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. This one will be called *'iššāh* because from *'īyš* this one was taken.

The three verses about the creation of Hawwa raise interesting questions:

- (1) Why did God construct the woman from Adam's *šela'*, commonly taken as referring to rib?
- (2) Why does the narrator mention that God “closed the flesh beneath it,” that is, at the place from which the rib was taken?

A third question derives from Israelite burial practices. In the Iron Age, these consisted of placing bodies on raised benches in burial caves, leaving them until only the skeleton remained, and then, when the bench was needed again, removing the skeletal bones to a common storage niche.¹ It is reasonable to assume that Israelites were familiar with both



Tomb of a Wealthy Jerusalem Family around the Seventh Century BCE

Bodies were laid out on stone shelves in a tomb until they decomposed. Afterward, the skeletons were disarticulated and the bones placed into a repository excavated either in the entrance chamber or under the shelf, as shown in this drawing of Ketef Himmom burial cave 25. This procedure enabled a family to reuse a tomb for generations. (Adapted from a drawing in Gabriel Barkay, *Ketef Hinnom: A Treasure Facing Jerusalem's Walls*, Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1986, p. 24. Used with permission.)

human and animal skeletons and that they noticed that ribs are paired symmetrically. Were Adam a prototype, people, or at least males, should logically have had either one asymmetrical rib or a place on the skeleton where such a rib might have been situated.

(3) From where in Adam's body did God take the rib used to make man's helper?

The first and third of these questions are among the most asked about this part of the story, not to mention the basis of many jokes. The second question, as will be shown below, provides the key for interpreting this episode.

MESOPOTAMIAN AND EGYPTIAN PUNS

One response to the first question is that the choice of a rib may have been influenced by a motif attested in Sumerian myth and magic traditions. In Sumerian, a non-Semitic language once used in southern Mesopotamia, the word *ti* means both “rib” and “life,” so *Ninti* in Sumerian means both “Lady of the rib” and “Lady of life.”²

There are four difficulties with this clever explanation.

First, in the Sumerian myth of Enki and Ninhursag, where Ninti, “the Lady of the rib/life,” is mentioned because she was created to heal Enki’s rib, seven other goddesses were also created to heal his head, hair, nose, mouth, throat, arm, and side. The goddess *Nazi* healed Enki’s throat, *zi*; *Ninsikila* healed his hair, *pa-siki*, and so forth. This pattern of punning, where the divine names indicate healed parts of the body, does not evoke ambiguity outside the Sumerian story.³ Although this explanation of the choice of rib is theoretically possible, then, it is not ultimately satisfying.

Second, Sumerologists have not yet determined how the written form of Sumerian sounded when read aloud. It is possible that the words meaning “rib” and “life” were pronounced very differently.

Third, if punning was actually at work in the Sumerian, it is highly unlikely that a Sumerian pun would have been known to Israelites or mediated to them through another language. Sumerian was a known *written* language in Mesopotamia, but it was dead as a spoken one by the last quarter of the second millennium BCE. This was almost three centuries before Hebrew emerged as a distinct language around the beginning of the first millennium BCE.

Fourth, the biblical story does not associate the rib and the “mother of all life,” as Hawwa is called in Genesis 3:20. The lady-from-a-rib in the Garden story is named *’iššāh*, “woman,” a word associated with *’yš*, “man,” in verse 23, not with “rib.”

Another response to the first question is that the reference to a rib may be based on a pun in Egyptian, where the word for “rib” and “clay” is *imw*. Furthermore, this word may be written in Egyptian hieroglyphics to look like the word for “flesh,” creating a visual association.⁴ Unfortunately, the Egyptian story about Khnum’s creation of man from clay does not refer to the formation of a woman at all. This explanation, a partial response to the first question, must be deemed as inadequate as the

Sumerian one. At best, the two ancient Near Eastern stories indicate that just as the author of the Garden story punned—*īyš, 'iššāh*, “man, woman”—so too did other authors in different cultures.

Another way of approaching the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter is to reevaluate the assumption that the word *šēla'* refers to “rib.”

