

## WOMEN AND THE WORK OF GOD IN THE PENTATEUCH

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In 1 Corinthians 14:33b-34, Paul says, “As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.”<sup>1</sup> The fact that the law nowhere specifically says “women must be silent” or even “women must be in submission” poses a problem. In 1 Timothy, Paul points specifically to the facts that Adam was created first (1 Tim 2:13) and that Eve was deceived (2:14). Most scholars seek, then, to point to Genesis 1-3 as the referent of “as the Law also says.”<sup>2</sup> Discussions of the role of women in the Old Testament (OT hereafter) are often limited to a few pages.<sup>3</sup> Such discussions seldom venture beyond blunt assertions which beg the very question they answer.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2002). ESV used throughout unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> H. Wayne House, “Neither ... Male nor Female ... in Christ Jesus,” part 1 of 5 in *A Biblical View of Women in the Ministry* (BSac 145 [1988]: 52). Aída Besançon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), jumps from a discussion of Genesis 1-2 (pp. 17-42) to Jesus (p. 43).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home, A Crucial Questions Book* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1987), which devotes pages 109-113 to “Old Testament Case Histories.”

<sup>4</sup> For example, the document “Women in the Church: Biblical Data Report,” which was distributed as a *Connection: Extra* by Dallas Theological Seminary to support its decision to permit women in all degree programs (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1997), says of Deborah, “Deborah was a prophetess and also a judge in Israel (Judg. 4-5)” (2). Because it discusses neither the meaning of “prophetess” nor that of “judge,” it appears to support allowing women in leadership roles. This is begging the question.

broader scope of the law supports the conclusion that women ought not be spiritual leaders.

### EVE: ADAM'S HELPER

Eve was created after Adam, out of Adam, for Adam, brought to Adam, and named by Adam. Genesis 1:27 sets the expectation of male priority (i.e., creation prior to the female) by referring to the creation of mankind as “male and female,” placing “male” first:

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

Image extends to both the male and female, so the woman is not lesser in quality or worth. Genesis 2 provides the detailed description of the creation of man and woman, explaining that indeed God created Adam first, and then created Eve from Adam's “stuff.”<sup>5</sup> Adam named all the animals, demonstrating his authority over them. Eve was created in order to be Adam's helper (עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, “a helper corresponding to him”). The word translated “helper” is not a derogatory or demeaning one: it is used, in fact, of God (Ps 33:20).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the text describes the woman as

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<sup>5</sup> John E. Hartley says that עֵזֶר “is used once for a man's side (Ge 2:21f.) and once for the side of a hill, perhaps a ridge or terrace (II Sam 16:13; BDB); elsewhere it is an architectural term. It refers to the sides of an object, e.g., the sides of the ark of the covenant (Ex 25:12, 14)” (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke [Chicago: Moody, 1980], 2:768).

There is a curious legend in Judaism of a wife which God made for Adam before Eve. According to the legend, “To banish his [Adam's] loneliness, Lilith was first given to Adam as wife. Like him she had been created out of the dust of the ground. But she remained with him only a short time, because she insisted upon enjoying full equality with her husband. She derived her rights from their identical origin. With the help of the Ineffable Name, which she pronounced, Lilith flew away from Adam, and vanished in the air.” God subsequently created Eve for Adam (Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. [(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967-69)], 1:65). It is difficult to say the origin of this strange legend, but perhaps it provides a story devised to explain why Eve was created from Adam and not from the dust and why Eve was to be submissive Adam (and all subsequent wives to their husbands).

<sup>6</sup> Nor should one automatically assume from this fact that since the woman is a “helper” she is the superior! A superior may help a subordinate

created for the man, and not vice versa.<sup>7</sup> God brings Eve to Adam, and the order appears significant.<sup>8</sup> When Eve is presented to him, he names her (2:23; 3:20), which as with the animals, expresses his authority.<sup>9</sup> When Adam sinned, the indictment against him includes the fact that he “listened to” (שמע) his wife when he clearly should not have. God addresses Adam first (3:9-12); Adam’s judgment (3:17-19) is the last of the three and the longest. This ordering perhaps emphasizes Adam’s special culpability as the superior.<sup>10</sup> Spencer suggests that even some feminists see Genesis 2 as teaching the subordination of women to men while Genesis 1 teaches the equality of the sexes. She goes on to argue that both Genesis 1 and 2 teach equality.<sup>11</sup> However, both chapters support a complementarian view of gender roles.

