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DIAKONOI, NEVI'IM, AND OTHER ILLUSTRIOUS WOMEN: UNDERSTANDING THE
ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

by

Spencer Silver

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Religious Studies

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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
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Presented to the University of Iowa

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Introduction

In most societies, the status of women seems to be integrally linked to religion. There is persistent debate amongst religious leaders as to what limitations should be enforced on change concerning the elevation of women. Some Christian denominations exclude women from positions of clerical authority and force restrictions on women's speech in church. Those in opposition to gender equality cite the biblical text; they quote that a woman should be silent and subservient to her husband.¹ The bible has been used for centuries to justify actions. It has been used to justify the enslavement of other humans, polygamy, and genocide. It is still used to this day to keep women subservient to men. However, for every verse telling women to be subservient, there is a verse preaching equality, praising prominent women and their contributions. Not all churches suffer from inequality. Today, there are even churches with female ministers.

Christianity embraces diverse doctrines and sects, all mutually exclusive and contradictory. The typical way to solve doctrinal conflict, such as gender conflict, is through apologetics. Unfortunately, proof-text theology can be crude and reductionist. People will cherry-pick verses to support their argument while other verses directly contradict the latter and are neglected, as not to weaken their argument. However, the role of women in the bible is not as clear-cut as interpreters would like it to be. The most common error scripture interpreters commit is failing to address the immediate problems the biblical author faced. Accurate biblical hermeneutics demands that all commands, instructions, and implications be studied considering the original cultural framework. "Binding fundamental adherence to instructions taken out of context and developing rigorous church dogma on the basis of vague historical record is

¹ Massey, Lesly F. *Women and the New Testament: An Analysis of Scripture in Light of New Testament Era Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1989.

ridiculous.”² History cannot be overgeneralized, painting every female and male with the same brush. Men and women alike were prophets, spiritual & military leaders, and disciples in the biblical tradition; to say that all women were subservient and silent would be an egregious understatement.

This paper will explore the status of women in their original social and cultural contexts, starting with their role in the early Jewish faith and working its way through the Hellenistic world, ending with the early Christian movement of the 1st and 2nd century C.E. Women in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament had many of the same religious rights men held. Jesus himself promoted equality and welcomed people of all genders, colors, and classes. The early Christian writer and church leader, Paul, concurred with Jesus. However, later letters added to the bible after Paul show how Hellenistic culture prevailed over the egalitarian Jesus Movement, thus bringing this thesis back to the modern world.

² Massey, Lesly F. *Women and the New Testament: An Analysis of Scripture in Light of New Testament Era Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1989.

Women in the Hebrew Bible

To understand the evolution of the early church, it is important to know the religion that cultivated Christianity. The Hebrew Bible contains timeless stories of resilience, never-ending faith, and redemption. Nevertheless, the numerous texts that constitute the Hebrew Bible were produced by a patriarchal society. The Hebrew Bible was written about men, by men, for men. The texts are not forthcoming regarding women and their experiences. The worldview is overwhelmingly male. Moreover, the characters are predominantly male with over seventy percent of the 1400 names mentioned in the bible.³ Still, around ten percent of the remaining names are female. While the biblical text alone is generally unhelpful in women's studies when combined with other textual and archaeological evidence, scholars have been able to create a reasonable illustration of what life was like for Israelite women in the first-millennium BCE.

Ancient Israel was a kinship-based society. Marriage was the norm and people married within their family groups to avoid marrying foreigners; marriage to non-Israelites was condemned in Ezra 9:12⁴ and 19:2. In the Hebrew Bible, HB, Sarah was Abraham's half-sister (Genesis 20:12.) Furthermore, Abraham's son, Isaac, and Isaac's wife were patrilineal parallel cousins.⁵ However, marriage was not always possible for some women. Since women could not own property by themselves, without male family member, they would be homeless and in danger. Marriage was a woman's only chance for a safe life, in most cases. Women who were unmarried or widowed became targets of slavery and prostitution. In 2 Samuel 13:1–22, Tamar was sexually violated, and no one would marry her after she was defiled. She lived the rest of her

³³ Lawson, Edwin D. "Most Common Jewish First Names in Israel." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 39, no. 2 (1991): 103-24. doi:10.1179/nam.1991.39.2.103.