REASSESSING THE RIB

The notion that *šēla'* in this context might not refer to a rib is not new; it underlies a debate between Rav and Samuel, Jewish authorities who taught after the codification of the Mishnah, around 200 CE. One teacher—the Talmud does not indicate which scholar adopted this position—argued that it refers to “backside.” Since the first human was created “male and female” (Gen 1:27; 5:2), and the two aspects of the human were attached back to back, as written in Psalm 139:5—“you formed me [or surrounded me] in back and in front, you lay your hand on me”—the second aspect, the female, must have been split off from the backside of the male. The second scholar stated simply and without elaboration that the word *šēla'* indicates that the woman was formed from Adam’s tail (*b. Erubin* 18a).

The “tail” interpretation is more covert in the earliest collection of rabbinic homiletic exegesis, *Bereshith Rabbah*, compiled sometime after the third century CE. Here we see comments relating to the words “and he closed the flesh *tahtennāh*” (Gen 2:21b):

Rabbi Hanina b. Isaac said, “The Holy One, Blessed be He, made a fitting organ/limb for his lower part, *nōwy letahtiytōw*, so that he wouldn’t be disgraced like an animal.”

R. Ammi said, “He made for him a lock and a little chair attached to it so that he wouldn’t despair when he sits.”

R. Yanai said, “He made for him pillows.” (*Bereshith Rabbah* 17:6)

The circuitous reference is to the human anus, whose sphincter muscle, the “fitting organ” that has “a lock,” is not exposed because it is concealed by the buttocks, the “pillows” that form a “little chair” on which he sits. The first interpretation is launched by Rabbi Hanina from a consideration of the letters *nh* at the end of the word *tḥtnh* in the biblical verse

translated by NRSV and NAB by “in its place.” The letters representing consonant sounds are associated with the same letters in the biblical word *nāwāh*, “pretty, pleasant” (Jer 6:2), which is then associated with the related word *nōwy*, “grace, beauty, decoration.” The second and third interpretations by Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Yanai accept the initial word-play but amplify the meaning of “fitting organ/limb.”

Underlying these various fanciful comments is the notion that even though God made humans animal-like by providing the male with a conjugal partner, he still wanted to distinguish humans from other animals with regard to inherent dignity by providing them with natural privacy in the performance of certain bodily functions. To do so God removed the original tail, consisting of flesh and bone, and performed reconstructive surgery to conceal the incision and benefit the human, and then he formed the removed appendage into something new.

Homiletics and punning aside, these far-fetched, etiological comments explained not only man’s lack of a tail in comparison to other vertebrate mammals but also the presence of his coccyx, his tailbone, an obvious feature of human skeletons. (They failed to explain, however, why females possess a tailbone.)

One final rabbinic interpretation, most likely relying on Genesis 2:23, specifically refers to the material from which the woman was created:

Why is it that a woman must perfume herself but a man does not need to perfume himself? He [Rabbi Judah] said: Man was made from earth and earth never stinks, but Hawwa was made from a bone, *‘ešem*. Consider! If you leave a bone three days without salt, it immediately begins to stink. (*Bereshith Rabbah* 17:8)⁵

Whatever doubtful value Rabbi Judah’s statement may have for perfumers, its value for comprehending the biblical passage lies in its understanding of *šēla’* as a rare synonym for a more common Hebrew word, *‘ešem*, meaning “bone.” Bone, not rib. Not one of these rabbis considered the “rib” interpretation.

Most episodes in the story of Genesis, chapter 2, are replete with etiological information. This helps ground a hypothesis that the closing up of the flesh in verse 21 is etiological, too. Its mention seems to indicate that somewhere on the male body there is either a scar or what appears to be a scar caused by an incision whose origin is explained by this story. Although

most men are unaware of it, such a “scar” can indeed be found and seen on their bodies.

