

Modern Feminism, Religious Pluralism, and Scripture

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A passing comment in a textbook kindled the initial spark for this study: “Goddess worship has actually come back into vogue in modern culture, taking delight in its Canaanite roots.”¹

I was aware of the feminist movement, but ignorant of its contemporary drive for goddess worship. A subsequent article in *Christianity Today*² reporting the worship of “Sophia,” the goddess of wisdom, at a major American conference intensified my interest. Modern feminist writers have a profound grievance against Scripture because of what they describe as its “male” God and because of its “patriarchal” religion.³ As a result, some radically revise the biblical text; others determine to be rid of it altogether. The majority concur that the Bible has been a curse to humankind, and they insist they “are going to make a new place for women in contemporary religious life and thought.”⁴

¹Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 88.

²Susan Cyre, “Fall-Out Escalates over ‘Goddess’ Sophia Worship,” *Christianity Today*, 38/4 (April 1994): 74.

³“Mary Daly’s anti-Christian diatribe is often quoted: ‘If God in “his” heaven is a father ruling “his” people, then it is in the “nature” of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated’ (*Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, 2nd ed. [Boston: Beacon, 1985], 13). Carol P. Christ writes: ‘I left the church . . . because I concluded that patriarchy was deeply rooted in Christianity’s core symbolism of God the Father and Son.’ Daly and C. Christ are now witches.” Aida Besançon Spencer, “Father-Ruler: The Meaning of the Metaphor ‘Father’ For God in the Bible,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39/3 (September 1966): 433. In *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Good News, 1992), Mary Kassian provides an informative short biography of Mary Daly’s life, 227–233.

⁴Feminism regularly denounces Scripture, yet interestingly, many feminists continue to seek to unite themselves with the Church—some trying to destroy it, others trying to alter it dramatically.

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Feminist writer Naomi Goldenberg describes the radical nature of this modern “sisterhood”:

Every woman working to improve her own position in society or that of women in general is *bringing about the end of God*. All feminists are making the world less and less like the one described in the Bible and are thus helping to lessen the influence of Christ and Yahweh on humanity

Contemporary feminist critics of religion can be placed on a spectrum ranging from those who revise to those who revolt.⁵

Goldenberg’s own words place her in the “revolt” category:

Everything I knew about Judaism and Christianity involved accepting God as the ultimate in male authority figures. A society that accepted large numbers of women as religious leaders would be too different from the biblical world to find the book relevant, let alone look to it for inspiration.

“God is going to change,” I thought.” *We women are going to bring an end to God*. As we take positions in government, in medicine, in law, in business, in the arts and, finally, in religion, *we will be the end of Him*. *We will change the world so much that He won’t fit in anymore.*”⁶

See Kassian, “The Inevitable Intersection” and “The Slippery Slope,” 219–240. Also Thomas Oden, “Can a Goddess Be Politically Correct?” in *Requiem: A Lament In Three Movements* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 140–151.

⁵*Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon, 1979), 10, 13, emphasis added. Goldenberg seems to take inspiration from Elizabeth Cady Stanton from the 19th century:

“The first feminist critic of biblical traditions understood that Judaism and Christianity had to be eliminated for the position of women to be significantly improved. In 1895 American suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her revising committee began work on *The Woman’s Bible*. Stanton wanted people to realize how much the Bible degraded women. . . . Stanton was tired of hearing the scriptures used to hold women back. . . .

“In order to question biblical prescriptions for human behavior, Stanton had to take a stand against the sacredness of the Bible itself. ‘The time has come,’ she said, ‘to read [the Bible] as we do all other books, accepting the good and rejecting the evil it teaches.’ In her memoirs, she added, ‘the more I read, the more keenly I felt the importance of convincing women that the Hebrew mythology had no special claim to a higher origin than that of the Greeks, being far less attractive in style and less refined in sentiment. Its objectionable features would long ago have been apparent had they not been glossed over with a faith in their divine inspiration.’ Relativizing the Bible by placing it alongside other mythologies as well as ‘all other books’ is a radical step that many feminists both in Stanton’s day and in the present are reluctant to take. Many feminists recommend ignoring parts of the Bible, but still claim that the book as a whole is God-given. It is hard to deny that an eventual consequence of criticizing the correctness of any sacred text or tradition is to question why that text or tradition should be considered a divine authority at all. It is to Stanton’s credit that she never hedged on this issue” (ibid., 10, 13).

⁶Ibid., 3, emphasis added. Goldenberg’s assertions are bold: “Jesus Christ cannot symbolize the liberation of women. A culture that maintains a masculine image for its highest divinity cannot allow its women to experience themselves as the equals of men. In order to develop a theology of

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She cites Sigmund Freud as an ally:

In the case of religion, Freud called for nothing less than the complete and total overthrow of Judaism and Christianity—and he did this precisely because the religions were patriarchal.⁷

Goldenberg is not the only feminist writing this stridently. Cynthia Eller is one of many others:

This feminist rejection of established religions saw women's oppression in patriarchal religion occurring along many axes—theological, biblical, institutional, and so on—and all of these came in for feminist criticism. But the entire interlocking system of oppressions was finally summed up in a single metaphor: the maleness of God. Simply put, a religion with a male god is no religion for women.⁸

Feminist writing is often forceful, bitter, and uncompromising. However, these women are not issuing impulsive, ungrounded complaints. They regularly couple their arguments with descriptions of offensive personal experiences which have propelled them:

I am a woman. I have experienced the scorn and prideful superiority with which men have, at times, treated me. I have listened

women's liberation, feminists have to leave Christ and Bible behind them. Women have to stop denying the sexism that lies at the root of the Jewish and Christian systems" (ibid., 22).

⁷Ibid., 26.

⁸*Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 47. Eller describes various other aspects negative to Christianity. For example:

"The effects of spiritual feminists' feelings of marginality are perhaps most acutely present in relationship to traditional religions, where spiritual feminists exhibit a striking ambivalence. This ambivalence was in full flower at one workshop I attended on feminist witchcraft. Discussion during the workshop had been full of casual slurs on Christianity: how wonderful Europe had been before it was Christianized; how the church denied and punished women's sexuality; how the crucifix was a perfect illustration of how men fetishize pain. Finally, one woman began to speak with great agitation about how difficult it was for her when other women criticized Christianity. She said that though she recognized the church had some serious problems where women were concerned, she thought it unfair for spiritual feminists to characterize the church as the unrelieved enemy of women, and she said she found it personally hurtful when women around her called the pope 'an - - - - -' [deleted by *JATS* editor].

"Almost all the women present immediately retracted earlier statements, apologized for having upset her, and said that they had no intention to speak ill of her religion, which was in fact a beautiful religion. Some expressed regret for having felt driven to leave Christianity themselves; some said that while it was not for them, they did not want to dictate anyone else's choices; others praised her for sticking it out in the church and standing up for women in an arena where women's voices were so desperately needed. But at last, two women intruded on the apologetics to say that though they were sorry it hurt her, they had to stand firm: the church hurt women, historically and currently, and women needed to have that shown to them. Though they tried to be delicate in their phrasing, they intimated very strongly that women who remained within Christianity were collaborating in their own oppression and that of other women" (ibid., 223–224).

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to insults against my capabilities, my intelligence, and my body. I have burned with anger as I have wiped the blood from a battered woman's face. I have wept with women who have been forcefully, brutally raped—violated to the very core of their being. I have been sickened at the perverted sexual abuse of little girls. I have boycotted stores which sell pornographic pictures of women. I have challenged men who sarcastically demean women with their "humor." And I have walked out of church services where pastors carelessly malign those whom God has called holy. I am often hurt and angered by sexist, yes, SEXIST demeaning attitudes and actions. And I grieve deeply at the distortion of the relationship that God created as harmonious and good. As a woman I feel the battle. I feel the sin. *Feminism identifies real problems which demand real answers.*⁹

Such writers call attention to the pain women regularly experience. Though they often disagree in their solutions, they are correct that serious problems exist for women that need to be addressed.

Feminists claim that Scripture has caused this degradation of women. They especially delight in quoting the early Church Fathers' graphic descriptions of the "inferior sex." These include the Latin Fathers:

And the women of these heretics, how wanton they are! For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures—maybe even to baptize (Tertullian, AD 160-225).

You are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him who the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man [writing to Christian women concerning their dress] (Tertullian, AD 160-225).

Whoever does not believe is a woman, and she is still addressed with her physical sexual designation; for the woman who believes is elevated to male completeness and to a measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; then she no longer bears the worldly name of her physical sex (Ambrose, AD 339-397).

[T]he woman is inferior to man, for she is part of him, because the man is the origin of woman; from that and on account of that the woman is subject to the man, in that she is under his command The man is created in the image of God, but not the woman [commenting on 1 Cor 11] ('Ambrosiaster': pseudo-Ambrose).

In Holy Scripture [the word] "woman" stands either for the female sex (Gal 4:4) or for weakness, as it is said: A man's spite is preferable to a woman's kindness (Sir 42:14). For every man is called strong and clear of thought, but woman is looked upon as a weak or muddled spirit (Gregory the Great, AD 540-604).

⁹Mary A. Kassian, *ibid.*, 242, emphasis added. She eloquently argues this point though she is not a Feminist herself.

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And the Greek Fathers:

What is seen with the eyes of the creator is masculine, and not feminine, for God does not stoop to look upon what is feminine and of the flesh. (Origen, AD 185-254)

For the female sex is easily seduced, weak, and without much understanding. The devil seeks to vomit out this disorder through women We wish to apply masculine reasoning and destroy the folly of these women [attacking a group which praised Mary as divinely honored] (Epiphanius, AD 315-403).

Should you reflect about what is contained in beautiful eyes, in a straight nose, in a mouth, in cheeks, you will see that bodily beauty is only a white-washed tomb, for inside it is full of filth [writing to a monk considering marriage] (John Chrysostom, AD 347-407)

Somehow the woman, or rather, the female sex as a whole, is slow in comprehension [explaining Mary Magdalene's failure to recognize Jesus after the resurrection] (Cyril of Alexandria, AD 376-444).¹⁰

As feminist Mary Daly summarizes:

The history of antifeminism in the Judeo-Christian heritage already has been exposed. The infamous passages of the Old and New Testaments are well known. I need not allude to the misogyny of the church Fathers—for example, Tertullian, who informed women in general: “You are the devil’s gateway How easily you destroyed man, the image of God. Because of the death which you brought upon us, even the Son of God had to die,” or Augustine, who opined that women are not made to the image of God. I can omit reference to Thomas Aquinas and his numerous commentators and disciples who defined women as misbegotten males. I can overlook Martin Luther’s remark that God created Adam lord over all living creatures but Eve spoiled it all. I can pass over the fact that John Knox composed a “First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women.”¹¹

¹⁰ Leonard Swidler has compiled these quotes (and others) from the Latin and Greek Fathers in his book *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979).

¹¹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 3. See also Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 128–132:

“Already by 20 C.E. . . . Christianity was well on its way to becoming precisely the kind of hierarchical and violence-based system Jesus had rebelled against. And after Emperor Constantine’s conversion, it became an official arm, that is, the servant, of the state. . . .

“According to Christian histories, it is said that in 312 C.E., on the day before Constantine defeated and killed his rival Maxentius and was proclaimed [YOU’VE LEFT A LINE OUT OF THIS QUOTE, JO ANN] with the words *in hoc signo victor seris* (in this sign you will be victor). What Christian historians usually fail to report is that it is also said that this first Christian emperor had his wife Fausta boiled alive and ordered the murder of his own son Crispus. But the bloodshed and repression that ushered in the Christianization of Europe was not confined to Constantine’s

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A more modern “insult” for feminists is perceived in Pope Paul VI’s 1977 assertion that women are barred from the priesthood “because our Lord was a man.”¹² Feminists thus resolve that male-dominated Christianity has wreaked havoc on the lives of women for thousands of years.

However, the prime origin of all these accumulated abuses, they argue, occurred even before the formation of the canon with an alleged pivot away from an ancient matriarchal society and its worship of the Mother Goddess. They cite seeming evidence for ancient goddess worship, arguing that there are such hints in the OT at those points where Canaanite worship is summarily denounced.

They also cite examples from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, along with more minor kingdoms where the Primal Matrix supposedly ruled supreme. A major evidence for them is the thousands of female goddess figurines and carvings that have been discovered by archaeologists, coupled with the paucity of male idols. Rosemary Radford Ruether contends that the Asherah was a stubborn adversary to Yahweh in ancient Near Eastern history:

Old Testament religion is traditionally presented to us as an uncompromising war against nature religion. The worship of Yahweh (the LORD in English translations of the Old Testament) totally rejected that religion of Canaan expressed by the worship of the god-king Baal and she-goddess Anath. This struggle between Yahwism and the religion of Canaan was one of the most important influences in shaping Old Testament religion. The Old Testament rejection of female symbols for God, and perhaps also of female religious leaders, probably had something to do with this struggle against Canaanite religion, with its powerful goddess figures and its female-dominated ceremonies or worship.¹³

One corollary of this alleged primal Old Testament shift to “male god-ism” and patriarchy, feminists maintain, is the conspicuous male bias in all subsequent historical documents. Not only in Christian history—where they point out rarely is a female saint acknowledged as compared to the vast representation of

private acts. Nor was it confined to his public acts and those of his Christian successors, such as later edicts that heresy to the Church was now a treasonous act punishable by torture and death” (131).