### SARAH: A WIFE IN SUBMISSION

Peter, in urging Christian wives to submit to their husbands, even if the husbands are not saved (1 Pet 3:1-6), cites the example of Sarah who “obeyed Abraham, calling him Lord.” One might cite, for example, Genesis 18:12: “So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I am worn out, and *my lord* is old, shall I have pleasure?’” (emphasis added). The term translated “lord” here is אֲדֹנָי, the common term for “lord” or “master” plus a pronominal (1cs)

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or vice versa. Cf. Wayne Grudem, “The Key Issues in the Manhood-Womanhood Controversy, and the Way Forward,” in *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 31-32.

<sup>7</sup> Grudem, “Key Issues,” 31-32; Grudem cites 1 Corinthians 11:9, “Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.”

<sup>8</sup> Marriage is often described in the OT as “taking a wife” (לקח + אשה), implying that the man is in some sense the initiator or the one in control of the process. The fact that Eve is brought to Adam and presented to him seems to suggest the same.

<sup>9</sup> Grudem, “Key Issues,” 27-28.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26, 30. Grudem cites 1 Corinthians 15:2, 45-49 and Romans 5:12-21.

<sup>11</sup> Spencer, 19. Cf. Gilbert Bilezikian, “Hierarchist and Egalitarian Inculturations,” *JETS* 30 (1987): 421-22; Pamela J. Scalise, “Women in Ministry: Reclaiming Our Old Testament Heritage,” *RevExp* 83 (1986): 7.

suffix, the very same word that Eliezer, Abraham's servant, uses of Abraham (Gen 24:10, 27, 36, 44, 48, 51). It is striking that Sarah refers to Abraham as her lord even in her thoughts. This "speech" is internal, for it is "within her" (בְּקִרְבָּהּ). The fact that אָמַר, "to say," is used is no impediment to this understanding, for this verb can refer to thoughts which are expressed only internally and not uttered aloud (1 Kgs 12:26; Ps 14:1).

Some adduce Genesis 21:12 in support of mutual submission of men and women: "But God said to Abraham, 'Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named.'"<sup>12</sup> This should not be taken simplistically to support mutual submission in marriage. This is a narrative and not necessarily normative. God does not tell Abraham that he should always listen to his wife, but that in this specific case Sarah's anger serves God's purpose, for Abraham's blessing is to be passed down through Isaac.

In the context of Genesis, it is clear that listening to one's wife is not always (or even usually) to be commended. Adam listened (שָׁמַע, 3:17) to Eve with disastrous results. The verb שָׁמַע can mean "to hear, listen," or "to obey." Hence, there is the possibility of a play on words here. The indictment of Adam in 3:17 does not merely point to Adam's eating, but to his listening and eating (כִּי־שָׁמַעְתָּ לְקוֹל אִשְׁתְּךָ וְתָאֵכַל), suggesting that there is a relationship between the two.<sup>13</sup> Both actions are faulted. Adam's listening to Eve, at least in this case, was wrong. (What, in fact, would have been the result if Job had taken his wife's advice [Job 1:9-10])?

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<sup>12</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman's Place in Church and Family*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 54. See rebuttal of Bilezikian in Wayne Grudem, "Wives Like Sarah, and the Husbands Who Honor Them," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 197.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 147.

## MIRIAM: PROPHETESS PUT IN HER PLACE

Miriam is another woman from the narratives of the Old Testament often adduced as proof of women in leadership roles. Dallas Seminary's "Women in the Church" says,

Miriam was a prophetess, and all the women with her gave public praise to God (Exod 15:20-21). Apparently she also had some leadership role along with Moses and Aaron (Mic 6:4).<sup>14</sup>

Hull is even more blunt: "During the Exodus period, Moses' sister Miriam was his companion in leadership."<sup>15</sup>

Miriam was, indeed, a prophetess (נְבִיאָה, Exod 15:20). She took a tambourine in her hand and led the women of the nation in public worship. Yet, several facts are overlooked in offering Miriam as proof of female leadership. First, Miriam is said to have led the women in procession. There is no indication that she led the whole nation in this instance. In fact, Moses is at present the leader of the nation and his song of praise is recorded in 18 verses (15:1-18) and recorded before Miriam's, which consists of a single verse (15:21). The priority and emphasis here is clearly on Moses as the leader of Israel. Miriam's "leadership" must then be subordinate. Micah 6:4 says,

For I brought you up from the land of Egypt  
and redeemed you from the house of slavery,  
and I sent before you Moses,  
Aaron, and Miriam.