In a male fetus of ten weeks, edges of the urogenital groove begin to fold together over the urogenital sinus, forming the underside of the penis. Where the edges come together they form a seam, or raphé, which indicates its bilateral origin. A similar seam, though with a slightly different derivation, is found on the scrotum. Both are visible after birth and throughout life, appearing as a straight thread of fine scar tissue, slightly different in coloration from surrounding skin. A common anomalous development in which the urogenital groove fails to close completely anywhere along its length results in hypospadias, openings along the seam, which extends from the bottom of the scrotum to the tip of the penis.⁶ Hypospadias would certainly have drawn attention to this usually covered and not readily visible part of the male anatomy and to the normal raphé along which they formed.

I hypothesize that the origin of this seam on the external genitalia of males was explained by the story of the closing of the incision.⁷ This explanation for the mention of the closing of the wound indicates that Hebrew *šēlaʿ* is to be associated with the man’s penis, not his rib.

Even as this explanation provides an answer, it raises another question: Where did the “rib” tradition emerge? The earliest rendering of *šēlaʿ* as “rib” is by the Greek translators of the Pentateuch in the mid-third century BCE. They used *pleura*, a word commonly indicating “rib,” but also “side” as in the side of a person, an army, a place, or a triangle or rectangle. The “rib” understanding entered the European tradition through Jerome’s use of Latin *costa*, meaning “rib” or “side,” in the Vulgate—the Latin version of the Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church—and became fixed there by interpretive translations from Latin into other languages using unambiguous “rib” words in the target languages.

The specific conclusion associating *šēlaʿ* with the penis is anticipated by at least one midrash. Commenting on why other parts of the body were not used in the creation of the woman, Rabbi Joshua from Siknin (ca. third century CE) said:

God said, I shall not create her from the eye, so that she won’t be haughty, and not from the ear, that she won’t be an eavesdropper, and not from the mouth, so that she won’t be talkative. . . . From where

shall I create her? From the modest organ/limb, *min'ēber haššanūwa'*, that he has, from the *yārēk*, thigh. (*Devarim Rabbah* 6:11)⁸

The full explanation of Rabbi Joshua's *yārēk*-thigh explanation is clarified by the following discussion.

Disassociating *šēla'* from rib has strong philological support. In biblical Hebrew, *šēla'* is employed to refer to a number of different items: the sides of a structure, Exodus 25:12–14; chambers or rooms extending from the side of another structure, 1 Kings 6:5; wooden planks or support beams, 1 Kings 6:15–16; the side of a hill, 2 Samuel 16:13. In fact, the only place in biblical Hebrew where it may refer to skeletal ribs is in the Genesis passages. Its Akkadian cognate *šēlū* means “rib, side, lateral wing of a building,” and by extension, “direction”; its Ge'ez cognate, *š'le*, means only “tablet, beam.”⁹ All these nouns refer to pleuric structures. Its Arabic verbal cognate, *ḍala'a*, means “to incline, to deviate.” Provided with a slightly different pattern of vowels, the same consonantal root is an intransitive verb, *ḍali'a*, which means “to be crooked” or “to be bent,” hence the Arabic noun *ḍila'*, “rib.”¹⁰ The core sememe (unit of meaning) clarifying these various applications expresses a two-dimensional, geometric relationship between something vertical or horizontal but lateral to a main axis.

Accordingly, “penis” is the referent of *šēla'* in Genesis 2:22—a penis is lateral to the up-down axis of the male body viewed in profile. Both ribs and penises reflect the basic sense, the core sememe, of the root *š-l-'*.¹¹

EUPHEMISMS FOR *PENIS* IN BIBLICAL HEBREW

Other data must be considered as well. Although post-biblical Hebrew refers to the penis clinically by the terms *'ēbār*, “organ/limb,” or *'ēbar hazzākār*, “organ/limb of the male,” or *'ēbar qātān*, “small organ/limb” (*b. Sukkah* 52b), no such term is known in biblical Hebrew.¹² Instead, biblical Hebrew regularly uses circumlocutions and euphemisms. The difficulty with the latter is that considering something a euphemism may be the result of reading too much into a text: “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.” Nevertheless, examination of the general or specific contexts of certain passages indicates that the following words refer to a penis.¹³

regel, “foot/feet,” in Exodus 4:25: “and Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son and brought it next to his *raglā(y)w*.” (The

meaning of the last part of this verse that I do not cite remains uncertain.)

