

Women in the Old Testament

MARK HAMILTON

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In Churches of Christ, an ongoing conversation is taking shape about the appropriateness of Christian women speaking in the worship assemblies of the church. Unfortunately, however, even when people do listen to each other well enough to reason together, we find ourselves pitting experience against Scripture or Scriptures against themselves (the Galatians 2:28 Christians versus the I Timothy 2 Christians). Surely there is a better way.

While experience teaches many valuable lessons, and the New Testament itself often appeals to experience as a theological resource for Christian action, experience is an uncertain teacher. Whose experience counts? If we ask the question of whether women should pray aloud, lead singing, read Scripture, serve communion, or even preach as part of the congregation's collected life, whose story is relevant? Do we heed the stories of the many women who find oppression in the silence? Or are the lives of women who see such silence as an act of obedience to Christ more telling? Or are both legitimate and valuable? Arguments and counter-arguments fly through the air, and solving a problem based on experience alone seems unlikely.

So I would like to make a more Scriptural argument, first by examining aspects of the Old Testament's discussions of the lives of women, and then by disposing of arguments that wrongly seem to support the traditional viewpoints, and then by turning to more careful readings of key biblical texts.

Women in the Old Testament: Description and Prescription

Let us begin, then, with what the Old Testament actually says about women. To help our discussion, we may open with a basic distinction between what a text **describes** and what it **affirms** or **advocates**. The Bible describes many things that

it does not endorse, but when it moves toward advocacy—when it teaches—it does so with great insight into the human condition.

First, description. The Old Testament uses the word “woman” (Hebrew: *’ishah*) about 775 times. (The same word can sometimes mean “wife,” as well.) That means that women appear all over the text, from Eve in Genesis 2–4 to the wronged wives in Malachi 2. Many texts describe behaviors that have to do with everyday life and not religion as we would conceive of it.

For example, we hear in the Bible of women working in the field (Ruth), cooking (Sarah), shepherding (the woman in Song of Solomon), drawing water (Rebekah, Rachel, Zipporah and her sisters), settling cases (Deborah), ruling a country (Athaliah), and prophesying (Miriam, Huldah), among many other activities.

Ancient people did differentiate roles by gender to some extent, just as modern people have often done. Yet we should remember several historical facts.

1. In the premodern world, the family was a place of both production and consumption. Dads did not go off to work while moms stayed home. Everyone worked together in order to survive. The idea of the husband as the provider and the wife as the family-tender simply did not exist.
2. Most of the week for both men and women was occupied in the production of food, clothing, and shelter.
3. Without machinery, the heavy physical labor of farming could be gender-differentiated to reflect the dimorphism characteristic of humans along with many other creatures. Males tend to be bigger and stronger and therefore might run a plow or engage in threshing. Women might make bread (which required grinding grain, kneading flour and the rest) because such equally strenuous work used different muscle groups. But these differences were not absolute, and they do not have theological significance.
4. Some trades seem to have been gender differentiated—pottery-making for example. But in many cases, we simply do not know how work

patterns were arranged, and again any differences seem to have little permanent significance.

Second, then, reflection and advocacy. The Bible contains texts that articulate views of women as human beings standing before God. In most cases, there are not substantive differences between men and women. Both are forbidden to be idolaters or liars or adulterers. Both are encouraged to pray for deliverance or express gratitude. Both receive the respect and care of their children. Both experience the call to prophecy, even if the biblical prophetic books bear male names. Both appear in the text as fully responsible adults accountable for their actions.

Yet the Bible also does make some gender distinctions that deserve attention:

1. In biblical **law**, women withdraw from the community in response to their menstrual cycle, as well as after giving birth. The two things are connected in fact. So, Leviticus 12 explains that after birth, a woman should remain apart for a month if the child is a boy and two months if she is a girl. Why? The simplest explanation seems to be that the extended time of separation symbolizes the fact that the female baby will grow up into a woman who must also be separated. The text pays double attention to menstruation as it were. Crucially, however, the mother ends her separation by offering whatever sacrifice she can afford, and this symbolizes her reentry into normal life. However, Leviticus 12:6 makes clear that the law applies whether the child is a boy or a girl. That is, the law does not think of either gender of child as somehow superior, just different.
2. This interest in women's blood explains why women cannot be priests in the Levitical system. Blood in that system was both a ritual detergent that cleaned the altar and the Tabernacle/temple, and a ritual pollutant that could defile. The ritual system, which is quite different from an ethical system, plays upon the bipolar nature of blood in order to emphasize the need to attend to the relationship to God and other people. (So Israelites may not spill innocent blood, for example.) Note, however, that