⁴ Coogan, Michael David., Marc Zvi. Brettler, Carol Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁵ Phipps, William E. *Assertive Biblical Women*. Greenwood Press, 1992.

life, “a desolate woman in her brother Absalom’s house.” Marriage was crucial to a woman’s identity at the time; it was her identity.

The biblical narratives are not concrete. Women are revered and treated poorly. The biblical narratives often depict women in horrific and demeaning ways. In Judges, Jephthah’s daughter was slaughtered, a mere child. In Bethlehem, a woman is gang raped and then dismembered (Judges 19).⁶ A man’s home was surrounded by angry city men. They wanted him to send out the man who came to his house. He refused to give them the visitor. Instead, he offered his own daughter to be raped by the angry men. This still did not appease them. He then threw his concubine outside and she was violently violated throughout the night. The woman returned to her master’s home and fell at the threshold. The master found her in the morning. He then chopped her body into twelve pieces and scattered the pieces across Israel. However, there are women in the Hebrew Bible that break this mold.

In Genesis 26, a woman was illustrated in a favorable light; she was a female character, acting within the confines of the family structure. Rebekah, unaided, determined the success of her son. Rebecca’s son, Jacob, was cooking a stew one day when his brother, Esau, asked for the stew. Jacob agreed to give Esau stew in exchange for Esau’s birthright, the equivalent of an inheritance. Esau gave up his birthright for the stew. Rebecca loved her son Jacob and instructed him to take food to her husband, Isaac, so that he could win his father’s favor. Jacob deceived his father; he committed identity theft, stealing the identity of his brother. Rebecca did what was necessary to fulfill God’s wishes.⁷ The assertive mother exercised real power on her own. She did not need a male to take action; she took action alone. Rebecca is illustrated as a strong-willed and cunning woman.

⁶ Yee, Gale A. *Judges & Method New Approaches in Biblical Studies*. Augsburg Fortress, 1995.

⁷ Phipps, William E. *Assertive Biblical Women*. Greenwood Press, 1992.

In Exodus 1, midwives Shiphrah and Puah put their own lives in danger to stay obedient to God. The Egyptian Pharaoh ordered the Israelite male babies killed. The women lied to the pharaoh instead of carrying out his mandate. They saved the babies rather than kill them. Shiphrah and Puah were given a crucial role; Israel's future was dependent on their actions. Their courage, wisdom, and vision had profound results. The midwives' obedience to God was rewarded with the gift of families. This story is important because it shows how these women were in no position of power, but they were nevertheless defiant in the face of tyranny.⁸

Later in the Hebrew Bible, the book of Ruth presents a story of courage, self-sacrifice, and faith. In Ruth, a woman named Naomi had two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Both of her sons marry foreign women and die. Mahlon's name comes from חלה, meaning "sick or weak." Chilion gets his name from כלה, meaning "to come to an end." Their deaths left the women widowed and childless. The widows then had to make a difficult choice. Naomi could not bear more sons to marry the two women; she was beyond her childbearing years. The women had to leave Naomi and return to live with their fathers, as was custom. Naomi would then continue to Israel by herself, after the women had left her. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, left Naomi and returned to her father; her name is derived from the word עָרַף which means "back of the neck." Her name suits her, as she turned her back on Naomi. The other woman, Ruth, cleaved to Naomi. She refused to leave her side. Ruth spoke to Naomi⁹, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16-17). Ruth was willing to be unwed and travel to a foreign land with her mother-in law. She was willing to go into a potentially hostile environment with an unfamiliar language so that she could stay with Naomi, a

⁸ Phipps, William E. *Assertive Biblical Women*. Greenwood Press, 1992.

⁹ וְאֵלֶּיךָ, עַמִּי עִמָּךְ--אֶלֶּיךָ תֵּלִינִי וּבְאֶשְׁרֵךְ, אֶלֶּךָ תֵּלְכִי אֲשֶׁר-אֵל כִּי: מֵאֲתֶרְיֶיךָ לָשׁוּב לְעִזְבֶּךָ, בִּי-תִפְגְּעִי-אֵל רוּת וְתֹאמְרִי: "אֵלֶּיךָ"

woman only related to her by marriage. The women traveled, and Naomi finds Ruth a redeemer, a male that is next of kin that could marry her. In summation, Ruth put herself in danger to fulfill the levirate custom and was rewarded for her bravery. Her reward was her own redemption by Boaz. The author of Ruth countered ethnic chauvinism. Ruth and Naomi rose above national and religious prejudice. Their loving disobedience and determination show that those who remain faithful will be rewarded.¹⁰ Ruth's initiative sets her apart from the mold; she furthers God's plan and through her actions, the Davidic line is preserved.