regel in 2 Kings 18:27 (= Isa 36:12): “Did my lord send me to say these words against your lord and to you, was it not to the people sitting on the wall who will eat their dung and drink from the waters of their *raglēyhem*” (reading with the Qeri; “their urine” [Kativ]).

kēlīy, “instrument(s), tool(s),” in 1 Samuel 21:5–6: “there is no common bread at hand, only sacred bread if the young men have guarded themselves from women. And David responded to the priest . . . : ‘Indeed women are kept away from us as always when I go out, and the *kēlīym* of the young men are holy even on a common journey.’”

qōṭen, “small one,” in 1 Kings 12:10 (= 2 Chr 10:10): “My small one, *qōṭonniy*, is thicker than the loin of my father.”

ēš, “stick,” and *māqēl*, “staff,” in Hosea 4:12: “My people, he inquires of his stick and his staff tells him because a spirit of whoring made them stray, and they whored away from their God.”

yād, “hand,” in Isaiah 57:8: “you mounted and you widened your bed . . . you loved their bed, you saw a *yād*.”¹⁴

yād in Isaiah 58:10: “you found the life-force of your *yād*.”¹⁵

**šekōbet*, “lying,” in Leviticus 20:15: “and a man who gives/places his lying in an animal will be put to death.” See also Leviticus 18:20, 23.¹⁶

mēbūwšīym, “embarrassments,” in Deuteronomy 25:11: “the wife of one draws near to rescue her husband from his smiter, and she extends her hand and grabs his embarrassments.”¹⁷

bāśār, “flesh, meat,” in Exodus 28:42: “let them make for themselves linen pants to cover the *bāśār* of nakedness.”¹⁸

bāśār, in Leviticus 15:2–3, 16: in a chapter dealing with genital discharges, *bāśār* refers to that member on the male from which flows caused by illness (often identified with benign gonorrhoea) and seminal emissions occur.

bāśār, in Leviticus 18:6: “don’t approach the relative of your *bāśār* to reveal nakedness.”

The expression *še’er bāśār* in the last verse, as well as in Leviticus 25:49, is a technical term referring to kin within the extended family. It combines *še’er*, a word referring both to food (Exod 21:10; Ps 78:20) and to a relative (Num 27:11) with one that refers to flesh and the male procreative

organ. The context of Leviticus 18:6, which deals with prohibited sexual liaisons, makes this use particularly poignant.

bāšār, in Ezekiel 16:26: “and you whored with the sons of Egypt, your neighbors big of *bāšār*, and you multiplied your whoring to anger me.”

bāšār, in Ezekiel 23:20: “she lusted on account of their concubines, those whose *bāšār* is the *bāšār* of donkeys, and their flow the flow of stallions.”

Rabbi Joshua, after asking “From where shall I create her?” came up with the answer *yārēk*, “thigh.” What did he intend by using that word? It occurs in a number of places in the Bible (Exod 32:27; Judg 3:16; 15:8; Jer 31:19; Ezek 21:17; Ps 45:4). It is also used to refer to the side or to an area near the side of a building: the tabernacle (Exod 40:22, 24) or an altar (Lev 1:11; 2 Kings 16:14).¹⁹

In many passages, however, the singular *yārēk* is used to indicate penis: Genesis 46:26, “all people . . . who came from his *yārēk*”; Exodus 1:5, “And all the people, those who came out of the *yārēk* of Jacob”; Judges 8:30, “And Gideon had seventy sons who came out of his *yārēk*.”²⁰