The expression "to send before" does not refer to leadership, per se, but to preparation. In Genesis 24:7 Abraham tells Eliezer that the Lord would send his angel before Eliezer to make his mission successful. In Exodus 33:2, God said that he would send an angel before the people to enable them to enter the promised land (though he himself would not go with them). There is no suggestion in either case that the people would see these angels or need to obey them. In both cases, these promises imply divine but invisible provision for success. Certainly, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were

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<sup>14</sup> "Women in the Church," 2.

<sup>15</sup> Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 109. Cf. Scalise, "Women in Ministry," 9.

all key figures in the Exodus events. To assume that Miriam was thus Moses' co-leader is unwarranted.

Second, Miriam is leading *the women* of the nation in procession. This would certainly be congruent with the later teaching of Paul: Older women are to teach the younger ones "to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands" (Titus 2:3-5). Paul does not forbid women from leading or teaching other women. It is, in fact, his command that they should do so. To suggest that Miriam's "leadership" of women as she "gave public praise to God" validates a role of leadership of the nation is to assume too much.

Third, the fact that Miriam (or any other woman) was a prophetess is not proof that she also held a position of leadership. Prophecy always involved divine revelation or at least a claim to divine revelation. The authority of an utterance comes from God, not from the prophet or his or her position. In Numbers 12, Miriam's prophetic authority is clearly tested. Miriam and Aaron demanded equality of power with Moses: "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" (12:2). Miriam may have been the ringleader of this rebellion against Moses' authority, for she is named first. It may very well be that Miriam and Aaron were older than Moses, which would have produced a cultural presumption of superiority on their part. God's response is telling:

And he said, "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (12:6-8)

Now, one dare not argue here that Miriam's fault was in claiming authority as a woman—the High Priest (and man) Aaron is part of this "coup." But the Lord's comments do provide insights: Prophecy was a direct revelation from God and the authority of the prophet was limited by the scope and source of the revelation. Moses' revelation was qualitatively better than that of Miriam or Aaron and his position of authority was given by God. The fact that Miriam or Aaron were prophets did not grant them any additional authority or position. Prophetic authority was strictly limited to the scope of the revelation. The fact that a man or woman had the gift

of prophecy did not give him or her any office or unlimited authority. Many of the prophets were, like Jeremiah, set in opposition to the ruling parties, and often paid dearly for their utterances.

This issue becomes clearer when prophecy is distinguished from teaching. Some complementarians argue that NT prophecy was somehow different in kind than that of the OT.<sup>16</sup> These complementarians support this argument by suggesting that since NT prophecy was subject to “peer review” (1 Cor 14:26-35), NT prophecy was different from that in the OT.<sup>17</sup> Such an approach is flawed. Harold Hoehner has demonstrated that in both Testaments “prophecy” refers to a direct revelation from God.<sup>18</sup> Even in the NT, prophets mediate revelations from God. For example, Agabus twice predicts future events. In Acts 11:28 he predicts a coming famine. In Acts 21:10 he predicts the arrest of Paul.

Furthermore, in the OT Deuteronomy clearly teaches that prophetic claims were to be tested. If the prophet claimed the revelation in the name of any God but the LORD, his prophecy was *ipso facto* false and he was to be executed (Deut 13:1-5). If the prophecy failed to be fulfilled or failed to correspond with previously revealed truth, the prophet was likewise false and to be executed (Deut 18:9-22). Any information or instructions which a prophet(ess) gave was subject to examination and validation.

On the contrary, teaching was an exercise of authority. Piper and Grudem say that

The role of pastor/elder is primarily governance and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17). In the list of qualifications for elders the prophetic gift is not mentioned, but the ability to teach is (1 Timothy 3:2). In Ephesians 4:11, the prophets are distinguished from pastor-teachers. And even though men learn from prophecies that women give, Paul distinguishes the gift of prophecy from the gift of teaching (Rom 12:6-7; 1 Cor 12:28). Women are nowhere forbidden to prophesy.