Deborah is another brilliant female mentioned in the book of Judges. Deborah is mentioned in a positive way as a judge and prophet (שפֹּטָה) (Judges 4:4). Meaning, Deborah acted in conjunction with and in support of the male leaders of her time. If she did not act appropriately according to social and religious tradition, presumably she would not have been mentioned or she would have been mentioned in a negative light. Deborah was an excellent judge. She was an advisor to the people; they came to her for her wisdom and advice. Deborah was also a prophet, delivering God's word to her people. She prophesied sanction for military action and proclaimed its success. In Judges 4, Deborah's role in the war was advisory. She summoned Barak and accompanied him on the battlefield to symbolize the presence of God (4:9). Deborah issued the command for Barak to fight, but she herself did not fight, at least in Judges 4. In Judges 5, the recounting of the same Israelite-Canaanite battle, Deborah was Israel's military chief. Barak was only second-in-command to Deborah. In Judges 5:12, Deborah is commanded by Yahweh to sound the cry of reveille and commence the battle. Deborah was a

¹⁰ Yee, Gale A. *Judges & Method New Approaches in Biblical Studies*. Augsburg Fortress, 1995.

respected judge, politician, war chief, and poet. A whole song is devoted to her name in Judges 5. She is illustrated performing political, economic, social, and religious roles.¹¹

The final woman mentioned in this section is Tamar. The following is a summary of the narrative found in Genesis 38. Tamar was a married woman until her husband widowed her, leaving her without children. The deceased husband's brother was to impregnate her, as was the levirate custom. The brother had to give Tamar a child to continue his deceased brother's lineage and take care of Tamar and the children he fathered. He would have to take care of these children until they could come of age. Instead of impregnating her, he spilled his seed on the ground. The man used Tamar for his pleasures, and abused her (was unjust). God killed him for his inequity, striking him down. After the second son died, the father in law, Judah, did not want to give Tamar his third son. Judah sent her back to her father's home until his third son could come of age and fulfill his duty; although, Judah never intended to send his third son to Tamar. Tamar disregarded propriety and revolted against the authority of her father in law. If he would not do what was just and fulfill the Levirate marriage, she would do it for him.

She clothed herself to appear as a prostitute and traveled to a spot where prostitutes were known to loiter. Judah was on his way out of town to shear his sheep when he passed Tamar. He did not recognize her and solicited her services. For her service, he promised her a sheep for payment, but he had to go fetch the animal. She requested his staff and seal for collateral while he went and grabbed the sheep. When he returned, the 'woman' was nowhere to be found. Later, word spread of Tamar's pregnancy. Judah believed he had the upper-hand. He could kill Tamar for her infidelity and keep his third son. He went to Tamar to burn her for her disloyalty to the family of Judah. However, when he confronted Tamar about her adultery, she responded, "I am

¹¹ Yee, Gale A. *Judges & Method New Approaches in Biblical Studies*. Augsburg Fortress, 1995.

pregnant by the man who owns these,” as she held out Judah’s seal and staff. Judah recognized them and made a confession, “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah.” Tamar was persistent in her pursuit of the levirate. She put herself in danger and risked her life to carry on her husband’s family name. This woman who married into the family showed more loyalty to the name Judah than Judah did himself. When Tamar was failed, she took matters into her own hands, subverting the patriarchal authority to overcome the injustice shown towards her.¹² Again, the Hebrew Bible praises a woman who takes initiative and breaks the mold.

While the Hebrew Bible is a man’s book, with archaeological and anthropological evidence, a great deal of information has been revealed about the life of ancient Israelite women. Most of this information gives insight into female family and household roles. However, women’s roles outside of the home in venues have also been exposed, predominantly in religious contexts. Women were prophets, magicians, judges, strategists, and the list continues.

¹² Phipps, William E. *Assertive Biblical Women*. Greenwood Press, 1992.

Women in Greco-Roman Culture

As previously discussed in the section titled, “Women in the Hebrew Bible,” women in the Jewish tradition were limited by cultural ideology but, they were praised through religious ideology. Now, the Greco-Roman world will be analyzed so later, Christianity can be placed into this Greco-Roman context to better understand its’ influences.

