Adam was created first and this means …

Marg Mowczko, March 3, 2017

Originally published as: *Adam was created first and this means …*, margmowczko.com, March 3, 2017 (last edited April 10, 2026). https://margmowczko.com/adam-created-first/

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Primogeniture and Patriarchy

I was chatting with a young man yesterday, and during our conversation, he stated that he believes the Bible teaches "a soft patriarchy while we're on earth." One reason he believes in this "soft patriarchy" is because he regards primogeniture as being part of God's pattern for society, with Adam being created before Eve as a key example of this pattern.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "primogeniture" can have two meanings. It can simply mean, 1. "the state of being the firstborn of the children of the same parents" with differing implications, or it can mean, 2. "an exclusive right of inheritance belonging to the eldest son." With the first definition in mind, Adam and Eve *might* be understood as being children of the same parent, God, with Adam being the firstborn (Luke 3:38; cf. 1 Cor. 11:12).

Genesis 2 and 1 Timothy 2:13 (which is a summary statement of Genesis 2) tell us that Adam (or *ha'adam*) was created first and Eve was created second. But do these scriptures indicate that this order is significant and part of God's design for relationships? Do they indicate that there is a continuing pattern of primogeniture or priority of man first and woman second? Do these scriptures somehow mandate an exclusively male authority or a soft patriarchy? Do they indicate "an exclusive right of inheritance" for Adam that excluded Eve?

5 Reasons Why the Primogeniture Argument Doesn't Work

To link patriarchy among Christians to primogeniture in Genesis is fraught with problems. Here are five reasons why it doesn't work.

1. After the operation recorded in Genesis 2:21–22, the first (hu)man in Eden was different from when he had first been created by God. A part, or side, had been taken out from his body.[1] A part of him was now missing and had become an integral part of the woman. This transference of a significant body part from Adam (or *ha'adam*) to Eve makes the idea of man first, woman second, less clear-cut and decisive.

2. Primogeniture is about birth order, but neither Adam or Eve were born; they were both made by God. There is no Bible verse that states Adam was "firstborn." And Eve was not created as Adam's younger sibling but as an equal and compatible partner.[2]

3. The custom of primogeniture was part of many ancient societies, including Israelite society, but it only involved sons, not daughters, not women. Furthermore, if we see the principle of primogeniture as still being significant and relevant, and if we want to apply it to church leadership today, it could be argued that only firstborn sons can be leaders. Primogeniture would make younger sons, as well as women, ineligible.

4. The custom of primogeniture was not followed by many prominent biblical families.

Cynthia Westfall writes about this fourth point.

> *Throughout the Genesis narrative, it is clear from the beginning that someone who was born or came first did not necessarily have authority. Primogeniture among brothers was continually subverted, so Genesis cannot be used to provide an argument for male authority based on Adam being formed first. Cain was born first, but Abel received God's favor. Esau was born first, but God chose Jacob. Reuben was born first, but the line of Christ came through Judah, and Joseph saved the family and assumed authority over them. Manasseh was Joseph's firstborn, but Jacob placed his right hand on Ephraim's head to say that he would become greater.*[3]

Other books of the Old Testament also show that God endowed younger brothers with greater authority than that of their older siblings. Moses had more authority than his older brother Aaron; David was the youngest son of Jesse but was chosen by God to be king of Israel; Solomon became David's successor despite not being David's firstborn son.

The custom of primogeniture was not closely or universally followed by the Israelites. More importantly, God disregarded the custom in some key instances. And in Exodus 4:22, God speaks metaphorically of the whole nation of Israel (not just the males) as being his firstborn son.

5. The concept of primogeniture has no place among Jesus-followers in the New Creation. Rather, Jesus taught that in his kingdom "the last are first and the first are last" (Matt. 20:16). He also taught other similarly counter-cultural and equalizing principles. (More about Matthew 20:16 and the parable of the vineyard workers, here.)

Primogeniture and Jesus

In God's kingdom, of which we are a part, the only person who can claim the right of primogeniture is Jesus himself. Westfall points out that "Jesus is the firstborn of all of us" who are in Christ (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18), and that this truth "relativizes relationships among his followers."[4] In other words, there is equality among Jesus' followers as we, without respect to gender, are being conformed into the image of our older brother.