¹²Ibid., 132. Each of the feminist authors describe their own disgust at male domination. For example, Carol Christ: “During my years there, Yale’s president was to make the infamous statement that Yale would never admit women as undergraduates because its mission was to educate 1000 male leaders each year. But I had not expected this experience. I had come to study truth, and truth was no respecter of gender, I thought.” (In *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* [Boston: Beacon, 1980], xi.) An exhaustive collection of all such accounts would be astonishing.

¹³Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary—The Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 19.

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men¹⁴—but also in national historical records, where women rarely have been included.¹⁵ Such male bias, they insist, has also affected literary expression:

. . . Elaine Showalter [has] concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice—i.e., the stereotyped images of women in literature as angels or monsters, the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classic and popular male literature, and the exclusion of women from literary history. . . . Through women-centered analysis, feminists sought to draw attention to the sexual inequities of language and to change social attitudes and practices through the changing of language.¹⁶

In response, feminists seek to rewrite history—calling it HERstory. For example, feminist writer Merlin Stone refers to an ancient Sumerian myth where the female, like Eve, makes wrong choices, but is instead deified. By contrast, Stone notes, the Eve of biblical patriarchy has been “dammed by all subsequent generations for her deed.”¹⁷

Moreover, in the biblical narrative of Hosea, Gomer’s desertion of her husband and blatant prostitution is now celebrated. Old Testament Queen Jezebel, feminists suggest, represents flourishing female pagan worship in Israel and is cheered.¹⁸

Along with this, feminists adjust the spelling of words. For example, “theology” becomes “*thealogy*” to avoid the masculine gender of “*theos*.”

Witchcraft. Another definitive feminist posture is their endorsement of witchcraft. They argue that it is one of the many lost “arts” of ancient goddess religion, a treasured remnant which earned its “bad reputation” only through persistent male persecution.¹⁹ Feminists aspire to detoxify witchcraft by tracing a

¹⁴For example: “Looking at the list of the lesser saints in the Church of England’s Alternative Services Book, Janet Morley comments that it is inherently improbably that one sex, the male sex, should be nearly seven times as saintly as the other, a balance which would be startling if the preponderance were the other way. She is therefore right to ask why it is that saintly women are less remembered or deemed to be less important.” Ann Loades, *Searching for Lost Coins: Explorations in Christianity and Feminism* (Allison Park: Pickwick, 1987), 4.

¹⁵See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 262–263.

¹⁶Kassian, 73–74. Denise Lardner Carmody concurs: “. . . one is struck by the richness and ambiguity in the religions’ symbolization of women’s holiness and evil. Clearly, one of the most pregnant signs of women’s subordinate status has been the tendency to view them as either much better, or much worse, than men, for this implies that only men have normal, mid-range humanity. So women have been elevated as goddesses, virgins, mothers, symbols of purity, mercy, love. Likewise, they have been denounced as whores, witches, seducers, symbols of treachery, malice, lust. What they have not been, historically, is equal sharers of humanity whose social and religious offices have been determined principally by their talents” (*Women and World Religions* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1979], 17).

¹⁷Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Dial, 1976), 8.

¹⁸See Stone, 188, for an example.

¹⁹See, for an example, Eller, 6, 12–13, 17, 35. She cites many female testimonies of conversion to *wicca*: “. . . a woman named Antiga describes her discovery of witchcraft like this: As I

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supposed “glorious” manifestation through prehistorical myths, biblical history, and the Middle ages, claiming that it was forced to go into hiding because of male determination to destroy any remnants of female power. But now, they maintain, “wicca” is finally being restored and liberated from male destruction.

In close connection with this, feminists imperiously affirm the symbol of now-exonerated witchcraft—the snake or serpent:²⁰

In fact, it is only from the historical perspective that the story of Eve taking counsel from a serpent makes any sense. The fact that the serpent, an ancient prophetic or oracular symbol of the Goddess, advises Eve, the prototypical woman, to disobey a male god’s commands is surely not just an accident. Nor is it an accident that Eve in fact follows the advice of the serpent; that, in disregard of Jehovah’s commands, she eats from the sacred tree of knowledge. Like the tree of life, the tree of knowledge was also a symbol associated with the Goddess in earlier mythology. Moreover, under the old mythical and social reality . . . a woman as priestess was the vehicle for divine wisdom and revelation.²¹

Modern feminists insist that the Christian patriarchy-stained Scripture forces all women into submission to all men, reminding us how even the Church Fathers have so understood the canon (as we saw above). But it is significant to note that radical feminists never seem to question this early Church exegesis. With their acceptance of the Church Fathers’ position on women (by which they unwittingly reflect Catholic male interpretation read into Scripture long ago), feminist authors snarl that Scripture as a whole degrades women; and that centuries of male dominance have clouded most people’s minds from even recognizing this.

studied witchcraft, in spite of the bad name it always had, I thought it makes perfect sense for any woman to be a witch, because of the way patriarchy has treated and defined women. Any religion that gives us a female divinity, that gives us a goddess, that gives us respect for women, it just made sense to me. I still didn’t think that I might ever be a witch, or that I was in fact already practicing what some other people call witchcraft, but I went on with a new moon group. The question it was based on was, what would spirituality be like if it were based on women’s experience? We did what felt right to us, and a lot of what felt right to us, I later learned, were the things that witches do. One of the things was telling our story in an environment where whatever we said would be OK. Another was involving the goddess, the female divinity, who is both inside and around us. Chanting, using candles, using incense: a lot of these things that engaged our other senses too just felt really, really good to me” (53–54). Mary Kassian also comments: “Feminists dethroned the Judeo-Christian male God and proudly set themselves in His place. Lest this seem overly brash and presumptuous, they justified it by pointing to the ancient practice of goddess worship and witchcraft (which they claimed predated the Judeo-Christian religion) and which presumably exalted women and the female power” (155).

²⁰Riane Eisler comments at length on the serpent as a symbol for the goddess in many ancient culture, such as Egypt, Crete, Greece, and Rome, in *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 70, 86.

²¹Eisler, 88, 89.

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Critique of Feminist Reconstruction

Historical Selectivity. Although their historical analysis is extensive, feminist writers exhibit great selectivity in their research. Major theories are propounded without substantiation. For example, it is argued that the whole basis for biblical “male god-ism” is to prop up the male ego, citing Mother Goddess history as support for their argument. As Denise Carmody writes:

When the patriarchal, prophetic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) met the Middle Eastern Goddess practices, powerful interests came into conflict. Masculine self-control, social authority, and theological construction (a masculine God) were all bound to see the Goddess temple worship as extremely threatening. Since the patriarchal religions won the battle, their scriptural and cultural authorities became ‘orthodoxy,’ and the female-oriented fertility religion became foul deviance.²²

In support of what feminists portray as primeval Mother goddess worship, many feminists attempt to authenticate an ancient matriarchal culture of supposed peace and tranquility. In so doing, they somehow ignore the extensive evidence of weapons found in tombs of even the earliest archaeological sites.²³ They exclude mention of the many ancient inscriptions also discovered by archaeologists that include grotesque descriptions of wars and butchery carried out by female gods.²⁴ Instead, feminists confidently describe the ancient matriarchal society as a now-lost utopia, or “Paradise.”²⁵

²²Carmody, 32.

²³Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An EcoFeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 152.

²⁴William F. Albright is one of many archaeologists reporting this. See his *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1968), 77, on Anath or Astarte. The feminist movement has been faulted for selective reading of history. Extant ancient historical records and myths give no indication that cultures adopting goddess worship were filled with peace and prosperity. Even the most ancient tombs include remains of weapons of destruction. Moreover, many male skulls are found with head wounds indicating something less than Paradise.

²⁵Ruether suggests: “Stories of a lost paradise have two major roots in Western thought, the biblical story of Eden and the Greek story [told by the Greek poet Hesiod about Prometheus and Pandora] . . . Both of these stories are shaped by males to blame women, especially as wives, for all the troubles of hard labor and physical illness. Both of them imagine the idyllic time as one prior to hunting, agriculture, and technology, a gatherer paradise when humans could simply stretch forth their hand to pluck the fruits of an abundant earth. The stories seem to be compounded of two elements, an idealized memory of preagricultural societies and idealized (male) childhood. The adult male resents the wife, whom he must support by his labor, and idealizes his lost nurture by an all-giving mother. Woman-blaming for the lost paradise may have psycho-familial roots, roots that go back to primal human social patterns.

“Ecofeminist theories of the lost paradise often include the idea of original matriarchy. This story envisions a time prior to patriarchy, in which women ruled over men. It is a story found in many cultures, often associated with male puberty rites” (*Gaia*, 144).

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Critics of feminist re-interpretation of history decry this selectivity. Joan Townsend, anthropologist and archaeologist, insists that the Goddess movement is flawed by its “arm chair” archaeology and survey of ancient history:

The existence of a “universal” or Mediterranean/European-wide Goddess religion, which is claimed to have existed from the Upper Paleolithic through the neolithic and beyond, cannot be validated. The supposition that there existed a peaceful matrilineal/matrilocal kinship organization and/or matriarchy as a political organization in these areas during that period is also unfounded. . . . Sadly, it is this kind of pseudo-history that many women listen to, partly because it is so readily available, and because it appeals to them by giving the illusion of an effective means of acquiring social and political power in contemporary society.²⁶

Feminism exhibits strong commitment to evolution, apparently failing to see the inconsistency of this presupposition with their main argument. For evolutionary theory claims a fundamental *progress* along its developing continuum. Nevertheless, feminist authors contend that when humanity shifted from goddess worship to male god-ism about 6,000 years ago, it caused a disaster of great magnitude.

Misuse of Scripture. All the primary expressions of modern feminism are either condemned in the Bible, or are in direct antithesis with its implicit principles, such as the following.

Witchcraft. Many feminists boldly exalt it. They insist that witches are not evil sorcerers, but rather spiritual women who have a knowledge of healing. “They were burned as witches [in the Middle Ages] *because they were women*

²⁶Townsend continues: “Similarly, the assertion that violent Indo-European patriarchal pastoralists with a male paramount deity swept over the peaceful Goddess-oriented matriarchy is not accepted by most researchers. Rather, the Indo-European *linguistic* encroachment into Europe appears to have been gradual, intermittent, of long duration, and not related to undue violence. The effect of those linguistic and perhaps social migrations on the religious and social organizations in specific areas is problematic.

“I do not deny that female as well as male and non-sexed humans and animals have been revered as deities in the past and today in various parts of the world. Unfortunately, the literature dealing with the cult of ‘The Goddess’ and her relationship to female supremacy of the past is *often* founded on extremely poor research. Much is taken from archaeological data, with little understanding of prehistory or archaeology. On the basis of selected material finds, assumptions are drawn; then speculations and conclusions are drawn from those assumptions. Attempts have been made to synthesize religion and belief systems as well as social and political systems by taking data that seem to support the argument from various times and places with little critical use of sources. These are melded into a hodge-podge, apparently without any real comprehension of the role and functions of religion and belief in human society, the relation of belief systems to the rest of culture, or of the mechanisms and dynamics of social and political organization at various levels of socio-cultural complexity.”

Joan B. Townsend, “The Goddess: Fact, Fallacy and Revitalization Movement,” in *Goddesses in Religions and Modern Debate*, ed. Larry W. Hurtado (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 196-97.

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and because they possessed a power to heal that was unacceptable to the male establishment."²⁷ Goldenberg elaborates:

Even the high priestesses of the feminist witchcraft movement emphasize that all women are priestesses and Goddesses. Every woman is encouraged to keep a small altar in her home to be used for meditation and focusing her will. At the Boston conference, women were advised to use mirrors on their altars to represent the Goddess. That way, they would be continually reminded that they were the Goddess and that they had divine beauty, power and dignity. . . . Witchcraft is the only Western religion that recognizes woman as divinity in her own right. Mary, the only remnant of a Goddess left in the Christian tradition, is recognized solely because of her son.²⁸

Lesbianism. This sexual orientation is urged as the ultimate expression of freedom from male dominance. As prominent feminist Kate Millet declares:

Women's liberation and homosexual liberation are both struggling towards a common goal: a society free from defining and categorizing people by virtue of gender and/or sexual preference. "Lesbian" is a label used as a psychic weapon to keep women locked into their male-defined "feminine role." The essence of that role is that a woman is defined in terms of her relationship to men.²⁹

²⁷"Feminists and pagans are both coming from the same source without realizing it, and heading toward the same goal without realizing it, and the two are now beginning to interlace." Kassian, citing Pagan witch Margot Adler, 219. See also 78 (emphasis Kassian); Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods*, 93-94, 98.