Before assessing the lives of women in late antiquity, there are numerous factors that must be taken into consideration. Women of the time encountered Greco-Roman cults, Judaism, and Christianity. To understand the evolution of women’s roles in early Christianity, the environment these women lived in must be addressed and brought to the fore. Then, these factors can be identified with a wider understanding of Hellenism and ancient Rome.

First, the atmosphere must be recreated. Despite the efforts of Cato and others, Rome was largely welcoming to Hellenism¹³. Hellenism was the pinnacle of what a civilized society ought to be at the time. Looking at the broader social, political, and religious context, observations on the interaction of women and religion can be brought to fruition. Since the fourth century BCE, Hellenism’s influence on Jewish culture was inevitable. The Torah was translated into the Greek language; it is now referred to as the *Septuagint*. Gymnasiums, the Latinization of the Greek noun, γυμνάσιον, were built all around the ancient Mediterranean, including Jerusalem. Gymnasiums were a place of learning, physical training, and social betterment. However, Greek civilization’s social hierarchy had little that was positive to offer women.

Greek society maintained a strict dichotomy between the public and domestic realms. In Roman society, this dividing line was more ambiguous. According to the philosophy of Aristotle,

¹³ Sawyer, Deborah F. *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries*. Taylor and Francis, 2002.

women were the defective sex while men were normative.¹⁴ Women were largely restricted to the γυναικόσ, women's quarters. Women rarely left the house and were unfit to even teach their own children. About the only occasion to leave the house was a religious festival. The education of the children was tasked to the slaves¹⁵. In Roman society, women were the commanders of all house activity. Women oversaw the slaves and education of their children. All of this is applied to women not in a poorer class. All of this applies to women of the noble class. Women that lived their lives as a Plebian, freed slave, or slave had very different experiences.

Plato, an ancient Greek philosopher, also regarded women as inferior. In Plato's *Timaeus*, he stated, "It is only males who are created directly by gods and are given souls."¹⁶ He later states if men lived immoral lives they would be reincarnated as women. The *Timaeus* reads, "The following remarks may be offered. Of the men who came into the world, those who were cowards or led unrighteous lives may with reason be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation."¹⁷

Women of lower classes were hardly educated, if at all. The daily toil of manual labor was always accompanied by fear. Some mothers could single-handedly farm rural land but, lived in fear of losing the land, the soul source of income to sustain her family. The growing urban population and need to farm large areas intensively rivaled the already dwindling rural plots of land. Additionally, the majority of the population was overburdened by the demands of the military and impoverished. Some women traveled to Rome to search for work. They might have

¹⁴ Jowett, Benjamin. *Politics Aristotle*. Vol. 2. Batouche Books, 1999.

¹⁵ Sawyer, Deborah F. *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries*. Taylor and Francis, 2002.

¹⁶ Dickason, Anne, 1976. "Anatomy and Destiny: The Role of Biology in Plato's Views of Women," *The Philosophical Forum*, V (Fall-Winter 1973–1974). Reprinted in *Women and Philosophy: Toward a Theory of Liberation*, Carol C. Gould and Marx W. Wartofsky (eds.), 1976. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

¹⁷ Plato, Benjamin Jowett, and Glenn R. Morrow. *Timaeus*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1949.

found work as hairdressers and beauticians.¹⁸¹⁹ Other Plebian women found work in entertainment. Nero and Domitian especially enjoyed female dancers and actors. While not all were erotic in nature, they were all painted with the same brush, classified as prostitutes. There is even evidence of female gladiators.²⁰ Pompeii evidence included a female weaver that dabbled in prostitution in addition to being a fruit vender and pimp to two other women.²¹ Prostitution was the fate of many women. Women venturing to the city from the country side, widowed or dispossessed women, no woman was safe from prostitution's influence. Women, free and slave alike could be prostitutes to earn a living. A noblewoman had power, education, wealth, and freedom. The common woman was illiterate, impoverished, powerless, and indentured as a servant.²² Women's expectations as well as experiences were varied in addition to diverse. Although Roman society seemed to liberate women as opposed to Greek society, it was patriarchal at its core. The legal system, government, and domestic organization were less than egalitarian.

¹⁸ Sawyer, Deborah F. *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries*. Taylor and Francis, 2002.