Once the referent of *yārēk* in the preceding passages is clear, the euphemistic rather than literal usage in the following passages becomes obvious. In Genesis 24:2–3 (cf. verse 9), Abraham, concerned that his son Isaac has no wife gives his senior servant specific instructions about what sort of a wife he is to find for Isaac. He instructs the servant to take an oath: “Place your hand under my *yārēk* and I will make you swear” (that is, touch my testicles and testify to the effect that you will do such and such). See also Genesis 47:29, where the same expression involving a formal oath occurs. In Genesis 32:26, the narrator of Genesis describes a wrestling match in which Jacob will not release a mysterious man who asks to be released before the sun rises. Jacob refuses and the man takes action: “and he touched the hollow of his *yārēk*, and struck (a powerful blow at) the hollow of the *yārēk* of Jacob while struggling with him . . . and he [Jacob] limped on account of his *yārēk*.”²¹

Two conclusions may be reached on the basis of this survey. Excluding *mebūwšīym*, “embarrassments,” which may not refer to a penis at all but, if so, is clearly a euphemism, *kelīy*, “instrument/tool,” which may be slang, and *qōṭen*, “small one,” which may be a vulgarism, most of the words that biblical writers employed when referring to the penis are usually applied

to limbs or parts of the body that are attached and protrude from the trunk. The single word on this list whose semantic range, exclusive of its use to refer to a penis, resembles that of *šēla'* is *yārēk*, which happens to be the word that refers to a penis most often. It was the euphemism preferred by Rabbi Joshua. This does not prove, but does support, the contention that *šēla'* also referred to penis in Jerusalemite Hebrew.²²

Individuals were able to imagine the erect penis as a homunculus from which a human figure could be formed. More important, however, is the observation that the erect phallus, as opposed to the flaccid one, is the only protuberance on the male body lacking a bone. But if it lacks a bone, how is it that the man referred to the woman as “bone from my bones” in verse 23?

THE BACULUM

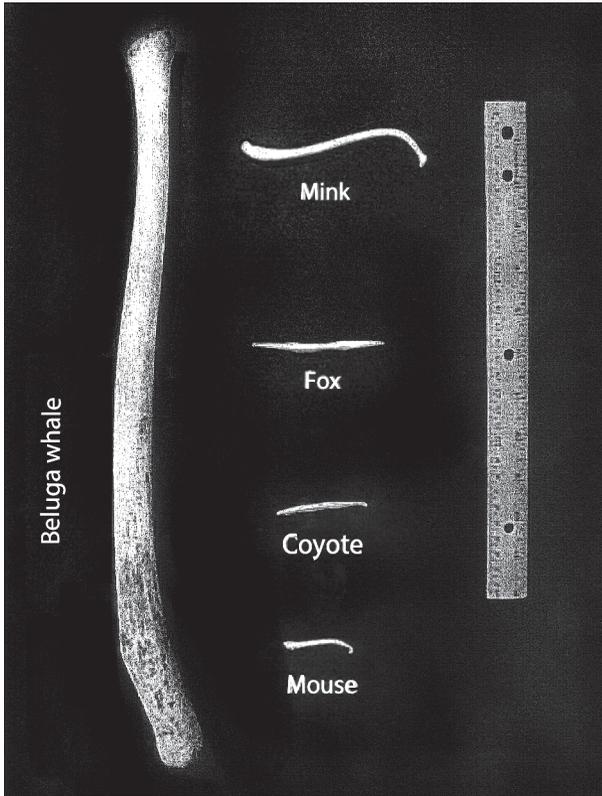
Among mammals, all insectivores, bats, rodents, all carnivores, and most primates have a bone called a baculum, or *os penis* and sometimes *os priapi*, that occurs as a stiffening rod in the penis. Human males (like spider monkeys) lack this bone and rely instead on fluid hydraulics to maintain erections.²³ The baculum is not necessarily a small bone. That of a large male dog can be almost four inches (10 centimeters) long, half an inch (1.3 centimeters) wide, and more than a third of an inch (1 centimeter) thick.²⁴ The largest mammalian baculum is that of a walrus, which can reach lengths of up to thirty inches (76 centimeters).