²⁸Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods*, 93-94, 98. Goldenberg also lists the 12 factors of witchcraft:

- 1) female deities;
- 2) no body and soul dualism;
- 3) viewing nature as sacred;
- 4) value of the individual will;
- 5) spiraling notion (rejecting "the notion of the linear progress of time to some judgment day of euphoria or catastrophe");
- 6) cyclic notion of bodily growth and decay;
- 7) no original sin ("nor does it have a concept of a covenant against which one can sin");
- 8) no division of good and evil;
- 9) absence of a sacred text;
- 10) no rigid law of discipline;
- 11) sex ("is understood as having its own regulatory principle");
- 12) fun ("Rituals always have fun and jokes that are encouraged and truly spontaneous. No such attitude is possible in the Jewish and Christian stance toward worship."). *ibid.*, 111-114.

²⁹Cited by Kassian, 85. She then comments: "In the years that immediately followed NOW's proclamation, lesbianism became much more than 'a legitimate concern of feminism.' For those within the inner circles of feminism, it became a water-shed issue—the acid test of one's allegiance to the feminist cause. Sexual intercourse with men was equated with male power over women. Many feminists argued that by rejecting sexual liaisons with men women would become

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Family Relationships Dissolved. Women are urged to liberate themselves from Western patriarchal shackles by freeing themselves from their husbands and children to pursue authentic personal fulfillment.³⁰

Abortion. This practice is championed as another essential freedom from bodily restraints and especially male-dominated sexuality.

In *The Grandmother of Time*, Zsuzsanna Budapest gives a religious argument in favor of abortion rights: "Where does it say that every little soul that manages to land a fertilized egg is entitled to occupancy? Abortion is the prerogative of the Dark Mother; she aborts us monthly; it is called menses. The shadow of motherhood is abortion, which is also our responsibility, making the choice of life and death as much a part of the Goddess as her life-giving good nature."³¹

Salvation in Self.

Starhawk, a feminist priestess . . . maintained that the importance of the goddess symbol for woman could not be overstressed. . . . The image of the Goddess inspires women to see ourselves as divine, our bodies as sacred, the changing phases of our lives as holy . . . God is in all, and God exists within the feminine psyche. Self is God. . . . Z. Budapest, founder of the Susan B. Anthony Coven, stated this precept quite succinctly when she observed: There was opposition within the feminist movement toward the spiritual movement. Those who didn't share the experiences wondered why intelligent women would want to 'worship the Goddess.' They missed the crucial meaning: *It is self-worship*" [emphasis Budapest].³²

The accumulation of these anti-biblical positions should disturb orthodox Christianity. Though not all feminists espouse all of these positions, they are some of the most prominent attitudes revealed in radical feminist literature. The underlying attitude is a bitter opposition to Scripture and biblical patriarchy.

A More Accurate View of Womanhood in Scripture.

Recently there has emerged another group of women who, taking the canon authoritatively, have drawn attention to many details regarding women that have been overlooked or ignored. One valuable consequence has been a better comprehension of biblical patriarchy. Moreover, a number of male scholars have begun to provide a much-needed corrective to previous. Trevor Dennis is one who so comments:

entirely independent from men. . . . Feminists proposed that by participating in the lesbian experience, a woman freed herself from patriarchy in order to know and experience her true self."

³⁰Gloria Steinham, for example, writes extensively thus.

³¹Eller, p. 194.

³²Cited by Kassian, p. 160, 162.

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Looking at these texts consistently from the points of view of their female characters has for me been exhilarating and liberating, but it has shaken me and disturbed me more than I could have anticipated. It has put me in touch with my own sexism, with destructive stereotypes about women, and about men also, deep rooted within me. . . . Shall I conclude that God always gives his more important tasks to men? But that would be absurd. Shall I think he prefers dealing with me? But such a notion is so patently silly as to be close to blasphemy. Shall I believe that he calls men and not women to be the conspicuous bearers of his promises? But I for one have had more than enough of that belief in the Church, and wish to see no more of the great harm it does to those who hold to it, or of the greater harm it does to their victims.³³

What is now being increasingly recognized is that throughout both the Old and New Testaments women are affirmed not only in home/family administration, but also in public and religious spheres. The roles of women in Scripture are varied and vigorous. At first glance, males can appear to predominate by sheer numbers. However, even this fact must be understood with a correct perception of historical writing itself.

No history book is exhaustive. Each historical document includes certain events/people/ideas deemed by that historian as the most crucial, effecting subsequent human life. Scripture, though including much historical material spanning multiple centuries, is also not exhaustive.³⁴ One cannot help but notice great time voids.

Christians have long believed that the development of the canon was superintended by God to include those people and events that are decisive in Salvation History from the divine perspective.³⁵ The historical panorama, thus, is lengthy yet basically narrow in scope. The reader is informed of patriarchs and matriarchs, kings and queens, prophets and prophetesses, couched between significant

³³Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 176, 179.

³⁴Biblical writers themselves allude to this fact: John 21:25, "And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." Also: Heb. 11:32, 35, 36 "And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of . . . And others . . . still others . . ."

³⁵Ellen White is sensitive to this issue. For example, during the patriarchal period the first OT Deborah is mentioned. Gen 35:7-9 records that when Jacob returns to Bethel, Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, dies. This woman is mentioned only twice in Genesis (24:59, 35:8). Yet her death and burial are included in the Genesis narratives. Ellen White movingly comments: "Deborah was buried with expressions of so great sorrow that the oak under which her grave was made, was called 'the oak of weeping.' *It should not be passed unnoticed that the memory of her life of faithful service and of the mourning of this household has been counted worthy to be preserved in the word of God* (PP 206).

Furthermore, the issue of women in patriarchy (in the OT) or women in ministry (in the NT) is not the primary issue being addressed in Scripture. Rather, as the biblical writers focus the reader on Salvation History, these peripheral (to the writers) issues are brushed up against tangentially—and it is these which later readers must comb for such papers as this.

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historical voids regarding other female and male personages throughout the many centuries connected by Scripture. In this light, it becomes more precarious to insist that males have *always* dominated women. It is just not possible to substantiate that position.³⁶ Furthermore, recent probing into the biblical text itself also suggests that this is not the case.

Carol Meyers advises,³⁷ for instance, that patriarchy itself must be carefully defined in the light of its original context. Feminists appear uniformly biased against it. But recently other studies have proposed that the Old Testament seems to indicate an equitable situation between male and female up to the time of the Israelite monarchy. The establishment of the throne in Israel, Meyers argues, brought great changes to Israelite society, with the position of the female slowly diminishing from that time on.³⁸ Meyers also suggests other contributing factors:

Greco-Roman culture brought a dualistic way of thinking to the Semitic world: pairs such as body and soul, evil and good, female and male became aligned. Eve was the victim of this alignment: female was linked with body and evil. Relegated to a position of decreasing power as the household lost its prominence, she then became associated with negative aspects of life. The misogynist expansions of the Eden story in early Christian Jewish literature begin to emerge. A new concept of Eve associated with sin, death, and suffering is superimposed so indelibly on the assertive and productive figure of the Eden narrative that we can hardly see the original woman of Genesis 2-3.³⁹

³⁶Carol Meyers argues further: "the Hebrew Bible . . . contains some statements that appear to value men more highly than women or to give men certain legal privileges that are not extended to women. From our contemporary perspective, these texts give incomplete evidence of biblical patriarchy. They do not tell us how Israelite women felt about differential treatment. In the context of the specific social and economic structures that characterized ancient Israel, the existence of gender asymmetry, with men accorded a set of advantages apparently unavailable to most women, must not automatically be perceived as oppressive. . . . and the lack of evidence that the Eves of ancient Israel felt oppressed, degraded, or unfairly treated in the face of cultural asymmetry. Gender differences that appear hierarchical may not have functioned or been perceived as hierarchical within Israelite society." *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 34.

³⁷*Ibid.*, passim.

³⁸"The formation of the monarchy was perhaps the most significant change in the millennium-long history of ancient Israel's national existence. Even before socioeconomic analysis became a prominent concern of the study of ancient Israel, scholars recognized the dramatic changes brought about by state formation: 'The monarchy, owing to its nature and its effects, was the most radical revolution in ancient Israel. It aimed to give Israel an international status, . . . to industrialize the country, and to develop the city at the expense of the village.' (E. Neufeld, "Emergence of a Royal-Urban Society in Ancient Israel," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 31 [1960]:37.)

³⁹*Ibid.*, 196.

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Meyers' reasoning appears to have strong validity as one becomes more observant of intriguing, previously overlooked details within biblical narratives. Even Christ's treatment of women, in contrast with many in His society, is also remarkable. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul, whom feminists regard with the greatest scorn, can be seen reflecting Christ's positive behavior to women. A brief survey of the canon is indicative.

Old Testament Women Women in Genesis.

Sarah. Abraham's life of faith has been extensively (and rightly) studied and admired. His wife, Sarah, though rarely acknowledged on a par with her husband, is equally remarkable.⁴⁰ Consider that:

As Sarah and Abram are approaching Egypt [during the famine], he does not order her to comply with his planned deception. Rather, Abraham must ask her to say that she is his sister. He cohabits with Hagar because Sarah wants him to; and when she decides that Ishmael is a threat to her own son's inheritance, Sarah succeeds in expelling both mother and child. Indeed, God defends her demand; and this is not the only time that the Lord acts on Sarah's behalf. In Pharaoh's court, and within the household of Abimelech, God is concerned that Sarah be protected and returned to her husband.⁴¹

Nunnally-Cox also argues that, given their social context, Sarah and Abraham are amazingly equal:

She appears to say what she wants, when she wants, and Abraham at times responds in almost meek obedience. He does not command her; she commands him, yet there seems to be an affectionate bond between them. Abraham does not abandon Sarah during her barrenness, nor does he gain other wives while she lives, as far as we know. . . . and when Sarah dies, Abraham can do nothing but weep. Sarah is a matriarch of the first order: respected by rulers and husband alike, a spirited woman and bold companion.⁴²

⁴⁰In fact, A. Savina Teubal, when appraising the many narrative details about her life in Genesis, has gone so far as to suggest that she may have been an early priestess. It is, of course, impossible to confirm this idea textually, and it seems highly unlikely, but Teubal's assertion does draw attention to the exceptional portrait of Sarah that Genesis presents. For, as Teubal notes, details of Sarah's narratives include the following: Sarah is the only matriarch with her age recorded when she died, as is always done for all the patriarchs. Furthermore, why does her mural at Mamre receive so much attention? Why did Isaac consummate his marriage to Rebekah in his mother's tent? Also, she argues that her theory could possibly help explain the interest Abimelech exhibited in Sarah though she was ninety years old. *Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch of Genesis* (Chicago: Swallow, 1984), 110–122. These questions are also raised by Jack Vancil in "Sarah—Her Life and Legacy," in *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, vol. 2, ed. Carroll D. Osburn (Joplin: College Press, 1995), 61–63.

⁴¹Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, *Far More Precious Than Jewels* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 9.

⁴²Janice Nunnally-Cox, *Fore-Mothers: Women of the Bible* (New York: Seabury), 9.

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The Genesis record depicts Sarah as being just as crucial to the Covenant as Abraham himself. For God maintains that it will be *Sarah's* offspring who will fulfill the covenant promise—even when Abraham argues that he already has a son, Ishmael:

And Abraham said to God, 'Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!' Then God said: 'No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant' (Gen 17:18-19).⁴³

This particular era of patriarchs and matriarchs deserves renewed attention, as Teubal suggests:

In particular, women have traditionally been depicted as primitive and childish in their aspirations and generally lacking in vision. Fresh study of our female forebears, however, invalidates this view and shows us that the matriarchs were learned, wise women who were highly developed spiritually.⁴⁴

Sarah's life surely demonstrates this:

1. When Abraham pleads with her to misrepresent their marital relationship [as they travel to Egypt], Jack Vancil notes:

Instead of being a proud and overbearing patriarchal figure, Abraham begs Sarah to lie for him. This appears uncharacteristic for a totally dominant patriarchal society. Is Sarah a completely submissive wife, or does she retain some right and control? The text does suggest that she maintained some sort of authority and that Abraham was not the absolute master figure that might be assumed even though the story is set within the patriarchal period.⁴⁵

⁴³Ellen White addresses this issue forcefully: "The instruction given to Abraham touching the sacredness of the marriage relation was to be a lesson for all ages. It declares that the rights and happiness of this relation are to be carefully guarded, even at a great sacrifice. Sarah was the only true wife of Abraham. Her rights as wife and mother no other person was entitled to share. She revered her husband, and in this she is presented in the New Testament as a worthy example. But she was unwilling that Abraham's affections should be given to another, and the Lord did not reprove her for requiring the banishment of her rival." PP 147.