¹⁹ Prisca and Aquila are tentmakers mentioned in Acts 18: 1-4. It is also important to note that Aquila's name is mentioned before her male partner's (Acts 18:18; Rom. 16:3; 2 Tim. 4:19).

²⁰ Horace, and H. Rushton Fairclough. *Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. 1.2.57-59.

²¹ *A Comprehensive Index to Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. Vol. IV. 7118-10913. 2015.

²² Sawyer, Deborah F. *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries*. Taylor and Francis, 2002.

Women in the Jesus Movement

Christianity was a new religious movement that developed its own identity from its parent religion, Judaism. However, the Jesus Movement to 70 CE should not be referred to as Christianity. Christianity is best understood as a Jewish sect at the time. This new religious movement grew rapidly and, therefore, had little time to distinguish itself from Judaism in the eyes of the public. At the beginning of the first century, Christianity did not exist. But, by the end of the century, the movement had a scriptural canon and a strict concept of orthodox belief and practice.²³ However, it is important to keep in mind that there were numerous sects at the time with diverse beliefs and practices. To say that all of groups of the Jesus Movement believed in the same doctrines would be a great oversight.

The beginnings of Christianity were that of a Jewish revival movement concentrated on the figure, Jesus of Nazareth. With a millenarian view, the group believed that Jesus would usher in the eschaton. Jesus spread the good word of God and declared, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14-15). Evidence of the movement's relationship with the Roman authorities is distressing before 70 CE. During the reign of Nero, the Christians were blamed for the fire of Rome and persecuted,²⁴ possibly resulting in the creation of *the Book of Revelation*. However, during these early stages of development, the Jesus Movement was not distinguished from Judaism. Christianity arose in a world of countless customs. The Christian movement differed greatly from the readily visible Greco-Roman culture. As Christianity developed, the apostles and the church were forced to respond to highly stressful situations. Much of the organizational structure and format arose out

²³ Sawyer, Deborah F. *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries*. Taylor and Francis, 2002.

²⁴ Mellor, Ronald, and Ronald Mellor. "Book XV." In *Tacitus Annals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 15.44.

of necessity. The early church was caught between philosophical ridicule and persecution from the outside world. Despite the turmoil, the beliefs of the early church were somewhat revolutionary. However, Christians worked diligently not to give cause for offense. They did not want to draw attention to themselves, for fear of discrimination. The early Christians wanted to be all things to all people; a peaceful blending of cultures. However, some members tried adapting or assimilating to Greco-Roman society while other, such as the Jesus movement itself, became counter-cultural.

To accomplish a united spiritual body that was at peace with everyone, apostolic teaching pertained to the sacrifice of self and surrendering oneself to authority. This meant surrendering even to oppressive rule. These teachings are evident regarding Roman government, slavery, and social justice.²⁵ Generally, these statements that place social or religious restrictions on women are acknowledgements of the way things happened to be by way of centuries of cultural development and human tradition. They were not intended as universally binding mandates.

These passages should be interpreted in view of the immediate cultural climate. “The Gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry provides a revolutionary doctrine of liberation for women from the degradation and inferiority which they have suffered for millennia. Its principles provide means whereby the social status of women can be, and has been to a significant degree, elevated wherever it finds respective minds. Most importantly, the New Testament provides for total intrinsic equality among races, classes, and sexes, thereby granting women equal opportunity for service in the kingdom of God.”²⁶

²⁵ Massey, Lesly F. *Women and the New Testament: An Analysis of Scripture in Light of New Testament Era Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1989.

²⁶ Massey, Lesly F. *Women and the New Testament: An Analysis of Scripture in Light of New Testament Era Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1989.

Jesus was born and raised a Palestinian Jew in a period deemed propitious for the appearance for the Messiah. Palestine was in the crossroads of trade between the East, West, and South. The cosmopolitan complexity was unparalleled. Social and political turbulence permeated the area demanding strict control by the Roman government. This was the setting Jesus of Nazareth entered. New Testament writers claim Christ as the authority. The New Testament church claims Jesus as its founder, author, and source of its religious doctrines.²⁷ Therefore, whatever status women occupied in the early church, and continue to occupy in the church today, should have its roots in the attitude, example and teachings of Jesus. Without a doubt, the Christian Church is the direct outcome of the life and ministry of Jesus and deviated sect of Judaism.

