

**The Human's Naming of the Creatures  
as the World's (and God's) Open Future:  
A Conflict of Interpretations among Jews, Muslims and Mormons**

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*for*

**the National Meeting of the American Academy of Religion  
Open and Relational Theologies Group  
November 20, 2006  
Washington, D.C.**

*Man gave names to all the animals,  
In the beginning, in the beginning.  
Man gave names to all the animals,  
In the beginning, long time ago.  
– Bob Dylan*

One of the deeply formative narratives in the history of Western cultures regarding human beings' social and sexual identities – construed in terms of their relations to one another, to the more-than-human environment, and indeed to their Divine Maker – is the story of Adam (or *ha adam*, the earthling) in Genesis 2. This story, radically different from the creation story with which Genesis opens, narrates the variety of relations in, of and by which human beings come to be – and does so in a surprising, perhaps even shocking, manner. It is upon this narrative, and upon a sampling of readings of this narrative, that I will focus in undertaking a mode of scriptural reasoning regarding the question whether openness theologies are biblical.

In Genesis 2 *Yahweh elohim* expresses dissatisfaction with the solitary condition of the human (“It is not good for *ha adam* to be alone”) and sets out to remedy this malady. The Creator fashions all the creatures from the same ground (*adamah*) from which the human was formed, and ushers an undoubtedly cumbersome menagerie one-by-one (or perhaps two-by-two, as the rabbis would later suggest) into the presence of the lonely earthling. It is particularly striking that God does this “to see what [the *adam*] would call them,” the obvious implication being that whatever names the human might propose are not known, ahead of time, to the deity. Further, the text betrays no suggestion that *Yahweh* provided cue cards or even helpful hints along the way. Instead, the text of Genesis announces straightforwardly, “and whatever the human called every living creature, that was its name” (2:19). Indeed, the text goes even further by observing that after naming all of these creatures, “for *ha adam* there was not found a helper for a partner” – as though to suggest that perhaps both the Holy and the human had harbored hopes for a ‘helper’ among the horde of freshly-minted creatures. None has proven capable of providing a partnering reply to the human. Only then is a partner fashioned from the very side of the human.

While acknowledging that this is a highly anthropomorphic portrayal of God in a recognizably fabulous (i.e., fable-like) story – or in Claus Westermann’s succinct description, “a truly naïve and childlike account” – I submit that the narrative of Genesis 2 is nonetheless of profound theological significance. Read as a parable of sorts, this ancient story celebrates the creative and intellectual gifts of the human species and provides a trajectory of open possibilities for the future of God’s creation, perhaps possibilities open even for God.

We humans have developed languages to help us to communicate with one another, but also and equally to *name our worlds* – to bring a semblance of order to our experience of the world with classifications, labels, defining characteristics of things. Of course, this is not a task undertaken by a solitary human in a single day; it is the ongoing labor of us all as we strive to comprehend the wonderful and mysterious universe in which we live. Even so, particularly when one considers the fundamental importance of the act of naming in Semitic cultures, it is striking that in Genesis 2 this role is left by the Creator to human ingenuity and creativity. Further, human freedom and creativity appear to necessitate an open and unknown future for the world. The text suggests more than a hint of divine curiosity about what the human will do – keep in mind that God brings the various creatures to the human “to see what [*ha adam*] would call them” – and of course this narrative detail points us toward a radical openness regarding the future. This future is not a fixed collection of events, not even for God. God offers the task of naming the elements of creation to the human, giving *ha adam* the kind of room and freedom as to make, and to keep, the human vocation in the world a relatively open vista. In this story there are no “right” names, no divinely-prescribed meanings for the world and its creatures; we find instead a thoroughly human partnership, collaborating with God’s creativity by the acts of observation, discovery, naming and meaning-making.

