
❖ Other Voices ❖

In spite of the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts, I myself have no intention of giving up the biblical basis of my theology. The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ. In spite of its ancient and patriarchal worldviews, in spite of its inconsistencies and mixed messages, the story of God's love affair with the world leads me to a vision of new Creation that impels my life.

LETTY M. RUSSELL, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," in Letty R. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (1985)

Yes, it is true that the biblical text allocates more space to men than it does to women. Yes, more men than women in the Bible hold prominent positions in society. But do these two facts mean that women are less important than men in family, in society, and before God? I decided to probe more deeply this question—and concern—by studying the women of the Bible.... My research points decisively to a negative answer to this central question! My research leads me to note that overwhelmingly when a woman (or girl) appears in the biblical text, this rarity *heralds* an upcoming event as important. Narrators may intentionally use a woman's or girl's entrance into the text to raise, as it were, a *red flag* that announces the significance of this part of the story.

ROBIN GALLAHER BRANCH, *Jereboam's Wife: The Enduring Contributions of the Old Testament's Least-Known Women* (2009)

The strong interest in biblical women's stories recognizes the important place of women in salvation history. The Bible plays a part in determining both how women see themselves and how others see women in church and society.

BARBARA J. ESSEX, *Women in the Bible* (2001)

In an androcentric society, where men created and enforced the laws, dominated religious and political life, and had the final say in matters pertaining to all facets of family life, one might logically wonder if a woman had any ability to determine her own destiny. Although the Bible seems to insinuate that all women were subordinate to men, there are many women stories that indicate the opposite. It is clear that many women thought for

themselves and acted on their own accord (or some might argue, under divine directive), without the advice, permission, or the blessings of a man. Hence the women stories present us with a bit of a paradox. On the one hand, the Bible is undeniably steeped in patriarchy – a cultural reality that is necessarily restrictive, subjugating, and even misogynistic. On the other hand, there are stories in the Bible that feature women taking matters into their own capable hands and making decisions independent of men.

What are we to do with such a paradox? At one end of a rather wide spectrum is a traditional, undeniably conservative interpretation of the women stories that would advocate contemporary adherence to the patriarchal norms found in the Bible. Many religious conservative groups, both Jewish and Christian, embrace these norms and women are required to strictly follow many of the patriarchal dictates found in the Bible. At the other end of this spectrum is the tendency by some to dismiss the Bible as archaic, outdated, and of little value to women's (and men's) contemporary roles within the family and community.

Perhaps the best way to address this paradox is with a more centralist view. That is, to read the women stories in the Bible for enjoyment, inspiration, and for the pearls of wisdom the biblical author or authors sought to impart.

T. J. WRAY, *Good Girls, Bad Girls: The Enduring Lessons of Twelve Women of the Old Testament* (2008)

The final motive of this book is probably pastoral, to suggest that with regard to women early Christianity was a movement of liberation, that the God of the New Testament revealed in Jesus Christ is the God of Hebrew scripture, a God of justice, a God with an ear especially turned toward the oppressed and disenfranchised. That cultures and societies presented or described God in male or patriarchal terms does not make God male or patriarchal. As I understand it, the New Testament is the literary record of God's most dramatic attempt to be better known by human beings. If the writers of the New Testament in some ways fell short of God's self-revelation, it is not God's fault. The Word, after all, became flesh, not book.

BONNIE B. THURSTON, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary* (1998)

For those exploring the New Testament, this reality must be factored into any description of discipleship: some women were capable of theological discussion and had the means to sponsor the group. We should expect that Jesus, Paul, and traveling missionaries (which included women) met educated women with strong business acumen and effective community influence.

Ironically, women's lack of participation in church politics and leadership hierarchy in later history has led some to argue that the way forward is to go back to the model of the first-century church. Communities negotiated the question of female participation based on local situations—for example, whether wealthy women were members of the church and whether the female followers of Jesus had much if any education. Some of their answers might appear sexist by our standards, assuming we have understood their injunctions correctly. Understanding the cultural and social world of these women (and men) allows us to critique that world, and perhaps to critique our own. As we do so, it offers us an opportunity to think more deeply about the subtle (and explicit) forms of sexism (to say nothing of racism) endemic to ancient culture and, sadly, to our own. But knowing history allows us to avoid repeating its mistakes and to build on its successes.

In short, as we dialogue today about the role of women in society and in the synagogue and church, about women in political leadership and the “glass ceiling,” about a woman's role in family and community, we would do well to have an accurate picture of those women who walked these paths before us. Women in the world of the earliest Christians offer us a portrait of possibilities.

LYNN H. COHICK, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (2009)

Upon closer inspection, I discovered many women in the Bible had trouble fitting into the wife-and-mother definition of what it means to be a woman. They clearly embraced traditional expectations and tried desperately to live within those parameters, but ultimately found it impossible. Naomi in the Old Testament and Anna in the New enjoyed ideal lives at one point, only to lose everything through the premature death of a husband. Sarah didn't become a mother until she was ninety, which was considerably worse than my experience of delayed motherhood and hardly any woman's dream. Hagar's and Esther's lives were hopelessly reconfigured—actually sacrificed—to serve someone else's agenda. Neither woman had a voice in events that trampled underfoot her private hopes and dreams.

It is not often noted, but many stories of women in the Bible make no mention of a husband or children. Although singleness was exceedingly rare in ancient Hebrew culture, no one knows if Miriam, Mary and Martha, or Mary Magdalene ever married. In a jarring break from the culture (and without diminishing the family), the New Testament anchors a woman's identity and purpose to her relationship with Jesus rather than to her parentage, her marital status, or her children.

CAROLYN CUSTIS JAMES, *Lost Women of the Bible: The Women We Thought We Knew* (2008)