The Jesus Movement was a countercultural movement for the disenfranchised and disprivileged. This relative deprivation attracted people from all different social classes.²⁸ Alienated and disaffected people such as women, foreigners, and/or former slaves were strong candidates. This movement gave women freedoms that the Hellenistic world never would. However, the Hellenistic setting laid stress on the local communities. It was important to establish communities and keep a strong household. In contrast, Jesus called into being, a movement of wandering peoples that did not found local communities. They are characterized by homelessness, lack of family, renunciation of possessions, and the relinquishment of defenses. They were in opposition to the Roman society from the start.

Early Christian literature, even in the second century, perceives its relationship with society as in terms of conflict. During the next stage of development, the issues faced by

²⁷ Ehrman, Bart D. *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, 4th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017. 288-289.

²⁸ Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theol. Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th ed. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002. 70.

Christianity are that of the pagan environment. A self-conscious emerged and the group needed to assess how it looked to the outside world. However, there was also a fear of the group being infiltrated by pagan ideology and being corrupted by it. Paul's correspondence with Corinth is evidence of this. This will all be explored in the following section.

Women in the Gospels

With some confidence, scholars agree that Jesus associated with women and ministered to them.²⁹ The vast majority of his closest disciples were certainly men; for this reason, nearly all the characters in the gospel traditions are men. The gospels known to this day are varying beliefs from numerous sects of early Christianity. Gospel comes from the Greek word, εὐαγγέλιον, or “good news.” The importance of women in Jesus’ ministry is attested in many of the earliest traditions, such as the gospels. Mark and the L Source indicate that Jesus was accompanied by women on his journeys (Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3). In Mark and John, Jesus spoke publicly with women who were not among his immediate followers (Mark 7:24-30; John 4:1-42).

In John 4, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman. Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for water from the well. At first she question why a Jewish man would ask a woman of Samaria for a drink. However, Jesus replied, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water...Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”³⁰ Jesus taught the woman and she believed him. She then went to her husband and told him what she experienced. She was the literal embodiment of the gospel. The Samaritan woman was a model believer; she believed in Jesus’ teaching and spread the “good news.”

Mark and John also record a tradition that Jesus had physical contact with a woman. This woman anointed him with oil before his Passion (Mark 14:3-9 & John 12:1-8). This is incredibly

²⁹ Meeks, Wayne A. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. Yale University Press, 1983.

³⁰ John 4: 10, 13

significant. Just as a prophet anointed, or made a messiah of David, so a woman anointed Jesus. She officiated in a ceremony of ordination, perhaps even preparing Jesus for his entry into Jerusalem. After strenuous objections, Jesus recognizes that the woman's actions were done as part of the gospel itself.³¹ Women were the first to see Jesus' resurrection (Mark 16:1-8; Matthew 28: 1-10; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10.) John 20 states, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.'" In Matthew and Mark, women are the only ones present. In John, John is the Beloved of God, ἀγαπητός, with the women present.

Women also accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem in all four gospels (Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:49; Matthew 27:55; John 19:25). These women alone remained faithful to the end. All his male disciples abandoned him. Mark 15:40-41 affirms the presence of Jesus' female followers at his Passion, "There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem". These women are also the first to proclaim Jesus resurrection (Mark 16).

³¹ Ehrman, Bart D. *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, 4th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Women in Pauline Literature

Paul was the earliest writer and influential of Christianity. Upon close analysis of his letters, scholars have found that Paul's views were contradictory and the legitimacy of some letters attributed to his hand should be questioned. Consider Paul's letter to the Romans.

In the last chapter, Paul mentions numerous people that had been associated with him and his work. Among these people a woman was mentioned. Each person was commended for their work. However, this woman was the only one associated with a specific act. She was employed to carry an important letter, perhaps more than one. She went a great distance to deliver this letter, from Corinth to Rome. Her name was Phoebe. Phoebe was praised by Paul in glowing terms. She was a faithful woman, active in church affairs. She was a *διάκονος* and *προστάτις*, a deacon and patroness in the Greek.³² Paul especially commends her saying, "our sister which is a servant of the church which is in Cenchrea."³³ She is the first individual to be mentioned in the last chapter and the first two verses are devoted to honoring her virtues and works. Additionally, Paul wants Phoebe to greet twenty-eight people in Rome; ten of these people are women. Priscilla is unusually mentioned before her husband in verse 5. In verse 6, Mary is mentioned and later in verse 12, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis are mentioned. Clearly, women had an honored place in Paul's ministry.