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<sup>16</sup> See for example, Wayne Grudem, “Prophecy—Yes, But Teaching—No: Paul’s Consistent Advocacy of Women’s Participation without Governing Authority,” *JETS* 30 (1987):13; H. Wayne House, “Should a Woman Prophesy or Preach before Men?” part 2 of 5 in *A Biblical View of Women in the Ministry* (*BSac* 145 [1988]: 150-52).

<sup>17</sup> Grudem, “Prophecy—Yes,” 14.

<sup>18</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, “The Purpose of Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:20-25,” in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 56-57.

Paul simply regulates the demeanor in which they prophesy so as not to compromise the principle of the spiritual leadership of men (1 Cor 11:5-10).<sup>19</sup>

Douglas Moo adds the following helpful description:

The word *teach* and its cognate nouns *teaching* (*didaskalia*) and *teacher* (*didaskalos*) are used in the New Testament mainly to denote the careful transmission of the tradition concerning Jesus Christ and the authoritative proclamation of God's will to believers in light of that tradition (see especially 1 Timothy 4:11: "Command and teach these things;" 2 Timothy 2:2; Acts 2:42; Romans 12:7)... In the pastoral epistles, teaching always has this restricted sense of authoritative doctrinal instruction.<sup>20</sup>

Leadership in the NT entails not only authoritative doctrinal teaching but some measure of command authority as well (1 Tim 3:5; 5:17; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:5). Consequently, a woman's prophesying in the NT (1 Cor 11) does not pose a problem because her utterance is directly from God and is tested by others, just as prophecy was in the OT. A woman's prophesying is significantly different from a woman's teaching because teaching entails authority over those who are taught. The prophetic role is significantly different than that of a teacher, who held a position of authority. Citing OT women who prophesied provides no support whatsoever for claims that women may serve in leadership roles. For the same reasons, reading a commentary or textbook or singing a song written by a woman poses no real problem if it is being tested and approved by those in authority (pastor or professor).

Deborah and Huldah are often cited alongside Miriam as prophetesses with public leadership roles in Israel.<sup>21</sup> Though these women appear outside the Pentateuch, these bear examination. Huldah was the prophetess whom Josiah consulted when the book

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<sup>19</sup> John Piper and Wayne Grudem, "An Overview of Central Concerns: Questions and Answers," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Douglas Moo, "What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men? 1 Timothy 2:11-15," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 185.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Scalise, "Women in Ministry: Reclaiming Our Old Testament Heritage," 9.

of the Law was found in the eighteenth year of his reign (2 Kgs 22). Hull argues in this fashion:

Both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles tell us, again in the most straightforward way, that the king's emissaries went directly to Huldah and that God spoke His message through her.... Huldah was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Zepheniah. We cannot ignore the fact that in His wisdom God chose the woman Huldah as His spokesperson in presenting His word to Josiah.... No, five emissaries went openly to the theological college where Huldah lived.<sup>22</sup>

Hull's use of the word "directly" is tendentious in the extreme. Jeremiah had begun his public ministry in the thirteenth year of Josiah (Jer 1:2). Nevertheless, the assumption that Josiah inquired of Huldah *in preference* to Jeremiah simply cannot be sustained. The text of 2 Kings points out that Huldah lived in Jerusalem and was apparently related to a royal official (2 Kgs 22:15). It may even be that Jeremiah was out of town at the time as Jeremiah hailed from Anathoth (Jer 1:1). The suggestion that Huldah lived at a "theological college" finds no clear support in the text. True, prophets often had disciples, but nothing in the text suggests that Huldah had any, so the use of the expression "theological college" is both tendentious and anachronistic. Furthermore, though Huldah was clearly recognized as a prophetess of whom one could inquire of the Lord, we know nothing more at all of her ministry. As previously discussed, the fact that any given woman was a prophetess is no warrant to claim a role of public/national leadership for her.

Deborah's situation is more difficult to sort out. She was a prophetess (Judg 4:4) who would make herself available to the people at "the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim" so that they might come to inquire of the Lord for decisions. She receives a prophecy from the Lord and summons Barak to hear it (4:6). When he balks at the instructions to lead the army into battle and insists that Deborah go with him, Deborah declares that the glory of capturing the enemy commander, Sisera, will go to a woman (4:8-9). This is clearly an insult to Barak's reticence to obey the command of the Lord. Jael, a Kenite woman, receives the glory of slaying Sisera (4:21).

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<sup>22</sup> Hull, *Equal to Serve*, 111-12.