The rabbinic extrapolation of this narrative, as we encounter it in Genesis Rabbah, stays fairly near the narrative’s logic: the human is asked to name the creatures, and does so. Further, the names crafted by the human are imagined by the rabbis to have been perfectly “fitting,” i.e., appropriate to each creature. The human even names itself “Adam,” acknowledging in this act of naming that the human, like all the other land

creatures, has been brought forth from the *adamah* – though apparently the rabbis overlooked the little detail regarding who had given the name *adamah* to the stuff beneath their feet. The point, nonetheless, is that their creative expansion of the Genesis 2 story only serves to underscore the conviction that human beings are entrusted by their Maker with the task of creating language, of crafting words and languages appropriate to the radically variable human experiences of this world. Indeed, the rabbis go a bold step beyond Genesis by imagining that God bequeaths to humanity the power and responsibility to name not only the creatures but also even the Creator. “And what is My name?” God asks. The human replies, “It is fitting for you to be called *Adonai*, since You are *Lord* over all Your creatures.” But notice that this Lord over all creatures does not lord it over the human, who makes bold to name the deity: a kind of God-given chutzpah.

The profound observation in the rabbinic midrash on Genesis 2 is that, in fact, we humans do create names for things – and even names for the Maker of all those things. The human art of theology is engaged precisely in the quest to name this Power as accurately, as adequately, as we can. We may believe that God has given us some help in this task through the gift of revelation; but even then, any help that God may give obviously will be in the very form of words from our own stammering tongues.

Just as the rabbis re-told this oddly charming story in Genesis 2, so did the Qur’an. *However:* in the qur’anic version of the narrative, there is a true and perfect name for each thing and only God knows what it is. Thus, rather than bringing the animals to the human to be named – let alone having to wait with divine anticipation to “see what the *adam* would name them” – in the Qur’an God teaches the human “the right

names.” I trust you hear, and feel, the contrast. It would be difficult to imagine a more dramatic one.

In the Qur’an’s version of the story, God and only God has all necessary (and necessarily perfect) knowledge, and there are “right names” that creatures should be called. Indeed, in the qur’anic rendering God chastens angels who had earlier questioned the wisdom of God in proposing to create human beings; God’s sharp rejoinder is, simply, “I know that which you do not know.” God next teaches the freshly-made human, portrayed in the passage as a passive recipient, these right names of everything. The openness to new possibilities in the future is muted here, if not silenced altogether, by a very different portrayal of God – but also a radically different interpretation of linguistically-constructed and contoured meaning.

In reflecting upon the qur’anic version, we should keep in mind (as Muslims generally do) that the Qur’an is given as a “guidance” to humanity, as spiritual and moral instruction. In this case, the guidance is a solemn reminder that only God knows “the secrets of heaven and earth.” The Qur’an’s “guidance,” in this case, functions to uplift God’s inherent power to know all things and, correspondingly, to keep humans in their proper muslim role of submission. In fact, in the qur’anic version of the story Allah’s angels recite together a prayer that humans could certainly be expected (and rightly guided) to join: “We have no knowledge, except what You have taught us. In truth it is You who are perfect in knowledge and wisdom.”

It is obvious that this pair of parallel narratives, from Genesis 2 and Surah 2, create two distinct theological trajectories. In Genesis, Yahweh appears all-too-human, which raises troubling theological quandaries – but this portrayal also celebrates the

human powers of intellect, creativity and language. With humanity given such powers to name and to shape the world, the future becomes a vast panoply of possibilities; even the world's Maker is interested in seeing how things will develop. In the Qur'an's version, on the other hand, it is precisely the greatness and superior knowledge of God that find expression.

Much more could be said regarding the rabbinic and qur'anic variations on the story of Adam's naming of the animals, but let us move quickly to a third re-telling of the tale. Of the two preceding scenarios – the rabbinic and the qur'anic – it should be no surprise that, in the main, Latter-day Saint scripture would prefer the former. Indeed, Harold Bloom in *The American Religion* argues that Joseph Smith was particularly captivated by the anthropomorphic rendering of God in the Yahwist tradition (or what Bloom calls “the Book of J” in his book of that title). In this layer of Hebrew tradition, God and humanity seem not so far apart, not so radically different: God is anthropomorphic and humans are (at least potentially) theomorphic. Indeed, Bloom – fascinated as he is by Smith's colorful and somewhat kabbalistic religious imagination – decries subsequent theological refinements in both Judaism and Christianity (and would surely decry the same in Islam) that created increasingly abstract notions of deity, the god of multiple metaphysical compliments. Two such compliments undoubtedly would be timelessness and omniscience.

