

The Humility of God, the Creator Who Educates

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“Thus You do not say, *Let man be made*, but, *Let us make man*; nor do you say, *according to his kind*, but, *to our image and likeness*.”

Augustine, *Confessions*, 13.22.32

In a fit of creativity, Gad Marcus has used the 2018 conference theme, “Education as Formation,” as the title for his article. He appears to repeat his highly original title in his subtitle, by using the German word *bildung*—which is usually understood to mean “education as formation”—but this apparent repetition is an interpretive key. In Marcus’ article, the very meaning of *bildung* is at stake as Marcus seeks to “show that there is some deeper meaning to [*bildung*] than merely the idea of formation.” In other words, his article suggests that there is more to *bildung* than the obvious linguistic association to education as formation. Marcus carefully teaches us how *bildung* affirms the fundamental truth that all human beings are equal. Following this interpretive key, I will explore what Marcus’ sense of *bildung*, rooted in equality, has to do with education. In what sense is this ontogenetic, primordial sense of *bildung* as equality related to education? I am especially interested to see what *bildung*, in Marcus’ sense, has to do with a notion of education perhaps closer to teaching or, in German, *erziehung*.

Before I begin in earnest, I’d like to first dispute Marcus’ early remark that he believes that “there should be no need to have to present an argument” for equality. Here, Marcus suggests that it is obvious and therefore unnecessary to be reminded of the essential equality shared among all human persons. This sentiment is opposed by one of Marcus’ philosophical sources,

Martin Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger continually warns against the easy acceptance of the obvious as a given. All forms of everydayness, Heidegger warns us, provide an inauthentic dismissal of what is primordial because it seems too fundamental to worry about. This dangerous dismissal of the obvious serves as evidence for Heidegger's assertion that we have forgotten Being. This is how, according to Heidegger, ontological research is brushed aside. Marcus ought to be more circumspect about dismissing equality as obvious. Indeed, this very obviousness of equality may be precisely why it is so often missed. In the end, Marcus redeems himself in his analysis. He does not forget the Being of beings and takes up ontological research through religious exegesis. Nonetheless, my response here firmly rejects the cavalier mood he opens with. My rejection is strongest when we encounter Marcus' primary theological source, the Book of Genesis. As we have seen in Marcus' article, and will continue to see in my response, this Torah exists for study and has supplied religious lessons for millennia. These lessons always bear repeating, in the re-reading of study and the iterative nature of teaching. It is always the right time to present an argument for equality, which is why texts like the Book of Genesis exist to begin with.

After this admonition, I will show how this educational need for repetition is at the very heart of Marcus' exploration into the deeper meaning of *bildung*. Think of these words that remain as my attempt to say one word in response to Marcus: Amen.

Let us turn now to the passages from Genesis that Marcus examines. The first passage emerges indirectly through rabbinic commentary, taken from the earliest clauses of Genesis 1:26—"And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'"¹ Marcus brings Rashi's commentary to bear upon the notion of human equality that emerges from Adam being made in the image and likeness of God. Reading onwards to chapter three, one finds that the human equality of chapter one seems to involve a form of inequality as well. After all, the serpent tempts Eve with the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, saying, "you will be like angels" (3:5). After Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, God says, "Behold man has become like one of us, having the

ability of knowing good and evil, and now, lest he stretch forth his hand and take also from the Tree of Life and eat and live forever” (3:22) and banishes them from the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve are made in the image and likeness of God, as Marcus reminds us, but this human *bild* does not entail equality to angelic beings and much less to God at first glance. Does this mean in Genesis there is a dialectical notion of inequality before angels and God alongside human equality?

A close reader will notice that God speaks using plural pronouns: “Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness,” “man has become like one of *us*” (emphasis added). Why does a monotheistic God speak in plural pronouns? Consideration of this question may resolve some of the *prima facie* tensions between the human equality presented in chapter one and the sense of inequality before angels and God in chapter three. Rashi addresses this very question in two commentaries on the phrase “Let us make” from Genesis 1:26. In the first, Rashi explains that “Since man was created in the likeness of the angels, and they would envy him, He [God] consulted them,” concluding that God “took counsel with His heavenly household.” In his second commentary on the same passage, Rashi elaborates further on the writing of the Scripture itself, saying, “Scripture did not hesitate to teach proper conduct and the trait of humility, that a great person should consult with and receive permission from a smaller one. Had it been written: ‘I shall make man,’ we would not have learned that He was speaking with His tribunal, but to Himself.” God, Rashi seems to indicate, is not an autocrat. Instead, he appears to be an educator.

Rashi’s commentary illuminates a radical implication within Marcus’s reading of *bildung* as equality in the Book of Genesis. The image of Being that our equality is forged upon is not a singularly pressed autocratic seal. Even God, Rashi teaches us, “took counsel” “in order to teach proper conduct and the trait of humility.” This means that the apparent metaphysical inequality between angelic and human beings—and, more radically, between Creator and created—is ruptured for explicitly educational purposes. God forgoes divine right in order to teach. Pedagogy interrupts mystagogy. Education complicates metaphysics. The God of the book of Genesis—the God of Abraham, Isaac,

and Jacob—has all the power to create *ex nihilo* one could imagine, yet this is not the account of creation we find in Hebrew scripture and tradition when it comes to the human person. Far from it, God does not forget to teach us as he creates us. The writers of the sacred text are faithful to this reality is their usage of plural pronouns.

The orthodoxy of this teaching may conceal a potential scandal for theology—and Rashi does mention that it almost flirts with heresy—but the orthopraxy of God’s desire to not only create but to *teach* in the very act of creation reveals a challenge to far more than our understanding of education and *bildung*. It is an educational challenge to theology itself, to the notion of God. The lesson of equality is not only the ontological equality of *bildung* that Marcus asserts between humans, it is also the theological humility of God to teach us his ways so we might better keep his commands to love the divine in and through our love for one another. This gives new meaning to the expression “For my sake the world was created.” On this reading, God’s humility creates the world educationally and we are called to constantly renew that world in the same way. The act of creation is not an act of conceit, it a humble act of education. Marcus’s exegesis of *bildung* reveals not only education as formation and equality, but also the humility of God as a Creator who educates.

As we have seen in the Book of Genesis, God forgoes the metaphysical right to inequality in order to teach us the humility required for equality. As Marcus’ article continues, we see that equality is not limited to our relation to the Divine, but also, perhaps most importantly, extended towards to each other. After all, it was Cain’s jealousy towards Abel’s more favorable sacrifice to God that motivated him to kill his brother. Cain’s sin does not begin in fratricide. Abel’s “bloods” call out from the failure to show the proper conduct of humility in Cain’s offering before God which led to his murderous jealousy towards his brother. As Adam and Eve sought equality to God, Cain sought equality to Abel. In both cases, they missed the radical lesson of equality embedded in the humility of God in his acts of creation, but these sins are a *felix culpa*, a happy fault for us because by re-reading and re-telling these stories we are confronted with the great promise of true education: the possibility of

redemption. By calling us to respond to this possibility, Marcus has educated us all.

1 All citations from Hebrew scripture and commentary by Rashi are taken from “The Complete Jewish Bible with Rashi Commentary” at Chabad.org. I am grateful to Adi Burton and Oded Zipory for their helpful assistance with questions I had along the way.