Hull's exposition is slightly different:

Prominent in Old Testament history was the judge Deborah. Judges 4:4 tells us, 'Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.' Judges 5:7 also tells us that she was a mother. This competent woman was not only a spiritual and governmental leader, but she was the inspiration behind Barak's military expedition against Sisera. She delivered the word of the Lord to Barak and then, at his express request, accompanied him on the campaign.<sup>23</sup>

Hull's translation of Judges 4:4 is that of the NIV. Though "judge" (שפֹּט) often connoted a military or civil leader, one need only look at Samson or Gideon to see that a "judge" was not always "a spiritual and governmental leader."<sup>24</sup> (One need only look at Numbers 22:28 where Balaam's donkey prophesied ["And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam"] to see that not all prophets were in positions of leadership!) Judges 4:5 defines Deborah's role as a judge in prophetic terms: she sat at a predetermined place so that people might come and receive decisions from the Lord. Only under duress does she accompany Barak to battle, and there is nothing in the text to suggest that she even fought as part of the army, much less led it. Deborah does not slay Sisera herself, but the glory, nonetheless, goes to a woman, highlighting Barak's cowardice.

One gets the impression that it was as unusual for a woman to lead as Deborah was doing (even in a limited way), as it was for Molly Pitcher to "man" her husband's cannon when he fell in battle. Far from proving the appropriateness of women in leadership, these OT characters are not normative but narrative. Miriam is rebuked for her power-grab (along with Aaron) because neither was the equal of Moses. Huldah was clearly a prophetess, but beyond that her status is ambiguous at best. Deborah is the only one who might be considered to have held a leadership role, and that appears to be quite extraordinary, the exception which proves the rule. In no case can one equate their status as prophetesses with roles as leaders.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Piper and Grudem, "An Overview," 72.

## THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD: DARING IN THEIR REQUEST

The five daughters of Zelophehad provide an interesting test case. Numbers 27:1-11 and 36:1-12 describe their plight. They are five daughters of one man, Zelophehad. They are still unmarried (36:11), so likely still quite young. They have no brothers to claim property in the promised land. These women seek to claim their father's portion so that he would have a legacy in his name in the Promised Land. They approach Moses who consulted the Lord. The result was a new law permitting women in such a circumstance to claim the family inheritance in Israel.

In his commentary on Numbers, Jacob Milgrom devotes an excursus to the issue of women inheriting property in the ANE. He argues that "Israelite practice contrasts sharply with that of its neighbors regarding a daughter's inheritance rights."<sup>25</sup> After demonstrating from ancient Mesopotamian sources such as the Nuzi documents that women did, at times, inherit family property, especially in the absence of brothers, he argues that the reason Israel had to make special provision for this was the tribal nature of society and the land allotments.<sup>26</sup> One might add that it was certainly not improper for a woman to own property. The ideal wife of Proverbs 31 is praised for buying property and planting a vineyard on it (31:16). Such purchases would not affect tribal structure for they would automatically revert to their original owner in the Jubilee (Lev 25). The fact that a woman marrying outside her tribe would cause land to change tribal alliance is the major concern in Numbers 36 (see below).

The request of Zelophehad's daughters is striking in the context of the book. The fear of the warriors in chapter 14 was that they would be slain by the Canaanites and their wives and children taken captive to be abused or enslaved (14:3). In Chapter 26 a second muster of the army is taken to confirm that no man of the first muster (ch. 1) remains alive except Caleb and Joshua; the curse of 14:20-35 has been fulfilled. As a part of that curse, 14:31

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<sup>25</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 482.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

promises that “your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected.”

The chapters immediately preceding chapter 26 are transitional in the book. That is why outlines of the book of Numbers vary so widely regarding the major dividing point in this section. The wilderness period is drawing to an end. Israel is beginning to conquer their fears and their enemies, and they are gaining a renewed sense of purpose and hope. Aaron turns over his office to his son Eliezer and dies (20:23-29). Phinehas’s zeal for the Lord demonstrates that the prospects for the priestly line are excellent (25:1-18). Moses is clearly told that he will die outside the land (20:2-13). In the pericope immediately after the daughters of Zelophehad, Moses is informed that Joshua will succeed him and lead the people into the land (27:12-23).