Israelites comparing skeletons of common male animals with those of deceased human males must have noticed the absence of a baculum on the human skeletons. In context, Adam's statement in Genesis 2:23 is etiological; it explains what happened to the bone: “This one. This time. Bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. This one will be called Woman [*'iššāh*] because from Man [*'īyš*] she was taken.”

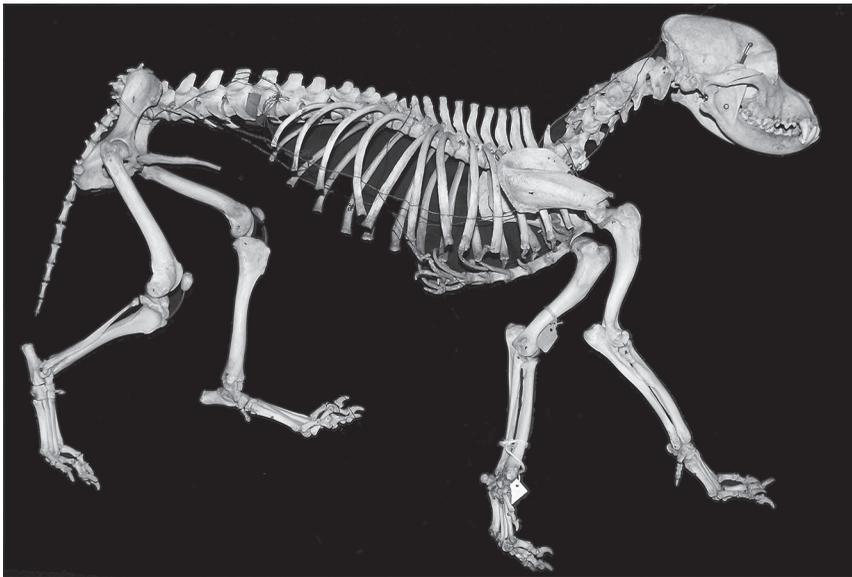
Adam's statement is interesting for three reasons.

First, he uses the term *bāšār* meaning “flesh, meat,” to refer to the woman. The word is one of the euphemisms for penis discussed above as well as a word connected to kinship terminology.

Second, Adam's declaration explains the literal, as well as the literary, origin of an idiom expressing blood kinship, *'ašmīy ūwbešārīy*, “my bone and my flesh,” that recurs in the Bible (Gen 29:14; Judg 9:2; 2 Sam 5:1 [= 1 Chron 11:1]; 19:13, 14).²⁵ This should not be confused with the familiar and



Bacula from Selected Mammals
(Courtesy of Scott F. Gilbert, Department of Biology, Martin Biological Laboratories, Swarthmore College.)



A Skeleton of a Male Dog

(Courtesy of Scott F. Gilbert and the Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians, Philadelphia.)

somewhat similar expression “flesh and blood,” which originates in a phrase used in New Testament passages to refer to people in general, not to relatives (Mat 16:17; Gal 1:16; Eph 6:12). In contemporary expressions such as “he is my flesh and blood” meaning “my kin or family,” “flesh and blood” is used as if it were the Hebrew expression “my bone and my flesh.”

Third, in Adam’s enthusiastic declaration about the woman, he articulates the distinction between human males and human females. Prior to the formation of the woman, a special term referring to a male human would have been meaningless, since he was the only show in town. The first creature was an *’ādām*, a sexually undifferentiated human. There is semantic truth in the folk expression “it takes a woman to make a man.”

The distinction made by Adam between himself as a man, *’īyś*, and the woman, *’iššāh*, employs words that with one exception refer to humans alone. The exceptional reference in Genesis 7:2 refers to animals as mated pairs entering the ark: “the man and his woman.” This contrasts sharply with the cryptic verse in Genesis 1:27 that describes a figure with both male and female characteristics: “And God [Elohim] created the human [*ādām*] in his image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.” The clinical terms used there for male, *zākār*, and female, *neqēbāh*, are employed elsewhere in biblical Hebrew to distinguish animals by sex.²⁶ This usage suggests one additional implication of Adam’s statement about the new creature.