- unwanted emission of blood rendered both men and women impure, as Leviticus 15 explains in great detail. This “impurity” has nothing to do with morality, but is part of an understanding of ritual. And so it is easily cured by washing with water and the passage of time.
3. In biblical **stories**, however, things are more complex. Most biblical stories focus on male actors, and yet a great many women also appear in the text, and not just as passive participants in the events going on around them. In many cases, women are the dominant agents of change, for good or ill. And many stories portray women moving from a position of structural weakness to one of personal strength, whether through trickery (Rebekah, Michal, Esther, Bathsheba) or displays of courage (Deborah, Rahab, Jephthah’s daughter in an odd sort of way) or plain intelligence (Naomi, daughters of Zelophehad). In other words, the Bible reports human life in its complexity.
 4. A number of these stories seem especially relevant, however, if for no other reason than that they grabbed the attention of later readers, including the early Christian writers of the New Testament. One of these is the story of Eve in Genesis 1–4. A few elements of the story stand out. First, Genesis 1:26 insists that both men and women are made in God’s image. There is no distinction between them in a theological sense. Second, Genesis 2 sees Eve as the one who partners with Adam in his task of caring for the beautiful garden. Far from being an assistant or sidekick, Eve serves as Adam’s *‘ezer* or “rescuer.” Third the curse upon her in Genesis 3 sees her husband’s rule over her as a punishment, not as part of the intended order of creation. It is thus much like the pain of childbirth. The question is whether such punishment is to be permanent. Certainly the hostility of the land to the farmer Adam was not permanent, as the Flood removed the curse on the ground. Again, it is difficult to make much of such a text over the long term.
 5. Another relevant story is that of Hannah in I Samuel 1–2. Here we see a wife in a polygamous marriage unable to bear children. Entering the old temple in Shiloh, she appeals to God for help, receiving finally a priestly blessing that announces her impending childbirth. Chapter 2 portrays her

- singing a celebratory song that makes her the subject of a story of God's care for human beings. She becomes a symbol of the people as a whole, who can count on the Lord for help.
6. Still another story of relevance is that of Miriam. She appears first as Moses' sister, and her story is always intertwined with his. Like him, she is a prophet (Exodus 15:20) whose words shape Israel's understanding of its faith. However, her status is lower than his, as the story of Numbers 12 indicates. Yet the same is true of all others — Moses is one of a kind, and Miriam's being second only to Moses makes her an important figure indeed. An interesting sidebar of this story, then, is her punishment for challenging Moses. She becomes "leprous," or possessed of some sort of skin disease that necessitates her removal from the holy site of the Tabernacle. In this, her fate contrasts with that of Aaron, not because he is male but because he is the high priest and thus yet another sort of person. The story establishes a sort of hierarchy, but not one of gender, but of purpose: Moses the lawgiver, Aaron the priest, and Miriam the prophet. It's prophecy, not a person's gender, that is being made slightly less important, if still crucial.

So, does the Old Testament offer precise models for the roles of men and women in Christian worship? No. But it does something more important, namely basic principles for our stance before God. These include several basic claims:

1. God has created all and seeks to redeem all.
2. Women, like men, address God in prayer and song and sacrifice in order to orient their lives to the redeeming God who delivered Israel during the exodus and the exile.
3. The people of God worship with the nature of God in mind. They do not replicate human hierarchies in their address to God.
4. Worship cannot be disconnected from ethics, and ethics has to do with human relationships. This is the basic message of the prophets. It is therefore difficult to argue for a way of worshiping that does not reflect the shape of relationships in the rest of life.