See also Is 51:1-2, where God declares Sarah's position:

Listen to Me, you who pursue after righteousness,
You who seek the LORD:
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
And to the hole of the pit from which you were dug.
Look to *Abraham* your father,
And to *Sarah* who bore you."

⁴⁴Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*, xii.

⁴⁵Vancil, "Sarah—Her Life and Legacy," 48-49. Nunnally-Cox concurs: "Several things are readily apparent in the story of Sarah and Abraham. First, she holds powerful sway over Abraham. It is he who asks her permission to call her sister, however questionable his actions may be. In the instance of Hagar, Sarah is the one who suggests the liaison, and Abraham does her bidding. . . . And when Sarah later insists that Hagar and Ishmael be cast out, Abraham once again complies with her wishes, even though it means losing a son and an heir" (*Fore-Mothers*, 8).

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2. When Abraham offers hospitality, the patriarch shares in the domestic preparations along with his wife (Gen 18:6–8).⁴⁶

3. After Sarah's death, little is recorded about Abraham. Genesis 24 deals with the marriage of Isaac, and chapter 25 records Abraham's marriage to Keturah and their offspring in his remaining forty-eight years. The remaining verses in the Abraham narratives deal briefly with the distribution of his wealth. However, the record of Sarah's funeral involves an entire chapter in the book of Genesis.

Hagar. Hagar is the victim of a grave mistake by Abraham and Sarah. Yet consider the poignant details recorded in Scripture after she and her son have been excluded from Abraham's family. This Egyptian slave woman is "more highly honoured in some respects than almost any other figure in the Bible."⁴⁷ For example, the "Angel of the Lord" appears, for the first time in biblical history, to this rejected woman (Gen 21:17). Indeed, He even calls her by name! Abraham and Sarah have not even granted her this dignity, but typically refer to her only by her status, as "slave woman."⁴⁸

God has not abandoned Hagar or her son Ishmael in this extremely devastating situation caused by human error. His word regarding the Covenant is eternal, yet He pointedly provides for this mother and her son. He promises to make Ishmael a great nation, too. In fact, it is arresting how similar His promise regarding Ishmael is to the one they had been hearing for years in Abraham's household.⁴⁹ This divine affirmation to Hagar is also the solitary time that a covenant-type promise is announced to a woman:

. . . how very surprising is the honour which is bestowed upon Hagar (and upon Ishmael too) in Genesis 16. For a start, annunciations are a rare commodity in the Bible . . . In only three cases, those of Hagar, Manoah's wife, and Mary in Luke, is the promise of a son made to the one who will be the mother of the child (although Sarah overhears in Genesis 18, the words are addressed to her husband). In only four cases does God make the announcement himself. . . only two women in the entire Bible receive annunciations from God himself, Hagar and the unnamed wife of Manoah.⁵⁰

⁴⁶As observed with Abraham and Sarah, there does not seem to be a distinct division of labor between men and women in the household. Either gender could be a shepherd. Rebekah and Laban (her brother) share farm chores and the particulars of family hospitality. Later, the text reveals that both her sons knew how to cook (Gen 25:29).

⁴⁷Dennis, *Sarah Laughed*, p. 176.

⁴⁸Sarah speaking to Abraham, "Go, please, to my slave-girl" (Gen 16:2b). Sarah does not use Hagar's name but refers only to her position. Up to this point only the narrator has given Hagar's name.

⁴⁹"Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, 'I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude'" (Gen 16:10). Later to Abraham, "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation" (Gen 17:20).

⁵⁰Dennis, *Sarah Laughed*, 68.

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It is also significant to notice that Hagar, a woman, chooses the wife for her son. Moreover, she is also the only person in all of Scripture to give deity a name. “So she named the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are El-Roi’” (16:13a).

The name El-Roi occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament. It is Hagar’s name for God, and Hagar’s alone. It arises out of, and speaks eloquently of, her own private encounter with him. . . . Let no one underestimate how extraordinary this naming is. . . . After wrestling with God all night at the river Jabbok, Jacob names the spot, Peniel, or “The face of God” (Gen 32:30). After coming so close to sacrificing Isaac . . . Abraham names the place, “The Lord Sees” (22:14). Abraham’s name is very close to the one Hagar gives God. Yet, like Jacob, Abraham names the *place* of encounter. . . . Elsewhere Abraham calls *upon* the name of God (12:8; 13:4; 21:33), but that is a very different exercise. Moreover, Hagar does not name her God as an aside, or declare his identity to herself after he has left the stage. She names him to his face: “You are the God who Sees Me.” The phrase the narrator uses for the naming is the usual one in Hebrew narrative. It is the same as the one used, for example, when the man in the Garden named his wife Eve, or Eve herself named her third son Seth. Soon it will be used for the naming of Ishmael, and again for the naming of Isaac.⁵¹

Hagar is one of only three women to engage in dialogue with God in Genesis—and she a rejected slave woman.

Rebekah. This matriarch⁵² exhibits the same force of character as Sarah:

... rather than minimizing Rebekah’s contribution to the Israelite people, the [Genesis] narratives that introduce and develop the portrait of the second of the matriarchs are striking in the way she is depicted. Although she is described as being a beautiful wife for Isaac, she is not appreciated solely for her appearance. Like Abraham, her independence and trust are demonstrated by her willingness to leave her family and travel to a strange land.⁵³

When Abraham commissions Eleazer to find a wife for Isaac, he makes a significant allusion to woman’s status during the patriarchal era. “But if the

⁵¹Ibid., 71.

⁵²Keturah, Abraham’s wife after Sarah’s death, receives scant mention, without any of the impressive detail that Sarah’s narratives exhibit.

⁵³Sharon Pace Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar’s Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 53. “Even genealogical designation must not be overlooked. The genealogy in Gen 22:20-24 ‘presents the names of the children born to Abraham’s brother Nahor and his sister-in-law Milcah. Nahor and Milcah’s eight sons are listed, but the offspring of these eight sons, the third generation, are mentioned only in two cases. The offspring of Kemuel and Bethuel alone are deemed significant. The name of Kemuel’s son, Aram, is given only in a parenthetical phrase. In contrast Bethuel’s offspring is given greater attention. A separate phrase announces, ‘Bethuel begat Rebekah’ (22:23). Moreover, her name is arresting in this context because she is the first offspring who is mentioned.’ Even the placement of this genealogy after the account of the testing of Abraham with his son Isaac (22:1-19) emphasizes the importance of Rebekah, Jeansonne argues (54–55).

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woman is not willing to come with you, then you will be free from this oath of mine” (Gen 24:8, NRSV). “Abraham assumes the woman will have the final say in the matter.”⁵⁴ And indeed, ultimately it is Rebekah herself who chooses to go with Eleazar. In fact, in the lengthy narrative of Genesis 24, her determination to travel with Eleazar is spoken directly by her in the dialogue and not merely reported by the narrator (24:58).⁵⁵

Rebekah herself arranges for the hospitality of Eleazar when he arrives. Her father says hardly a word throughout. Eleazar asks for a place in her “father’s house,” but Rebekah offers welcome in her “mother’s house” (v. 28 NKJV).⁵⁶

There is an interesting correspondence of key terms between the Rebekah narratives and Abraham’s. They both leave behind “their country,” “their kindred,” and their “father’s house.” Both will be “blessed” and “become great.” James Williams underscores this by suggesting “With this blessing the narrator quietly moves Rebecca into the cycle of God’s promises to the patriarchs.”⁵⁷

After Rebekah marries Isaac and becomes pregnant, in apparent misery she is anxious enough “to inquire of the LORD,” and she does this herself (Gen 25:22):

The critical issue of this story comes into play as Rebekah suffers through her pregnancy. The children struggle within her and, pre-

⁵⁴Ibid., 57.

⁵⁵“But her brother and her mother said, ‘Let the young woman stay with us a few days, at least ten, after that she may go.’ And he said to them, ‘Do not hinder me, since the LORD has prospered my way; send me away so that I may go to my master.’ So they said, ‘We will call the young woman and ask her personally.’ Then they called Rebekah and said to her, ‘Will you go with this man?’ And she said, ‘I will go’” (Gen 24:55-58). In Narrative Analysis, direct speech implies the importance of the person.

⁵⁶[Eleazar speaking] “Whose daughter are you? Tell me, please, is there room in your father’s house for us to lodge?” . . . So the young woman ran and told those of her mother’s house these things” (Gen 24:23, 28, emphasis added). Her father Bethuel is still alive for he speaks later (in v. 50).

⁵⁷James G. Williams, *Women Recounted: Narrative Thinking and the God of Israel*, Bible and Literature Series, vol. 6 (Sheffield: Almond, 1982), 44. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn concur: “It is she [Rebecca], not Isaac, who follows in Abraham’s footsteps, leaving the familiar for the unknown. It is she, not Isaac, who receives the blessing given to Abraham (22:17), ‘May your offspring possess the gates of their enemies!’ (24:60).” *Gender, Power, & Promise: the Subject of the Bible’s First Story*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 73.

Mary Donovan Turner writes: “It is Rebekah who, like Abraham before and Jacob after, leaves her home. She travels to the foreign land guided by the blessing for descendants who will “possess the gate of those who hate them.” The reader of Genesis first encounters this promise for possession (*yah-rash*) in 15:3 where Yahweh seals a covenant with Abraham promising him descendants as numerous as the stars and possession of a land in which they would dwell. . . . It is important to note that although Abraham is guaranteed a son to carry God’s promise to his descendants, it is *not* Isaac who next receives the blessing for *possession* of the enemy. It is Rebekah who receives the blessing similar to Abraham as she leaves her family for the foreign land (24:60). The blessing for possession is given one other time, and that is to Jacob as he leaves for Paddan-aram (28:4). Abraham, Rebekah, and Jacob are the ancestors of this promise.” Mary Donovan Turner, “Rebekah: Ancestor of Faith,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, 20/2 (April, 1985): 43-44.

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sumably on the basis of her discomfort, Rebekah 'inquires (*darash*) of the Lord.' This phrase is of great importance in the Old Testament. Only the great prophets like Moses and Elisha and the greatest kings of Israel inquire of the Lord. . . . Rebekah inquires and, as a result, receives the oracle from Yahweh which destines her younger son to rule the older.⁵⁸

Note the formula used to announce Rebekah's delivery: "And her days were fulfilled that she should give birth" (Gen 25:24). Mary Donovan Turner notices that this formula is used of only three biblical women: Elizabeth and Mary in the New Testament and Rebekah of the Old Testament.⁵⁹

Later, when her son Esau marries two Hittite women, the text informs us that this was a "grief of mind to Isaac *and Rebekah*." (26:35, emphasis added). Turner also suggests that this inclusion of Rebekah's distress regarding Esau's marriage reveals that she was just as concerned about the covenant promise as was Isaac.⁶⁰

The characterization of Rebekah yields a deeper understanding of her significance. . . . All of these actions are given without a polemical context, and the narrator does nothing to indicate that these were unusual activities for a woman to take. . . . The presentation of Rebekah shows that women in Israel were viewed as persons who could make crucial decisions about their futures, whose prayers were acknowledged . . ."⁶¹

The Genesis matriarchs are not passive "wall flowers"! It would be unfair to the biblical portraits of these women to argue that within patriarchy women bowed in submission to all men. Rather, though respectful and devoted to their husbands, they are intelligent, willful, and directive.⁶²

The Women of the Exodus

A notable roster and concentration of women appear at the opening of the book of Exodus.

Jochebed. The Exodus narratives record the unusual means this mother devised to spare the life of Moses in spite of Pharaoh's grim decree. Her husband, after the brief Exodus 2:1 inclusion, is never referred to again except in genealogical notation. The reader's attention is focused on his wife.

Egyptian princess. Divine providence ironically enlists strategic protection for Israel's future deliverer from the very Egyptian monarchy which issued a

⁵⁸Mary Donovan Turner, "Rebekah: Ancestor of Faith," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 20/2 (April 1985): 44-45.

⁵⁹Ibid., 48.

⁶⁰Ibid., 47.

⁶¹Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 69.

⁶²Janice Nunnally-Cox concurs: "Far from conforming to a traditional servitude, these women grace the pages of Genesis with their laughter, their sorrows, their strength, and their power." *Fore-Mothers: Women of the Bible* (New York: Seabury, 1981), 20.