Primogeniture is not a dynamic that God instituted in society or that Jesus condoned.[5] Furthermore, Paul debunked the idea that men have some special position or privilege simply because Adam was created first. In 1 Corinthians 11:12, Paul taught that even though the first woman came from the first man, every other man has been born from a woman. He further stated, "But everything comes from God." Both men and women ultimately have God as their source.

There is no gender hierarchy for us who are in the Lord, but mutual interdependence between the sexes.

> *In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, and man is not independent of woman. For just as woman [Eve] came from man, so man [Cain, and others since] comes through woman, and all things come from God. 1 Corinthians 11:11–12 CSB*

Men do not have a greater level of authority, nor do they have a better inheritance than their sisters. Rather, we will all share in an amazing inheritance (Eph. 1:21–22). Christian men and women are co-

heirs with not the slightest sense of primogeniture.[6] We are co-heirs with our older brother Jesus (Rom. 8:16–17)!

The amazing theological truths of the New Covenant and our new creation in Christ have a direct bearing on our present relationships within the community of Jesus-followers. In this community, the church, there should be no place for a gender hierarchy or patriarchy of any description.

Postscript: April 12, 2022 – B.T. Roberts on the Created Order

B.T. Roberts makes this comment about the woman being made last, after the man.

> *It is urged [by some] that the Bible represents the woman as inferior to the man, and subject to him; therefore she should not be permitted to occupy a position equal to his, either in church or in state. As proof of this, the fact that she was created last is presented. But, if this proves anything, it proves her superiority. For the work of creation proceeded in regular gradation from the lower to the higher.*
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> *B.T. Roberts, Ordaining Women (1891)*

Postscript: December 9, 2022 – Calvin on the Created Order in 1 Timothy 2:13

I disagree with pretty much everything Calvin says about 1 Timothy 2:13 in his commentary on 1 Timothy. It's horrible. But he also could see that Adam being made first is not, in itself, a strong case for patriarchy or male superiority.

> *Yet the reason that Paul assigns, that woman was second in the order of creation, appears not to be a very strong argument in favor of her subjection; for John the Baptist was before Christ in the order of time, and yet was greatly inferior in rank.*
>
> *Calvin, Commentary on Timothy, Titus and Philemon (Source: CCEL)*

Notes

1. The Hebrew word *tsela*, which is traditionally translated as "rib" in Genesis 2, typically means "side." (See here.) John H. Walton explains that by looking at how the word *tsela* is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, "we would have to conclude that God took one of Adam's sides—likely meaning that he cut Adam in half and from one side built the woman." Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* (InterVarsity Press, 2015), 78.
2. On the topic of Adam and Eve and primogeniture, Nijay K. Gupta writes,

   > *Adam is not born, and neither is Eve. Each are formed uniquely by God. And Eve is not fashioned as a kind of younger sibling, to be mentored by and apprenticed to Adam. She is created as an equal to Adam, to partner with him in taking care of the world.*
   >
   > *Gupta, Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church (IVP Academic, 2023), 25.*

3. Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2016), 78.

   Westfall quotes Richard Hess in a footnote: "The norm among the patriarchs is *not* primogeniture but God's blessing on the second or third born." Hess, "Equality with and without Innocence: Genesis 1-3," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, editors: Ronald Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (InterVarsity, 2004), 84.
4. Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 78.
5. Jesus never mentions anything like a created order of man first, woman second. In the Gospels, he quotes from Genesis 1 where the narrative indicates that men and women were created at the same time. In Matthew 19:4, for example, Jesus asks the Pharisees, "Haven't you read that the Creator, from the beginning, made them male and female?" Jesus also quotes from Genesis 2: "For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the

two will become one flesh." Jesus taught about unity (i.e. oneness) in marriage; he did not teach that there is, or should be, male authority or a gender hierarchy in marriage (Matt. 19:5–6).

6. Question and answer 34 of The Westminster Shorter Catechism says that, through adoption, we "have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God." There is no gender distinction here.