The author of the Garden story could assume his readers’ awareness of a widespread feature in Hebrew that serves to mark a noun as grammatically feminine: the suffix *-āh* (as in the word *neqēbāh*, meaning “female”). The same suffix is often used to distinguish between nouns referring to the male and female of a species: *par* (steer, young bull—Num 7:15) and *pārāh* (heifer, cow—Isa 11:7); *sūwś* (male horse—1 Kings 20:20) and *sūwśāh* (mare—Song of Songs 1:9); *kebeś* (ram lamb—Isa 1:11) and *kibśāh* (ewe lamb—Lev 5:6); *pered* (he-mule—2 Sam 18:9) and *pardāh* (she-mule—1 Kings 1:33). So, he wrote, after Adam saw the creature that God had made from bone and declared her name, *’iššāh*, Adam was expressing that she was a female of the same species as he and was therefore sexually appropriate for him.

Humans can and regularly do copulate in the ventro-ventral (face-to-face) position, whereas most primates, owing to their anatomy, cannot do so. There are only two known exceptions to this. Bonobos (*Pan paniscus*),

a distinct species of ape, conduct about one-third of their copulations in ventro-ventral positions. And Western lowland gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) in the Republic of Congo were first observed and photographed using this position in 2007; they usually adopt a dorso-ventral (back-to-front) position, in which both face the same direction.²⁷ Since Israelites in Iron Age Israel knew neither bonobos nor gorillas, Adam's statement may be understood as a positive comment on the sexual uniqueness and appropriateness of the female.²⁸ This provides a naturalistic etiology explaining why human males copulate with human females and not with animals.

A second-century CE teacher, Rabbi Elazar, pondered the words "this one, this time" in Adam's declaration and concluded: "This teaches that Adam cohabited with every animal and beast but his mind was not at peace until he cohabited with Eve" (*b. Yebamot* 63a). Elazar's explanation may strike contemporary readers as condoning bestiality, which our Western tradition considers a violation of, if not natural, then biblical law. In the Hellenistic world, though, bestiality was perhaps practiced occasionally or regularly in different locales. It is described in myths about Leda and the swan (who was actually Zeus), Olympia, mother of Alexander the Great, and a snake (Zeus again), and others, and in stories about satyrs born of goats but fathered by humans.²⁹

Ancient Israelites were certainly aware of behaviors associated with bestiality. Laws against it were part of their tradition. Each of the three major collections of laws preserved in the Pentateuch proscribes bestiality without explanation: Exodus 22:19, "Whoever lies down with an animal, dying will be put to death"; and Leviticus 18:23; 20:16; Deuteronomy 27:21. In their literary contexts, unaccompanied by justifications, these laws represent the arbitrary will of the divine author vis-à-vis Israel. Zoophilia is something that God forbade Israelites because he desired to do so.

Elazar's interpretation accepts the story of God bringing the animals to the first person as an etiology for bestiality. It had been practiced by Adam and was not divinely forbidden to humans, only to Israelites after Sinai. In the twenty-first century, contemporary statutes outlawing human-animal sexual acts often do so on the grounds of animal cruelty. In many countries around the world, such acts are not considered illegal.

One additional etiological element may be seen, in the second half of verse 22, where God brings the newly made woman to Adam. In Israel, as

in other parts of the ancient Near East, males arranged marriages for dependent women. Although the women may have been consulted and may have had some influence in determining the choice, the final decision was not theirs. In like manner, Rachel is obtained by Jacob (Gen 29:21), Zipporah is given to Moses (Exod 2:21), Achsah, the daughter of Caleb, is handed to Othniel (Judg 1:13).

A final etiological element may be inferred from the monogamy evident in Genesis: Adam and the overwhelming majority of the men have only a single wife. Most marriages in Israel and elsewhere in the ancient Near East were monogamous for practical reasons. Maintaining two women with the legal status of wives was a major expense involving many legal complications in matters of inheritance.³⁰

This whole complicated story about the first lady of humanity, etiological implications and all, is completely ignored in the verse that follows, verse 24.