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death decree against Israel's male newborn! Ellen White says that angels directed the daughter of the Pharaoh to the basket wherein the baby Moses lay.⁶³

Furthermore:

. . . the actions of this non-Israelite are presented in direct parallel to those of the God of Israel: "She 'comes down,' 'sees' the child, 'hears' its cry, takes pity on him, draws him out of the water, and provides for his daily needs" (cf. 3:7-8). What she does for Moses, God is soon to do for Israel."⁶⁴

Shiphrah and Puah. These two midwives bravely disobeyed Pharaoh's command to murder newborn Hebrew baby boys. That these two courageous women are named (while even the monarch himself is only spoken of by his title) is highly significant in Hebrew narrative. Also noteworthy is the fact that these midwives have two separate audiences and conversations with Pharaoh, further emphasizing their status:

Analysis of Exodus 1 usually concentrates on the fact of the Hebrews in Egypt, their ever-growing numbers, the passage of time, the Pharaoh who did not know Joseph, and the Hebrews' persecution. . . . Rarely do traditional commentaries point to the midwives. . . . Few celebrate the courage of their decision . . .⁶⁵

Trevor Dennis rightly concludes:

Of all the initiatives taken by human beings in Ex 1-14, it is those of the women, however, that display the greatest courage, invite our keenest admiration, and have the most powerful influence on events. . . . Shiphrah and Puah and the women of 2.1-10 together succeed in defeating the policy of genocide, and save Moses from drowning.⁶⁶

⁶³"The mother's earnest prayers had committed her child to the care of God; and angels, unseen, hovered over his lowly resting place. Angels directed Pharaoh's daughter thither" (PP 243).

⁶⁴Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power & Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 93.

⁶⁵Alice L. Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 48.

⁶⁶Dennis, *Sarah Laughed*, 114. John Welch argues further: "When chiasm is used with conspicuous refinement, it becomes one of the few means by which an author of Biblical narrative is able to accentuate a certain tale and draw the reader's attention to its elements of special importance. A further case in point is Ex. 2:1-22. The principle figure in all but the first book of the Pentateuch is of course Moses, but details of his life and character are extremely scanty. . . . Of the first forty years the Torah chooses to tell the reader no more than a few incidents, chiasmically paired with the most decisive in the middle:

A Marriage of Moses' parents and his birth (2:1-4)

B Moses taken by a king's daughter to her home (2:5-10) by water (Nile)

C Moses rescues his Israelite brother (2:11-12)

D Moses betrayed by his brethren

C' Moses rescues non-Israelite maidens (2:15-17)

B' Moses taken by a priest's daughter to her home (2:18-20) by water (well)

A' Moses' marriage and birth of his son (2:21-22) . . .

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Miriam. We first meet this daughter of Jochabed watching her baby brother floating in a basket near the river's edge. Her courage and diplomacy in addressing the Egyptian princess saved Moses' life. She apparently never married. The Old Testament includes no record of a husband or names of any children for her as it does for the brothers Moses and Aaron. Once the Exodus from Egypt commences, attention usually centers on the lives of her two brothers. Any mention granted Miriam generally concentrates on her errors.

However, Scripture includes an indicative genealogical mention of her (Num 26:59). Miriam is also listed as one of the "sons" of Amram (a term in the plural which at times simply means "children"—see Gen 3:16) in 1 Chronicles 6:3. The fact that Miriam is mentioned amongst Amram's children in a lengthy chapter of fathers and their male offspring surely confirms her prominence. Perhaps this single woman's position during the Exodus has been underestimated.

In the book of Exodus, Miriam is presented as a prophet, only the second person in the Pentateuch so designated thus far (the other is Abraham in Gen 20:7).⁶⁷ At the crossing of the Red Sea one finds her in a dual role as prophetess and musician at the side of her two brothers. God Himself declares through the prophet Micah:

“For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
I redeemed you from the house of bondage;
And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam” (6:4, emphasis added).

The biblical narratives also recount her death:

. . . the fact that Miriam's death and burial were recorded at all is striking. Whereas other figures in the wilderness community (Hur, Eldad and Medad, Moses' wife and father-in-law, etc.) disappeared without mention, the notice of Numbers 20:1b seems to be at least an implicit witness that Miriam was a figure of some significance.

. . . .
It is noteworthy that Miriam is the only member of the wilderness community whose death is recorded without being explicitly connected with divine punishment [as were, for example, Aaron and Moses] (cf. Nm 20:2-13, 22ff; Dt 32:48-52).⁶⁸

“It is no accident that the Torah selects from among all that must have happened to Moses in the course of forty years just these five scenes. These, more than any other events, left their impression upon him and shaped his character” (John W. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity* [Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981], 95, 96).

⁶⁷Ex 15:20, “Miriam the prophetess . . .”

⁶⁸Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses?: A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam*. SBL DSS Series 84, ed. J.J.M. Roberts and Charles Talbert (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 120.

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Women during the time of the Judges

Ruth. This young, childless widow abandoned the security of her national ethnic identity, culture, and religious beliefs to accompany her widowed mother-in-law to Palestine.

Phyllis Tribble argues that Ruth's choice to serve the God of Heaven was just as radical a decision of faith as Abraham's leaving Ur. We must not minimize Abraham's exceptional act of trust as he followed God's call and left his homeland. Yet compare how he traveled with his spouse, much wealth, and many household servants. God sustained him by a direct call from heaven and a promise to guide his steps of faith.⁶⁹ In this light, Ruth's radical decision to serve the God of heaven marks an extraordinary venture. "By the grace of God, she had chosen to join the chosen people. Indeed, she had joined at ebb tide, when fortunes were darkest."⁷⁰

Ruth and Naomi's initiatives have been noted by many commentators. The men in this narrative never assume major roles, except for Boaz; yet the narrator exhibits no surprise at such female enterprise. This lack of surprise suggests that such initiative in women may have been less uncommon than we might expect.

Naomi's name itself (meaning "my delight" or "my pleasantness"), given to her when sons were often more welcome than daughters (Ruth 4:15), suggests that her parents were filled with joy at her birth.⁷¹ The book of Ruth ends with a genealogy that links this Moabite woman to the royal Davidic line, and thus to the Messiah Himself. Ruth becomes a key link in God's salvation lineage.⁷²

⁶⁹Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Denise Lardner Carmody also reflects on Ruth: "[Ruth's] pledge itself is religiously remarkable, because in it Ruth completely throws in her lot with Naomi's faith. A Moabite, Ruth presumably had her own gods and religious ways. . . . So her dedication to Naomi is extremely radical." *Biblical Woman: Contemporary Reflections on Scriptural Texts*. (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 33-34.

⁷⁰Carmody, 33-34.

⁷¹Louise Pettibone Smith, "Introduction to Ruth," *The Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville, TN: Parthenon Press, 1992, 829-32.

⁷²LaCocque is observant regarding Ruth's lineage. He recounts this "faithfulness displayed by a Moabite, and how providential it is that she was accepted and even honored by her contemporary Israelites. . . .

"It is for this reason and no other that the author belabors the point of Ruth's foreignness (Ruth 1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 10-13, 21; 4:5, 10). . . . the adjective 'Moabite' appears at last twice in connection with Ruth where the plot does not demand the title (2:2, 21). This issue is crucial to the purpose of the tale. Ruth is not any foreigner in general. She belongs to a nation that, for Israel, represents perversion and destruction. Number 22ff (see especially 25:1ff) explains the origin of the hostility between the two peoples. Moabite females attempted to corrupt the Israelites coming from Egypt on their way to Canaan. Since then, the numerous references to Moab in Scripture are unanimously pejorative. Zephaniah 2:9 (seventh century B.C.E.) exclaims, 'Surely Moab shall be as Sodom!' Deuteronomy 23:2-6 prohibits Ammonites and Moabites from ever entering the community of Israel. Even the Edomites are treated more kindly (Deut. 23:7-8)." *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 85-86.

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Deborah. The book of Judges includes the second Old Testament prophetess (and the third prophet), Deborah,⁷³ portrayed not only as wife and musician, but also as judge:

Deborah is the only judge described as a prophet and, in the tradition of the other biblical prophets, she spoke the word of Yahweh. Her summons to Barak is couched in the ‘ command of Yahweh, . . .⁷⁴

She is depicted as a great military leader with the same authority as male generals, and a judge to whom male Israelites turn for legal counsel and to settle court cases (Judges 4:5). She is observed as an esteemed political leader and one through whom God initiates a war. The text indicates that she arbitrated disputes, assembled people to combat, and was regarded as an oracle of the divine will.⁷⁵

There seems to be no shock or negative reaction to this woman appearing at this time, no hint that it should be regarded as unusual. She is merely introduced in the customary Old Testament manner. No excuses or explanations are necessary that a woman should be in this prominent position:

Nothing in the narrative suggests that Deborah’s gender improved or detracted from her status as judge/deliver, nor is there indication that Yahweh had any reservations about her functioning in this role.⁷⁶

Moreover, others have seen Deborah’s narrative as the single positive episode in the otherwise dreary history of the other (male) justices in the book of Judges:

With few (but significant) exceptions, the development of each major judge narrative leads to a decline . . . even during the judge’s lifetime. Typically, after becoming a leader of the people and eliminating the source of oppression, the judge leads the people away from Yahweh. . . . The exception . . . is Deborah.⁷⁷

⁷³The first being Rebekah’s nursemaid, Gen. 35:8. See note 35.

⁷⁴Charne E. Robarts, “Deborah--Judge, Prophetess, Military Leader, and Mother in Israel,” *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, Vol. 2, Carroll D. Osburn, ed. (Joplin: College Press Publishing Company, 1995), 74.

⁷⁵Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn rightly remind us: “Deborah is introduced by the epithet *eshet lappidot*. On first reading we might assume that this is a familial identification. Deborah, wife of Lappidoth. We might expect her importance to the story to lie in her role as wife. Yet we soon discover that wifehood reveals little about Deborah. It is not her relationship to her husband that will prove significant, but her relationship to Israel and to her appointed commander” (*Gender, Power & Promise*, 122). The reader is reminded that Deborah’s oracles concerned her entire people, and thus one finds that a prophetess could be, and in fact was, divinely authorized to articulate matters of national concerns.

⁷⁶Vancil, “Sarah,” 80.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 76.

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Hannah. In the pivotal shift from the Judges to the Monarchy, the key transitional person is Hannah, the mother of Samuel. The Samuel narratives commence with an extended account of her:

The Books of Samuel are primarily concerned with . . . David, for Samuel comes to prepare the way for him, while the account of the reign of Saul very soon becomes the story of David's own rise to power. . . . Hannah . . . appears right at the start of it all, when David is but a twinkle in the narrator's eye. Her story provides the beginning of this great chapter in Israel's story, just as . . . Shiphrah and Puah and the women of Exodus 2 presided over the accounts of Israel's beginnings as a people in Egypt. . . . The women of the beginning of Exodus, helped set up a series of events which would eventually take Israel out of Egypt, to their encounter with God at Sinai, and then on into the Promised Land. Hannah will begin a tale which will lead Israel into the . . . monarchy . . .⁷⁸

Hannah's vow is her first recorded speech (1 Sam 1:10-11). After this she speaks more than anyone else. In her initial prayer, she vows to dedicate her asked-for son as a lifelong Nazirite. Israelites normally took this pledge for themselves (Num 6:1-25). When Samson's birth was announced, God declared he would be a Nazirite (Judges 13:4-5). However, on this occasion, Hannah takes the initiative.⁷⁹

Moreover, Hannah—

does not need Elkanah to pray for her. *She* prays, and in doing so becomes the first woman, indeed the *only* woman, in the entire Bible to utter a formal, spoken prayer, and have her prayer quoted in the text for us to read. Eve, Sarah, and Hagar converse with God, and Rebekah (Gen 25:22) 'enquires' of him; Miriam, Deborah, and Mary the mother of Jesus all sing songs to God (Hannah herself will have her own song to sing to him in 1 Sam 2). . . . in the narratives of the Old and New Testaments Hannah's prayer is unique—and no other woman pays God such a vow as hers, either.⁸⁰

Only when Samuel is weaned do we learn of Hannah's earlier pledge regarding him. As the text suggests, "Hannah has not asked Elkanah to confirm her vow. . . . She presents her plan to dedicate Samuel as something already decided upon (1 Sm 1:22)."⁸¹ Hannah does not ask Elkanah for his permission. He is

⁷⁸Dennis, *Sarah Laughed*, 115-116.

⁷⁹"What God commands in Judges 13, she herself vows at Shiloh." *ibid.*, 123.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 124.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 130.

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depicted as simply giving his blessing.⁸² After this, Elkanah will have one brief final appearance (with Hannah, 2:20) in the narrative:

from now on he will have nothing to say, and nothing to do (he does not take any action in 2.20). Except for a few words of blessing from Eli in 2.20, all speech in the rest of Hannah's story will be put in her mouth, all the initiatives taken will be hers, all that is done . . . will be done by her.⁸³

When Hannah brings Samuel to Shiloh in fulfillment of her vow to God, Ellen White informs us that she travels with her husband (PP 571). However, the text records that all the initiatives are taken by Hannah.⁸⁴ This is significant, especially since Elkanah was a Levite (1 Chr 6:33-38), and Hannah's duties are generally thought to belong to the male. However, Hannah went to Shiloh:

expressly to perform her own vow. It is she who has come with such fine offerings for sacrifice, and, remarkably, with her own child to dedicate to the service of God. . . .