Dismissing Arguments for the Silence of Women

In our ongoing reflections, we must assess arguments people make for and against sharp divisions of roles of men and women in the church's life. Among the various biblically-based arguments made for the thoroughgoing silence of women in the church, some are frivolous and easily disposed of, while others take a little more effort. Consider two that draw on the Old Testament itself:

Argument 1: Women should not lead in worship because the priests of Israel were male (though priests in other cultures could be female) and the church's worship is in some ways analogous to that of the temple or tabernacle in the Old Testament.

Response: The analogy is very weak because (1) the Levitical priests were also from a single family, (2) aged between 30 and 60, and (3) disqualifiable if physically "deformed" or bleeding for any reason or even (temporarily) after having sex with their own wives. While all Christians are priests in some sense (see I Peter 2:5 quoting Exodus 19:6), the New Testament does not draw the analogy between the Levitical priesthood and particular members of the church, much less an entire gender. It might be impolite to notice also that some who make this argument from analogy turn around and deny the analogy of temple worship to the church's worship when the subject is instrumental music.

Argument 2: First Timothy 2 makes an argument for women's silence from the structure of creation itself, citing Genesis 3, thus indicating that gender differentiation has a theological dimension as well as a biological one. As an interpretation of an Old Testament text, it has something to say about how we read the Old Testament itself, therefore.

Response: As part of a longer discussion about the need for order and harmony in the church, the subject of the entire letter of I Timothy, I Timothy 2:8–15 seeks to regulate the speech of women in some way. The question is how.

In truth, I Timothy 2 does not say quite what people traditionally have made it out to say. First, in a world in which many people would not allow a woman to

learn at all, as the Greco-Roman world was, the text permits women to learn as long as they respect the teacher. This was also the stance that males had to take toward a teacher in that world, and so their deference reflected not so much their gender as the nature of the teacher-student relationship.

Second, the text does not cover the possibility that a woman might someday be as fully informed and as spiritually mature as her male teachers. In the ancient world, in which most literate people were male, such an event was rare. In our world it is commonplace. The biblical text simply does not address this possibility.

Third, and most importantly, the text does not, in fact, make an argument from creation. Rather, it makes an argument from the "fall." Genesis assumes that in the beginning, men and women were fully equal, with Eve bearing the godlike responsibility of being Adam's "helper." (The Hebrew word *'ezer* or "helper" usually applies to God as in Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7, 29; Psalms 20:2; 115:9, 11; 121:1; 124:8; and 146:5.) Her subordination comes about as a price of not trusting God and severing the ties of mutuality between God and humanity. But the larger point is that this new order after the expulsion from Eden is not the ongoing state of affairs in the church. The whole tendency of Christian self-understanding in many texts is the removal of the curse. Indeed, the book of Genesis itself was already headed in that direction.

So what argument is I Timothy 2 making? The text appeals to the story of Eve. Like other ancient interpreters, I Timothy connects her creation after Adam to her deception. That is, being made second does not make her second-rate, but it does allow her to be tricked by the serpent, since she did not hear the instructions to Adam about the fruit. So she "was deceived and transgressed." However, verse 15 opens the door to her redemption "through childbirth" coupled with wise behavior. What does all this mean?

First Timothy 2 engages in an ancient reading strategy called midrash, in which an interpreter pays close attention to every detail of the biblical story and draws meaning from it. The conclusion of this particular midrash draws not on Genesis

3, but on the first story in Genesis 4, the birth of Cain and Abel. First Timothy, like other ancient readers of Genesis, understood the story as being at least in part a witness to the redeeming work of God in Eve's life. Her story did not end with her expulsion from Eden. It continues. And so can the stories of other women. First Timothy obviously does not literally mean that bearing children offers a route to salvation in the full Christian sense—to argue that would be the grossest sort of heresy since it would propose two ways of being saved, the blood of Jesus and the act of giving birth. Rather, the text simply notes that, like Eve, a woman who finds herself in the role of a learner still has a future with the God who redeems all. Is this a blanket prohibition of women teaching for all time and in every place? Not at all. Not even close.

For Further Reading

Stol, Marten. *Women in the Ancient Near East*. Translated by Helen Richardson and Melvyn Richardson. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016.

Yamauchi, Edwin and Marvin R. Wilson, eds. *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical & Post-Biblical Antiquity*. 4 vols. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2014–2016.