After Jesus' ministry, the apostle Paul took over the new church. Paul did not know Jesus or his female followers. However, Paul began preaching about the beginning of the end. Jesus' death was a victory over the force of evil, but the fight was not yet over. Indeed, the victory brought a newness of life. Baptism offered a chance for his followers to become "a new

³² Meeks, Wayne A. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. Yale University Press, 1983.

³³ Sudlow, Elizabeth W. *Career Women of the Bible*, 1st ed. New York, NY: Pageant Press, 1951.

creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17.) This new creation implied a new social order as well, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The notion that there was no male or female was a radical idea at the time. It was common knowledge that men and women were inherently different.

While Jesus preached for social revolution, Paul did not. He believed the end was imminent. The end will bring a better life/world. There is no need to reform this evil realm. Paul maintained that there is still a difference between male and female. To eradicate the difference between the two would be to defy nature. In 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, for example, Paul insisted that women should wear head coverings when they pray and prophecy in the congregation. Despite the insistence on male v. female, it is clear that women could participate openly in the church. Although Paul believed men and women were equal in Christ, this concept had not become reality yet. Men and women were to keep their natural roles until the second coming of Christ (1Corinthians 11:3 NRSV). Paul’s attitude towards women is rather ambivalent. Women had great roles of authority, yet they had to maintain their social status as women.

The role of women became a dispute in the developing church after Paul. When the dispute came to a head, both sides of the argument could appeal to Paul to support their views. There were those that urged equality between the sexes. Then there were those who believed women should live in complete subservience to men. The winning side of this dispute chose the books which made it into the canon.

In the New Testament, after the gospels and Pauline letters, the Pastoral epistles are found. Allegedly, the letters were written by the apostle Paul to his colleagues, Timothy and Titus. The letters were advising the two to tend to the problems in their communities. One of

these problems was the status of women. 1 Timothy 2:11-14 reads, “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty”. Here the reader is told women must not teach men because they are inferior, as mandated by God himself. He created Eve second, after Adam. Eve was easily tricked by the serpent and lead Adam astray. Critics will argue that Paul said something similar in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. However, this passage is disputed. It is most likely a later insert to justify the prohibition of women’s leadership.³⁴ It is not impossible that Paul could have wrote the passage in 1 Corinthians. However, scholars agree that Paul spoke about women leaders elsewhere without mention of them being having to be silent. Paul mentioned a female deacon in Cenchreae, prophets in Corinth, and an apostle in Rome. In addition, Paul noted elsewhere that women could speak in the church.³⁵ If that is not convincing enough, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 interrupted the flow of Paul’s work. Until verse 34, Paul spoke of prophecy. In 37, Paul spoke of prophecy again. These lines intervene and cannot be part of the original text. They may have been a marginal note added at a later date.

While there was not complete equality in Paul’s church, there was a clear movement towards equality. Paul’s letters illustrate how he attempted to maintain control or authority over groups spread across the Mediterranean. These groups developed ideologies of their own accord; one group grew away from Paul’s apocalyptic ideology and thus developed a different view towards women. By acknowledging that various groups existed at the time with pre-existing

³⁴ Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theol. Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th ed. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002. 336.

³⁵ Ehrman, Bart D. *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, 4th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017. 294.

cultural framework, it is easier to understand how the church later moved from an egalitarian movement to embracing the Pastoral Epistles. As the early church developed, it moved away from the early egalitarian ideas of the Jesus Movement, relapsing to its Greco-Roman roots.

Conclusion

While the bible was written by men through the lens of men, prominent women appear throughout the biblical narratives. In the Hebrew Bible, women were prophets, war heroes, and strategists. In the New Testament, women were the first to witness Jesus' resurrection, they were deacons in the early church, and they model disciples, spreading the gospel. While many laymen's interpretations will cite passages, using the bible as a device to systematically oppress women, there are numerous passages to counter this oppression, praising women for their determination, insight and intelligence. Upon closer examination, these religious works form a microcosm of the Greco-Roman world and its culture; admiring and admonishing men and women alike. It is up to the reader to determine how these events apply today and what they mean for society. A final thought: If Christian groups wish to revive the beliefs and practices of the early church, they would be egalitarian.

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