It is hard to respond adequately to such an act as Hannah's and Eli does not try. This time he does not answer her. Only Hannah herself can speak to what she has done. After noting that she left Samuel with Eli, the narrator takes us straight into her song. For the second time she pours out her soul to God.⁸⁵

Hannah's exultant anthem is striking. One does not hear a gentle lullaby as usually expected of mothers. Rather,

It is a vigorous shout of triumph, . . . There is nothing ladylike about it! . . . At one point it uses the imagery of war. It speaks of the shattering enemies, and closes with a prayer for the king. That final reference is significant, of course. In Hannah's day there was no monarchy. . . . [Yet] Hannah sings *a king's song!*⁸⁶

Many commentators see Mary's glorious New Testament "Magnificat" as an echo of Hannah's triumphant hymn!

Women during the Monarchy

Huldah. This woman comes into focus as a chief religious authority during the time of an intense religious revival (2 Kgs 22:14f). Yet the text ex-

⁸² "“And Elkanah her husband said to her, ‘Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him. Only let the LORD establish His word.’” So the woman stayed and nursed her son until she had weaned him.” 1 Sam 1:23.

⁸³Dennis, *ibid*, p. 130.

⁸⁴“Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bulls, one ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh.” 1 Sam 1:24 (emphasis added).

⁸⁵Dennis continues, “When Mary presents Jesus to God in the temple in Jerusalem, she takes him home with her after the ceremony. Hannah will return to Ramah without Samuel. . . . Hannah's offering of Samuel is without parallel in biblical literature.” Dennis, *ibid.*, 132.

⁸⁶*Ibid*, 133.

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presses no surprise that the King of Judah dispatches Hilkiah the priest, Shaphan the scribe, and several other prominent officials to her. “The biblical text does not suggest that seeking divine revelation from a woman was in any way unusual.”⁸⁷ Both Huldah’s use of the prophetic formula “thus says the Lord” and the king’s directive, “Go, inquire of the Lord,” indicates that her judgment was authoritative.

The scroll of Deuteronomy had been found as the Temple was being repaired and refurbished. This particular book of the Pentateuch deals with significant moral and political issues. Thus the authority that the King recognizes in Huldah is profound. Ellen White so argues:

At that time . . . Huldah was living in Jerusalem, near the temple. *The mind of the king, filled with anxious foreboding, reverted to her, and he determined to inquire of the Lord through this chosen messenger, to learn, if possible, whether by any means within his power he might save erring Judah, now on the verge of ruin.*
*The gravity of the situation, and the respect in which he held the prophetess, led him to choose as his messengers to her the first men of the kingdom.*⁸⁸

Some commentators have suggested that Huldah may have been consulted because no male prophet was available at the time. However, no less a prophet than Jeremiah was already well established in his prophetic office. Others have thought Huldah might have been a man. However, the biblical text specifically states that Huldah was a wife (2 Kgs 22:14)!

Other Old Testament women could be considered, such as Abigail, who embarked on a mission of “solo diplomacy” during a volatile situation, only later notifying her husband. There is also the “wise woman of Tekoa,” who was enlisted to advise King David. Moreover, there are subtle textual indicators of women sprinkled throughout the Old Testament, such as Ps 68:11: “The Lord gave the word; great was the host of those who proclaimed it.” This “host” is a *female* company in Hebrew, but only a very few translations acknowledge this.⁸⁹

⁸⁷John T. Willis, “Huldah and Other Biblical Prophetesses,” *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, Vol. 2, ed. Carroll F. Osburn (Joplin: College Press Publishing, 1995), 112.

⁸⁸PK 398, emphasis added. Duane Christensen also carefully analyzes the inclusion of the story of Huldah in 2 Kings. He argues that the narratives of Deborah in Judges 4 and Huldah in 2 Kings 22 frame the Deuteronomic history of life in the promised land (from Judges up to and including Kings) on both sides, forming an inclusio:

A Deborah: a “Prophetess” of YHWH alongside Barak (Israel)

B Jezebel: A royal advocate of Baal in Israel

B’ Athaliah: a royal advocate of Baal in Judah

A’ Huldah” a Prophetess of YHWH alongside Josiah (Judah)

D. L. Christensen, “Huldah and the Men of Anathoth: Women in Leadership in the Deuteronomic History,” *SBL 1984 Seminar Papers* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985), 399-403.

⁸⁹*The Clear Word Bible* catches this nuance: “You, our Lord, spoke and victories were won. The women spread the news and everyone knew.” Jack J. Blanco, *The Clear Word Bible: A*

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This and other texts hint at a wider involvement of women in Israelite religion than is sometimes recognized. For example, Alice Laffey comments on Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:1-10:

Buried in this text . . . is the directive: circumcise your hearts. The author here transfers a physical act, possible only for males, to a symbolic one, possible for all human beings. The author thus transforms an essential sign of covenant partnership (cf. Gen 17:10-14; Ex 4:24-26) from one which can include only males to one which can include both men and women. . . . Verse 6 [of Dt. 30] transforms the phrase of Dt 10:16, 'circumcise your hearts.' It is now not they, the Israelites, who are to do it (an imperative), but rather the Lord who will do it for them. . . . making circumcised hearts rather than circumcised bodies the appropriate sign of the covenant relationship with Yahweh . . . directly available to women.⁹⁰

The Song of Songs represents full female/male equality in the marriage relationship. If anything,

. . . the primary orientation lies with the female of the pair. . . . There is no trace of subordination of female to male, and there is a presence of power images for the female and not the male."⁹¹

Women in the New Testament

Women in the Gospels

Anna. Luke refers to the widow and prophetess Anna (Luke 2:36-38). He includes her in the narration of the infant Jesus' presentation at the Temple because she was the second witness testifying to Jesus' divinity. At that time the injunction "in the mouth of two or three witnesses the thing is established" (Matt 18:16, cf. Deut 17:6) was taken very seriously. Luke is thus assigning a vital position to this woman. Ellen White's passing comment seems to suggest this:

Anna, also a prophetess, came in *and confirmed Simeon's testimony concerning Christ*. As Simeon spoke, her face lighted up

Paraphrase to Nurture Faith and Growth (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1994), 675.

⁹⁰Alice L. Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 64-66.

In the NT, the Apostle Paul also expresses the same lack of differentiation between male and female, for spiritual circumcision, representing entrance into the line of Abraham and the body of Christ:

"For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, . . ." (Col 2:9-11).

⁹¹Carol Meyers continues ". . . The Song of Songs . . . reveals a situation of gender mutuality. There is no trace of subordination of female to male, and there is a presence of power images for the female and not the male." Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 180.

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with the glory of God, and she poured out her heartfelt thanks that she had been permitted to behold Christ the Lord.⁹²

Luke describes Anna going forth from the Temple to proclaim the Incarnation to the crowds in the courtyard. The Greek verb translated “speak” (in the imperfect tense) indicates continual action. This suggests that Anna preached the Incarnation on more than one occasion.⁹³ Some have noticed a biblical pattern of God commissioning prophets to announce both the beginning and ending of the major timed prophecies in Scripture. If so, here at the climax of the 490-year prophecy predicting the Messiah’s birth (Dan 9:24–27), God enlists a female prophet to draw attention to this pivotal event in the capital city of Jerusalem!

In fact, three women prophets appear during this dramatic time. Anna is actually designated a “prophetess” by Luke. However, Elizabeth and Mary also “prophesied.”⁹⁴ Previously, the Old Testament referred to three women as prophetesses: Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah. At this climactic moment in Salvation History, three additional women appear in prophetic roles.

The Samaritan Woman. All four gospels record impressive portraits of Christ’s dealing with women during His adult ministry. The narrative in John 4 of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well is a profound case in point. The conversation between them is the longest recorded discussion Jesus had with anyone—and she a Gentile woman. Ellen White also informs us that it is the “most important discourse that Inspiration has given us . . .”⁹⁵ The Samaritan woman is the first person recorded in Christ’s public ministry who brought a group of people into a believing relationship with the Messiah.⁹⁶ Ellen White comments, “She proved herself a more effective missionary than His own disciples.”⁹⁷

This narrative’s position, immediately following that of Nicodemus (John 3,) may not be coincidental. Is the apostle seeking to contrast the weak faith of a prominent male Jewish religious leader with that of a Gentile woman?⁹⁸ She at

⁹²DA 55, emphasis added.

⁹³Lk 2:38: “And coming in that instant, she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.”

⁹⁴Elizabeth--Lk 1:41-45; Mary--Lk 1:46-55.

⁹⁵3T 217. In fact, two of the longest recorded conversations of Christ in the Gospels are with women, both Gentiles: this woman at Samaria’s well (John 4) and the Syrophenician mother (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30).

⁹⁶“And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, ‘He told me all that I ever did.’ . . . And many more believed because of His own word. Then they said to the woman, ‘Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world’” (John 4:39, 41-42).

⁹⁷DA 194-195.

⁹⁸The juxtaposition of narratives in the larger structure of biblical books is increasingly seen as significant .

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once hastens to spread her conviction of the Messiah, whereas Nicodemus does not publicly align himself with Christ until after Christ's death.

Martha and Mary. The narratives of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus also contain rich insights regarding Christ's attitude toward women. Lazarus is miraculously raised from the dead, the greatest and last of the "signs" John records leading up to Christ's Passion.⁹⁹ However, Lazarus is never recorded with direct speech in the narrative. Rather, it is Martha who

. . . makes one of the premiere confessions of faith in the New Testament, 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.' . . . The confession by Martha in John 11 may be compared to the confession by Peter in the Synoptic Gospels at Caesarea Philippi. Martha's statement is very close to Matthew's account, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt 16:16). . . . Martha's statement may also be compared to the confession of Thomas in John 20. . . . Actually, Martha's confession is more powerful than Thomas's for she had not yet seen Jesus' or even Lazarus' resurrection."¹⁰⁰

On another occasion Jesus coaxes Martha to accept her sister's priorities of opting to study rather than assisting in the kitchen. Nevertheless, Martha apparently had also been an avid student of the Messiah herself to express such a penetrating statement of faith at the death of her brother (John 11:23-27).

Her sister Mary has always been perceived as an earnest student of the Messiah. Yet,

Mary's choice was not a conventional one for Jewish women. She sat at the feet of Jesus and was listening to "his word." Both the posture and the reference to Jesus' "word" seem to imply teaching, religious instruction. Jewish women were not permitted to touch the Scripture; and they were not taught the Torah itself . . . A rabbi did not instruct a woman in the Torah. Not only did Mary choose the good part, but Jesus related to her in a teacher-disciple relationship. He admitted her into the "study" and commended her for the choice. A Torah-oriented role for women was not unprecedented in Israel . . . but the drift had been away from it.¹⁰¹

Mary is the first to see the resurrected Jesus, and Christ commissions her to proclaim His resurrection to the disciples. She is the first person to herald the resurrection!¹⁰² In fact,

⁹⁹Frank Wheeler also notes that "The location of this story in the Gospel of John is significant. Just as the first sign was initiated by a woman, Jesus' mother, the last sign is initiated by women, Martha and Mary." Frank Wheeler, "Women in the Gospel of John," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, Vol 2. (Joplin: College Press Publishing, 1995), 215.

¹⁰⁰Wheeler, *ibid.*, 216, 217.

¹⁰¹Evelyn and Frank Stagg, *Women in the World of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 118.

¹⁰²One can almost detect that the two disciples traveling to Emmaus are disparaging the fact that the "women" have been the only ones to proclaim the resurrection: "But we were hoping that

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Mary's prominence among witnesses to the resurrected Jesus is significant for John's readers. Of the six resurrection appearances of Jesus in the Gospels, five of them include Mary.¹⁰³

Jesus and Women. Biblical scholars have been slow to discern the role of women in the early New Testament Church:

While the focus in John is not to argue for greater recognition of women in terms of discipleship and ministry, that certainly would have been one of the results within the early Christian community. The focus, rather, appears to be on discipleship and giving testimony to Jesus as Messiah. In the fourth Gospel, women are shown to be capable of fulfilling that role as well as men. . . . this Gospel does make it clear that the faith, testimony, and discipleship of women is equal to that of men and is equally as important to the Christian community. The value of women's discipleship and influence has been tremendously overlooked."¹⁰⁴

There is no Scriptural evidence that the Messiah ever treated women as inferior to men or urged all women to be in submission to all men. At this time, though the status of women in Judaism is very complex, the position of the female is generally conceded to have been restricted, at least according to rabbinical rules. For example, as mentioned above, women normally were not allowed to study Torah. One first century rabbi, Eliezer, writes, "Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman. Whoever teaches his daughter Torah is like one who teaches her lasciviousness."¹⁰⁵ Women did not

it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened. Yes, and *certain women of our company*, who arrived at the tomb early, *astonished us*. When they did not find His body, they came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. *And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see*" (Lk 24:21-24, emphasis added).