Similarly, in her insightful work *New Religions and the Theological Imagination in America*, Mary Farrell Bednarowski proposes that for Mormonism the central revelation is that “God is [or at least was] a man and has a body. . . . This god is a deity who is transcendent, but not totally ‘other’” (22). Presumably, this deity would be neither

timeless nor omniscient. Hence, Latter-day Saint theology “can dispense with the effort to ponder God’s absoluteness and immutability, for [this] is a god [who] changes and develops – [who] exists in time and space and operates ““within the ongoing processes of the universe,”” as 20<sup>th</sup>-century LDS philosopher of religion Sterling McMurrin put it in his discussion of the finitude of Smith’s deity.

It is my belief that Joseph Smith developed this conception of God essentially as an intentionally literalist reading of the Yahwist’s anthropomorphism. Rather than spiritualize or rationalize, he literalized – and that right boldly. I would hazard the guess that it was those biblical texts describing an all-too-human deity that most profoundly moved Smith, rather than, say, issues of theodicy. Nonetheless, Bednarowski certainly is correct to point out that “Mormonism’s very willingness to accept a concept of deity that appears limited by contrast with classical theism . . . helps it to formulate a theodicy which dissociates God from the origin and continuing existence of evil” (24).

Bednarowski adds, “In the Mormon understanding, God co-exists in a cosmos of many worlds and many gods and eternally existing elements with which he must contend. In fact, the Mormon god is not the creator of the universe out of nothing, but its organizer out of chaotic elements. Thus God must deal with certain realities which have been given from all eternity. . . . Whatever the causes of evil, God is not responsible for them; certain things are beyond his power” (24).

It is all the more striking, then, that there exists in the Mormon canon a construal of the Genesis 2 narrative that significantly tempers the anthropomorphic rendering of God. In *The Pearl of Great Price*, the so-called Book of Abraham concludes with this ancient story of Adam, but rearranges the narrative sequence such that the creation of the

female (and thus, also, of the male as such) precedes, rather than follows, the making (by God) and the naming (by the *adam*) of the other creatures. This removes the potentially embarrassing problem of portraying God as a Maker (or *Matchmaker*) who appears to be casting about for a good partner for the human: no more does God play the role of an extremely awkward matchmaker. Indeed, in this version of the story, the divine intention to create just the right humanish helper is announced at the outset. (You will notice the plurality of deities, here, too – which I suspect was Smith’s literalist solution to the problem posed by the grammatically plural Hebrew term, *elohim*.)

And the Gods said: Let us make a help meet for the man, for it is not good that the man should be alone, therefore we will form an help meet for him. And the Gods caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam; and he slept, and they took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in the stead thereof; and of the rib which the Gods had taken from man, formed they a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said: This was bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; now she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man; therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. And out of the ground the Gods formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air, and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that should be the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, to the fowl of the air, to every beast of the field; and for Adam, there was found an help meet for him. (Book of Abraham 5:14-21.)

We see, then, that the Book of Abraham leaves it to the human – or, more precisely, now, to the *man*, since sexual differentiation has been transposed to an earlier juncture in the story – to name all the creatures. The tantalizing notion that God (“the Gods”) “brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them” is preserved, which I submit fits nicely within this particular version of the creation story. In the Book of Abraham an unspecified number of deities (possibly as few as two, who would be God the Father and the pre-existent Son) “organized and formed the heavens and the earth” – an apparently explicit denial of *creation ex nihilo* – leaving us with the likelihood that the

materials of creation can, at best, be molded and shaped by divine power(s). In such a scenario as this, the world is not under strict control of God or “the Gods,” thereby leaving the world, at least in principle, unwieldy, unpredictable and perhaps at least a little recalcitrant. On the other hand, no longer is it left to the reader’s imagination as to whether or not God knew what was coming as far as the issue of locating an adequate human partner is concerned. The Gods take care of that issue first. But this solution to the problem of where the woman (and thus also the man, specifically as a male) shows up in the story creates a new problem of its own, at least for most of us contemporary readers: this newly knitted woman, while on hand, makes no explicit contribution to the act of naming the creatures. This originative, paradigmatic woman does nothing while the man gets on with the creative task.