¹⁰³Wheeler, 219.

¹⁰⁴Wheeler, 223. He continues, "The Fourth Gospel may not have as much to say directly about the public or official roles of women in the church as one might like. Nevertheless, this Gospel does make it clear that the faith, testimony, and discipleship of women is equal to that of men and is equally as important to the Christian community" (224).

¹⁰⁵"Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman. . . . Whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her lasciviousness." (Eliezer, 1st c. rabbi). Rabbinic quotes concerning women are pointed:

"Happy is he whose children are males, and woe to him whose children are females.

". . . The Talmud says: 'Let a curse come upon the man whose wife or children say grace for him.' Furthermore, included in daily prayers was this thanksgiving:

Praised be God that he has not created me a gentile; praised be God that he has not created me a woman; praised be God that he has not created me an ignorant man.

". . . The gospel accounts themselves present no negative attitudes toward women, an astounding and telling fact. Leonard Swidler, in his paper, 'Jesus Was a Feminist,' comments:

For whatever Jesus said or did comes to us only through the lens of the first Christians. . . . The fact that the overwhelmingly negative attitude toward women in Palestine did not come through the primitive Christian communal lens by itself underscores the clearly great religious

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count in determining a *minyan* in worship (the number needed to organize public Jewish worship, according to the Mishnah). They could not bear witness. Jesus, however, repeatedly rejected these customs.

We must bear in mind, of course, that the Mishnah was not written down in Jesus' day, and many of its remarks against women are almost certainly from after that period. What is more, even if these rules were in place in then, this does not mean that all or even many Jews followed them. Mary the mother of Jesus certainly knew the Bible, as she alludes to it in a sophisticated way in her prophetic song. Josephus estimates that there were only about six thousand Pharisees, and we actually only know of the Sadducees from the gospels and the writings of Pharisees. So we should not assume that all women in Israel were treated the same way Pharisees and rabbis thought they should be treated.

Jesus also refused to limit a woman's horizon to nurturing her family and, as we saw, to cooking. When a woman once called to Jesus from a crowd, "blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked," Jesus sought to widen this feminine perspective by responding, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:27-28 RSV). Yet Christ never belittled the role of mother. Indeed, He likened Himself to a mother hen seeking to gather her baby chicks under her wings (Matt 23:37).

In one trilogy of parables (Luke 15), all of which revealed attributes of God, the Messiah placed in the center a woman seeking a lost coin. Some feminists have not been blind to all this and have openly appreciated Christ's attitude toward women.

As seen above, much feminist material boils with rage against Scripture. Thus it is arresting to notice how many feminists, though vehement against the canon, refrain from denouncing the Messiah. Often, in fact, they uphold Him as an example of a "revolutionary man" (even though He is male, and God). Radical feminist Mary Daly is one such example:

In the New Testament it is significant that the statements which reflect the antifeminism of the times are never those of Christ. There is no recorded speech of Jesus concerning women "as such." What is very striking is his behavior toward them. In the passages describing the relationship of Jesus with various women, one characteristic stands out starkly: they emerge as persons, for they are treated as persons, often in such contrast with prevailing custom as to astonish onlookers. . . . What stands out is the fact that these, his friends, he saw as persons, to whom he gave the supreme yet simple gift of his brotherhood.¹⁰⁶

importance Jesus attached to his positive attitude . . . toward women. [Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 3].

Nunnally-Cox, *Fore-Mothers*, 99, 100, 101.

¹⁰⁶She continues: "The behavior of Jesus toward the Samaritan woman puzzled even his disciples, who were surprised that he would speak to her in public (John 4:27f). . . . In the Gospel narratives the close friendship of Jesus with certain women is manifested in the context of the

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Women in the Epistles of Paul

Paul, of all the New Testament men, receives the greatest scorn from feminists, especially for his supposedly extreme chauvinistic statements in 1 Timothy. Because of what they consider as Paul's sexist language, feminists often jettison all of Paul's teachings and many times the entire New Testament itself. Denise Carmody so fumes regarding the Timothy passage:

But the prejudicial, if not outrightly vicious, interpretation of Yahwist mythology we find in this text triggers my bile. How arrogant and self-serving! What a dangerous precedent, as generations of patriarchal Christian leadership have proved! Pseudo-Paul has on his head guilt for a significant amount of the violence and humiliation women have suffered throughout the Christian era. Among the biblical wrongdoers, he stands out as a paramount oppressor.¹⁰⁷

Radical feminists, however, neglect to compare Paul's counsel to Timothy who was ministering in Ephesus with numerous other Pauline passages portraying Paul's attitudes and actions toward women elsewhere, along with his strong insistence that his teachings were normative, and that his example be followed.¹⁰⁸ These varied details must be taken into account when interpreting Paul,

crucifixion and resurrection." Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex: With a New Feminist Post-Christian Introduction by the Author* (NY: Harper/Colophon Books, 1975), pp. 79-80.

¹⁰⁷Denise Lardner Carmody, *Biblical Woman: Contemporary Reflections on Scriptural Texts* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

¹⁰⁸1 Ths 1:6 "... you became imitators of us and of the Lord . . ." "We often think about the imitation of Christ (Eph 5:1-2; 1 Jn 2:6; 3:3), but probably do not pay sufficient attention to Paul's repeated exhortation to the churches to imitate him ('I urge you to imitate me,' 1 Cor 4:16; cf. 2 Ths 3:7; Gal 4:12; Phil 3:17; 4:9), as he imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1)." John Stott comments:

"We are familiar with the claims of the Old Testament prophets that they were bearers of the word of God, for they introduced their oracles with formulas like 'the word of the Lord came to me,' 'listen to the word of the Lord,' and 'thus says the Lord.' But here in 1 Ths 2:13 is a comparable claim by a New Testament apostle. Paul does not rebuke the Thessalonians for regarding his message too highly. On the contrary, he commends them for having recognized it as what is truly is (God's word) and for having accepted it as such. More than that, he actually thanks God constantly that they have done so, and adds that the gospel authenticates its divine origin by its transforming power in their lives. This is a clear indication of Paul's self-conscious apostolic authority. He knew who he was (an apostle of Christ) and he knew what his message was (the word of God). And the Thessalonians knew these things as well."

[P. 130 regarding, 1 Ths 5:27:] "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren." "... he certainly used extremely strong terms in order to ensure that everybody without exception would have the change to hear it. 'I put you on oath,' he wrote, and solemnly added a reference to the presence and/or authority of *the Lord*, to have this letter read to all the brothers. He was later to make the same charge to the Colossians, with the supplementary requirement that they and the Laodiceans (referring perhaps to *Ephesians*) exchange their letters. It is quite extraordinary instruction. Already the Old Testament was read in the Christian assemblies, for the custom had been taken over from the synagogues. But now the apostles' letters were also to be read aloud during the worship service . . . The clear implication is that these apostolic docu-

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for it is the position of this paper that Paul as apostle cannot be contradicting himself. He will not be saying one thing in Ephesus and acting contrary elsewhere, though this is often the accusation suggested by feminists.¹⁰⁹

ments were to be regarded as being on a level with the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul saw nothing incongruous in this.

“Further, he gave the Thessalonians no command to test his teaching, as they were to test the words of the prophets [v. 19-20], in order to sift the wheat from the chaff, the good from the evil, the genuine from the spurious. They were to weigh prophetic utterances, because not all of them were from God, but they were to listen to everything the apostle wrote, and were expected to believe and obey it all. Thus Paul unequivocally put his authority as an apostle above that of the prophets. Just so today, granted that a subsidiary prophetic gift exists, Scripture has supreme authority in the church.”

“Paul has clarified the three distinct media which he has used in instructing the Thessalonians. First, he had taught them the apostolic *tradition* (*paradosis*), verbally, and they had received it from him (2 Ths 3:6, 10: 2:15). Secondly, he had set them an *example*, which they were to imitate (7-9; 1 Ths 1:6; 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Gal 4:12; Phil 3:17). Thirdly, he confirmed and elaborated his teaching by *letters* (14; cf. 1 Ths 4:16), which he autographed personally (17) in order to distinguish them from forgeries (2:2). ...

“. . . five times Paul resorts to the language of ‘command’ and ‘obedience.’ . . . It is truly astonishing that he says he is trusting the Lord Jesus to ensure that the Thessalonians will obey him. By these ‘blunt commands . . . he appears to canonize his own doctrine and writings” [fn: Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (Anchor Bible; Doubleday, 1974), 362.]

Now these are not the wild ravings of a demagogue. They are not the petulant reaction of a tinpot leader whose authority is being challenged and who over-compensates by reasserting it. Paul betrays no personal pique or anger, and no petty arrogance. On the contrary, he keeps his cool, continues to call them his ‘brothers’ (6, 13, 15), and does not require of them an obedience which he is unwilling to give himself (6-10). Yet he makes the explicit claim that his commands are the Lord’s commands . . . another clear example of his self-conscious authority as an apostle of Christ. In an earlier letter he has commended the Galatians for welcoming him as if he ‘were Christ Jesus himself’ (4:14), and in a later letter he will refer to his insistence that Christ was ‘speaking through’ him (2 Cor 13:3).

“Nobody in the church today has this kind of authority or dares speak to us this kind of language” [John Stott, *The Gospel & the End of Time: The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 36, 54, 130-131, 195].

¹⁰⁹Ellen White addresses this issue many times: “The Bible points to God as its author; yet it was written by human hands . . . Different forms of expression are employed by different writers; often the same truth is more strikingly presented by one than by another. And as several writers present a subject under varied aspects and relations, there may appear, to the superficial, careless, or prejudiced reader, to be discrepancy or contradiction, where the thoughtful, reverent student, with clearer insight, discerns the underlying harmony” (*Great Controversy*, v, vi).

“There is not always perfect order or apparent unity in the Scriptures. The miracles of Christ are not given in exact order, but are given just as the circumstances occurred, which called for this divine revealing of the power of Christ. The truths of the Bible are as pearls hidden. They must be searched, dug out by painstaking effort. Those who take only a surface view of the Scriptures will, with their superficial knowledge, which they think is very deep, talk of the contradictions of the Bible, and question the authority of the Scriptures. But those whose hearts are in harmony with truth and duty will search the Scriptures with a heart prepared to receive divine impressions” (1 SM, p. 20).

“In His Word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will” (GC, vii).

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Consider Paul's acknowledgment that women in Corinth publically praying and prophesying during the service of worship. Moreover, a spate of studies on the Philippian church suggest that "Philippi is perhaps the classic NT case study on the roles of women in the founding and developing of a local congregation."¹¹⁰

Moreover, in Romans 16 Paul sends greetings to twenty-six people in the church at Rome:

Reflecting on the names and circumstances of the people Paul greets, . . . the most interesting and instructive aspect of church diversity in Rome is that of gender. Nine out of the twenty-six persons greeted are women: Priscilla (3), Mary (6), probably Junia (7), Tryphena and Tryphosa, who may have been twin sisters, and Persis (12), Rufus' mother (13), Julia and Nereus' sister (15). Paul evidently thinks highly of them all. He singles out four (Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis) as having "worked hard." The verb *kopiaio* implies strong exertion, is used of all four of them, and is not applied to anybody else on the list. . . . the prominent place occupied by women in Paul's entourage shows that he was not at all the male chauvinist of popular fantasy.¹¹¹

Two names in this roster call for special attention: 1) *Phoebe*: who may have carried on this occasion Paul's letter, just as Titus and Timothy were deputed to do at times. Her designation as "servant" or "deacon" (the Greek word *diakonos* used here is usually translated "servant" but is also transliterated "deacon") does not imply the "deaconess" we know today, but may, rather, refer to the position ordained by the apostles in Acts 6:1-6, including that of Stephen (though "servant of the church" in Rom 16:1 may not refer to a church "office"

¹¹⁰A. Boyd Luter, "Partnership in the Gospel: The Role of Women in the Church at Philippi," *JETS* 39/3 (September 1996): 411. See also: W.D. Thomas, "The Place of Women in the Church at Philippi," *ExpTim* 83 (1972): 117-120; F.X. Malinowski, "The Brave Women of Philippi," *BTB* 15 (1985): 60-64; L. Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice: Paul's Letter to the Philippians and Luke-Acts as Received by First-century Women* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wikgren, 1988). Significant attention to the circumstances in Philippi is also found in such broader studies of NT women as E.M. Tetlow, *Women and Ministry in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist, 1980); B. Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988).