Another provocative 19<sup>th</sup>-century reader of Genesis, Mary Baker Eddy, solved all of these conundrums in the Genesis 2 fable with one fell swoop. The founder of The Church of Jesus Christ, Scientist – or the Christian Scientists – simply dismissed the Yahwist account entirely. Her non-material feet never touching the *adamah*, she hovers over the far end of the spectrum from Smith’s literalist, materialist, anthropomorphic reading of the text. For Eddy, the folksy story of Yahweh fashioning mammals out of the ground is, in her words, “a statement of this material view of God and the universe, a statement which is the exact opposite of scientific truth as before recorded” in Genesis 1. She writes, “The history of error or matter . . . [as embodied in Genesis 2] would set aside the omnipotence of Spirit; but it is the false history in contradistinction to the true” (521, 522) as found in Genesis 1. In short, Genesis 2 stands as a kind of monument to

materialist error, a warning against what happens to Bible readers who succumb to notions of an anthropomorphic, material god who inhabits a material world.

Further, Eddy commented specifically on the naming of the animals. “Here the lie represents God as repeating creation” – she was sufficiently familiar with critical biblical study to recognize two distinct creation accounts – “but doing so materially, not spiritually, and asking a prospective sinner to help Him. Is the Supreme Being retrograding, . . .? That Adam gave the name and nature of animals, is solely mythological and material” (528). In *The American Religion* Bloom is not particularly kind to Eddy’s religious philosophy; it is obvious, further, that her reading of the opening chapters of Genesis would garner none of his sympathies. She drains all the fun out of an anthropomorphic deity, all the *élan vital* so vital to the Yahwist rendering of creation as a kind of jerry-built meandering.

Smith’s and Eddy’s readings, of course, provide a study in sharp contrast. Smith’s consistent tendency was toward a full-(and literal-)bodied anthropomorphism. The LDS deity is a male personage of flesh and bones, and is indeed a god among virtually countless other similar deities in the vastness of the universe. This god, truly and literally the Father of all spirits who have become embodied human beings on planet Earth, is fully capable of experiencing emotions of joy and grief, love and disappointment, etc. Eddy, on the other hand, tried to distance herself and her followers as far as possible from divine anthropomorphism. God, for her, is Perfect and Omnipotent Spirit, Creator of a perfect spiritual creation.

I wonder if perhaps proponents of open theism try to land somewhere in the middle, but certainly are unafraid of coming to a stop nearer to Smith’s end of the landing

strip. Open theists, of course, are regularly accused of taking the Bible's anthropomorphic language about God too literally. Some say it makes no more sense to say that God grieves or changes God's mind than it does to say that God's nostrils flare and turn red when God is angry. The open theist position acknowledges that anthropomorphic language of God should not be taken simply at face value or read too literally; on the other hand, we who are sympathetic to this position nonetheless believe that such renderings of God are not entirely misleading, and that perhaps there are significant theological values to be gleaned from these descriptions of God's complex interactivity with the world. If open theists seem occasionally to resonate with LDS theology, that is not in itself a matter of grave heresy. After all, it may well be replied that the usual critics of open theism -- those who tend to be champions of a timeless, immutable, perfectly omniscient deity -- veer much too close to Eddy's bloodless, ethereal philosophy of Christianity. In any event, I submit that these two 19<sup>th</sup>-century American founders of alternative religious movements signify radically extreme poles of interpretation of biblical language about God. Neither extreme can be properly deemed as endemic to orthodox Christian teaching.

It is evident, then, that a variety of theological traditions -- Jewish, Islamic, Mormon, even Christian Scientific -- have attempted to address the potentially embarrassing aspects of this narrative in a variety of ways, and have done so with a relative success measured best by the uses to which these readings have been put in each tradition. My sympathies lie distinctly with the rabbinic reading of Genesis 2. Read in that light, the power of the story remains as an ancient, folkloric, thoroughly anthropomorphic and yet profoundly theological affirmation of human agency and

creativity – and thus, also (and at the very same moment) of divine openness to unforeseen possibilities in an unknowable future. Thus the story stands also as a marvelously, perhaps even embarrassingly, folksy testimony to a truly divine creativity as well – a creativity sufficiently adventurous and unafraid of the human creative contribution so as to labor in, with and through those creaturely energies, radically open to the new that emerges toward an indeterminate future.