Moreover, the Phillipian church was highly regarded by Paul:

" . . . of all his converts, the Philipians seem to have been the most free from fault, and the most attached to himself. In the Epistle which he wrote to them, we find no censure, and much praise; and so zealous was their love for St. Paul, that they alone (of all the Churches which he founded) forced him from the very beginning to accept their contributions for his support. Twice, while he was at Thessalonica, immediately after their own conversion, they had sent relief to him. Again they did the same while he was at Corinth, working for his daily bread in the manufactory of Aquila. And we shall find them afterwards cheering his Roman prison, by similar proofs of their loving remembrance." W.J. Conybeare and J.S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 436.

¹¹¹John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 394-396.

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at all, but to a woman who is devoted to Christian service, irrespective of any formal commissioning).¹¹²

2) *Priscilla*. In verse 3 (and in three other New Testament passages), Priscilla is named first before her husband.¹¹³ Whatever the reason behind this ordering, Paul recognizes her service to the church.¹¹⁴

Paul's positive inclusion of women is also implicit throughout his writings. For instance, in chapter 12:1-2, he entreats the believers in Rome to

“offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (1b). Paul uses five more or less technical terms. He represents us as *a priestly people*, who, in responsive gratitude for God's mercy *offer* or present our bodies as living sacrifices. These are described as both *holy* and *pleasing to God*, which seem to be the moral equivalents to being physically unblemished or without defect, and a *fragrant aroma* [cf. Lv 1:3, 9].¹¹⁵

This passage echoes OT sacrificial language, and allows no differentiation of men and women. All the believers are functioning in this NT “priestly” role.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, it is Paul's letter to Timothy in Ephesus that modern feminists (and the early Church Fathers) cite most often. And because of this passage feminists in droves have abandoned Scriptural authority. But perhaps they have not given careful consideration to the initial situation that Paul was addressing in Ephesus. For just as biblical patriarchy needs to be fairly interpreted in the light of its original context, so with Paul's materials. Leon Morris so argues:

It is a great pity that Paul's letters were ever called *epistles*. They are in the most literal sense *letters* [(Barclay, *The Letter to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: The Daily Study Bible, 1988), xiv)]. . . . what Paul wrote was a series of genuine letters addressing specific situations in which he and his converts found themselves. . . . Each of these missives was clearly written in the light of what was needed

¹¹²“Phoebe, the deacon acclaimed by St. Paul, is a woman of high favor. Although we know little else about her, the description in Romans is complimentary: she is sister, she is saint, she is helper of many, and helper of St. Paul as well” (Nunnally-Cox, *Fore-Mothers*, 134).

¹¹³Acts 18:18, 26; 2 Tm 4:19.

¹¹⁴Luke (Acts 18:24-26) pointedly describes *both* Aquila and Priscilla instructing Apollos and explaining “to him the way of God more accurately.”

¹¹⁵John Stott, *Romans*, 321, emphasis Stott's.

¹¹⁶“There is no doubt, in the early community, as to the full membership of women. [fn: Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 785.] Women and men now meet together, pray together, learn together, and serve a common people. The book of Acts, called the Acts of the Apostle, and several early letters of Paul make mention of a number of women. Jesus' positive, life-giving response to women begins to take root, and we see a blossoming in the community of early times.” Nunnally-Cox, *Fore-Mothers*, 121-122.

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in a given situation. . . . They all focus on the situation confronting Paul at the time he wrote them.¹¹⁷

Radical feminists need to recall that Ephesus was a major center for Goddess worship (a hint of this is found in Acts 19 with the great “Diana of the Ephesians”). Some of its major tenets were that a female goddess gave birth to the world, that the first woman was created before the first man, and that to achieve highest exaltation wives must claim independence from their husbands, and especially from child-bearing.

Sharon Gritz’s extensive research suggests that a situation of a radical religious pluralism existed in Ephesus, and that various false teachings were endangering the faith of the new Christian converts there. Thus, Paul was instructing Timothy how to deal with such a stark departure from the Christian faith.¹¹⁸ Instead of exhibiting a negative attitude toward women, Paul is seeking to preserve the exalted position of the Christian wife:

Paul’s concern in 1 Tim 2:8-15, according to Gritz, is not that women might have authority over men in the church, but that certain assertive women

¹¹⁷Leon Morris, *Galatians: Paul’s Charter of Christian Freedom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 13. Gunther Bornkamm concurs:

“The distinctiveness of the Pauline letters lies in their being close to the living voice of the gospel, that is to say, the gospel proclaimed by word of mouth and aimed at gaining both a hearing and an obedience in faith. They do not move in the realm of abstract theoretical reflection, but always include the hearers’ own situation as a determining factor. . . . [In addition] Paul’s letters differ from countless other church treatises and pastoral epistles both early and late in that their author’s person and work are an indissoluble unity. The modern reader will often feel their strangeness, nor should he try to gloss over it. But he should also be conscious that here the power of the spirit is united with the power of the heart and finds expression in language which is often quite amazing in its mastery. Very often it is difficult, impenetrable and overloaded; it shifts and changes, being wooing, and gracious, but abrupt and harsh as well. *In every case, however, it is dictated by the apostle’s work and gospel.* It is a tool used by a man who is himself a tool in the hand of his master” [*Paul* (London, 1971), xxiv-xxv].

Conybeare and Howson also:

“It is in these letters then that we must study the true life of St. Paul, from its inmost depths and springs of action, which were ‘hidden with Christ in God,’ In them we learn (to use the language of Gregory Nazianzene) ‘what is told of Paul by Paul himself.’ Their most sacred contents indeed rise above all that is peculiar to the individual writer; for they are the communications of God to man, concerning the faith and life of Christians; which St. Paul declared (as he often asserts) by the immediate revelation of Christ Himself. But his manner of teaching these eternal truths is coloured by his human character, and peculiar to himself. And such individual features are naturally impressed much more upon epistles than upon any other kind of composition. For here we have not treatises, or sermons, which may dwell in the general and abstract, but genuine letters, written to meet the actual wants of living men; giving immediate answers to real questions, and warnings against pressing dangers; full of the interest of the passing hour” [*The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), xv-xvi].

¹¹⁸Sharon Hodgin Gritz, *Paul, Women Teachers, and the Mother Goddess at Ephesus: A Study of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 in Light of the Religious and Cultural Milieu of the First Century* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991).

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in the church who had been influenced by false teachers would teach error. For this reason, he charges them to 'be silent.'¹¹⁹

It appears significant that Paul wrote this singular counsel to Timothy in Ephesus. When Paul counseled the churches in Philippi or Galatia,¹²⁰ for exam-

¹¹⁹Thomas C. Geer Jr., "Admonitions to Women in 1 Tim 2:8-15," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, ed. C.D. Osburn (Joplin: College Press, 1993): 1:281-302.

Angel Rodriguez also reaches a similar conclusion through a NT word study of the terms Paul is using. He concludes: "Having examined the New Testament evidence, we can now take a closer look at 1 Timothy 2:11, 12. There is no doubt that Paul is concerned about controversies in the church. In verse 8 he exhorts men to pray 'without anger or disputing.' In the case of the women, the apostle is also concerned about behavior and attitudes that could be disruptive. . . . Why did Paul single out women? Possibly because some of them had become the target of false teachers and their instructions (2 Tim. 3:6). As a result, they were bringing controversies into the church. Paul forbids this type of controversial and divisive speech when he says that 'a woman . . . must be silent'" ("Women's Words." *Adventist Review*, Nov. 14, 1996, 27).

¹²⁰Gal 3:27-29 "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Leon Morris comments on this passage:

"There are many distinctions in human society, and in the first century the Jews despised the Gentiles (even proselytes were often not fully accepted), the Greeks looked down on uncultured people outside their race, the Romans felt themselves superior to those they had conquered, and so on. Probably people of every nation look down on outsiders. But in Christ all such distinctions are meaningless. . . . *There is neither Jew nor Greek*. This means that the great divide between Jew and Gentile that meant so much to the Jews in general is meaningless. If Christ has saved a person, that person is a Christian and whether he or she is a Jew or Greek is irrelevant. Baptism unites people across all national boundaries. Nationality was important for both Jews and Greeks. Jews divided the whole human race into Jews and Gentiles and they saw only themselves as making up the people of God. . . .

The apostle moves on to the great social division of antiquity when he affirms that in Christ slavery makes no difference. Throughout the Roman world the division between slave and free was of the greatest importance. Slaves had no rights, and the lowliest free person was infinitely more important than any slave, however gifted. To recognize that a believing slave was just as important in God's sight as the highest among the nobility was to point to a radical abolition of a distinction that was taken for granted throughout Paul's world. These words mark a revolution.

It was hardly less so with *no male and female*. While occasionally women might attain importance or notoriety, it was almost universally true that the female of the species was allocated a very minor role. Women were not educated; often it was regarded as a sin to teach a woman. This meant that women had a very limited sphere in life. . . . to affirm that *male and female* was an irrelevant distinction, indeed that there was no such distinction, was to make another revolutionary statement. Osiek sees a reference to Genesis 1:27 and speaks of 'an expression of the deep unity of humanity as it comes forth from the creating hand of God.' . . .

For introduces the reason for the world-shattering statements the apostle has made. . . His *all* is important. *All* believers are one in Christ Jesus and the unity is the important thing." [fn: Bruce comments, 'No more restriction is implied in Paul's equalizing of the status of male and female in Christ than in his equalizing of the status of Jew and Gentile, or of slave and free person. If in ordinary life existence in Christ is manifested openly in church fellowship, then, if a Gentile may exercise spiritual leadership in church as freely as a Jew, or a slave as freely as a citizen, why not a woman as freely as a man?'] Leon Morris, *Galatians: Paul's Charter of Christian Freedom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 121- 123.

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ple, a different situation existed, and other issues were addressed. Carroll Osburn argues similarly:

Far from being intolerant, Paul neither teaches nor suggests in this text [1 Cor 14:34-35] anything regarding patriarchalism or female subjection. The real issue is not the *extent* to which a woman may participate in the work and worship of the church, but the *manner*. Paul's corrective does not ban women from speaking in public, but stops the disruptive verbal misconduct of certain wives who are giving free rein to 'irresistible impulses' to 'pipe up' at will with questions in the assembly.¹²¹

One wonders what might have resulted if the much-berated Timothy passage had been more carefully evaluated in the light of its original context by modern feminists (and the early Church Fathers) in determining Paul's intentions. Most feminists see it as the critical text behind the oppression of women. This is a crucial point. Such interpretations as offered by Gritz and many others enables all aspects of Paul's personal ministry, along with his counsel in his letters and epistles, to be held together without contradiction. Paul can even be seen demonstrating the attitudes of Christ Himself, who treated men and women with equality in the Church, along with carefully preserving the marriage union. This view moreover, dovetails with the constructive re-evaluation of biblical patriarchy, as seen above.

Conclusion

Women in Scripture are observed functioning in many different spheres. Contra radical feminism, biblical evidence does not reveal stifling patriarchy.

¹²¹Carroll D. Osburn, "The Interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34-35," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, ed. C.D. Osburn (Joplin: College Press, 1993) 1:242. See also Gordon P. Hugenberger, "Women in Church Office: Hermeneutics or Exegesis? A Survey of Approaches to 1 Tim 2:8-15," *JETS* 35/3 (September 1992), 341-360.

Also regarding the church at Corinth, John Willis writes that it "is instructive that Paul teaches here [1 Cor 11:4-5] that a woman can lead prayer or prophecy (proclaim God's message) in the public assembly of the church *and at the same time* honor and be in subjection to her husband." John T. Willis, "Huldah and Other Biblical Prophetesses," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, vol II, ed. Carroll D. Osburn (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Co., 1995), 2:120-121, emphasis Willis'. He continues by citing William F. Orr and James Arthur Walter: "There is no question that women were engaging in prayer and prophecy in public worship in Corinth. . . . The specific problem that elicits the theological analysis of the relationship between men and women has to do with how women should be attired and particularly how they should wear their hair when taking part in worship leadership. . . . Probably her veiling is an indication of her married state, which reflects her relationship to her husband; and this ought not to be put aside for any reason . . . because it would be a reflection upon her husband. . . . A woman who participates in Corinthian worship leadership *ought* to exercise her freedom responsibly. . . . The wife ought to lead in public worship in such a way (with such traditional decorum) that she will not bring disgrace or dishonor to her husband. Presumably the principle would apply to unmarried women, *mutatis mutandis* [William F. Orr and James Arthur Walter, *1 Corinthians* (AB 32; Garden City: Doubleday, 1976); 263-64.

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However, feminists have been right to force attention on the abuse of women inside and outside the Church. Their pain is *real*. Their anger is *deep*. Nevertheless, they have been wrong in their castigating of biblical patriarchy and the Apostle Paul. Upon a closer reading of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the entire canon can be seen to affirm women, whether in the home or in public ministry, or both.

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