In the midst of all these leadership transitions, the text reports that Miriam died in the wilderness of Zin (20:1). It is more than curious that Miriam is mentioned at this point and the two pericopes concerning the daughters of Zelophehad occur in chapters 27 and 36. It could very well be that the daughters of Zelophehad are to be perceived as fit “replacements” for Miriam. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam have each failed in some way and will die outside the land. Eliezer, Phinehas, Joshua, Caleb, and the daughters of Zelophehad will claim the land. The warriors in chapter 14 feared that their wives and “little ones” would become prey to the Canaanites, but—as God promised—it is these very “little ones” who are claiming the land.

In chapter 36, the relatives of the daughters of Zelophehad come to Moses with a problem: if the daughters of Zelophehad marry outside their tribe, they will begin to lose property to other tribes. The land will be divided by tribe and tribal inheritance was important (36:3-4). This problem produces a further law for Israel: daughters may inherit property only if they marry within their tribe so that land does not pass from tribe to tribe (36:5-9). The daughters of Zelophehad marry cousins, thus willingly obeying the Lord and claiming their father’s inheritance (36:10-12). In this they prove themselves fit successors to Miriam. Nevertheless, their “freedom” and their “rights” are clearly limited. They have significant rights for their time and culture, but the law does not permit them the full rights of a man. Property inheritance will remain patrilineal. The two pericopes of the daughters of Zelophehad clearly demarcate the last section of the book as an inclusio, much

as the order of march/camp does in chapters 2 and 10.<sup>27</sup> In the midst of this section set off by the daughters-of-Zelophehad inclusio stands another law which is relevant to a discussion of the role of women in the Pentateuch.

### WOMEN: VOWING IN SUBMISSION

Numbers 30:3-16 [MT 4-17] pertains to the vows of women. If a woman makes a vow and her father opposes it (נוא) on the very day he hears of it, the vow is annulled (ל' א' יקום), and the Lord will not hold her non-fulfillment of the vow against her (סלח, 30:5 [4]). If a woman makes a vow and subsequently marries, her husband may set aside her vow (פרר) on the day he hears of it, and the Lord will forgive her non-fulfillment of the vow (סלח, 30:8 [9]). The vow of a widow or divorced woman must stand (30:10 [11], literally, "it shall stand against her," יקום עליה). If a married woman makes a vow, her husband may annul it (פרר) on the day he hears of it, and the woman will not be held responsible (סלח, 30:12 [13]). If a husband hears his wife's vow and says nothing, and later annuls the vow, he must bear the guilt of non-fulfillment (30:15-16 [16-17], ונשא את-עוונה).

The verb נוא means *to restrain, forbid, refuse, frustrate*.<sup>28</sup> In addition to Numbers 30, it is used in Psalm 33:10 of God's blocking the plans of the nations (parallel פרר). It is used in Psalm 141:5 of not refusing the rebuke of a righteous man. It is used in Numbers 32:7, 9 of discouraging the hearts of the people. A noun form of this root (תנועה) is used in Numbers 14:34 and Job 33:10 of hostile opposition.

The verb פרר means in the Hiphil to break, frustrate, make ineffectual.<sup>29</sup> It is used of breaking a covenant (Deut 31:16, 20) or of breaking a commandment (Num 15:31). Hence, the father or husband "opposes" and "breaks" the vow in the sense that he prevents his daughter or wife from fulfilling it.

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<sup>27</sup> Alan Dean Ingalls, *The Literary Unity of the Book of Numbers* (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1991), 37-38.

<sup>28</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906), 626.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 830.

The right to invalidate a woman's vow is given to her father or husband for perhaps two reasons. The first is evident in the text: in verses 6 and 8, the woman's vow is described as *סוּרְסוּרָה*, "a rash utterance." The noun occurs only here in the OT, but the verb occurs in Proverbs 12:18 (Qal) and Leviticus 5:4 as well as Psalm 106:33 (both Piel). The Leviticus text is especially relevant here, for it pertains to the rash or thoughtless uttering of a vow whose non-fulfillment requires restitution.

A second possible reason for providing a man with the right to invalidate the vow of his daughter or wife is transparent. What if a woman were to vow never to do dishes again? Or vow never to cook for her husband again? Or vow to give the family homestead to the temple? Such a vow might have drastic consequences for her husband and family. The woman's volition is not independent of her husband's. He has the right to set aside such a vow. This reinforces the authority of the husband in the home and balances the two episodes with the daughters of Zelophehad which bracket this section of Numbers. A woman under the law has many rights and privileges, but she is still subordinate to her husband. The law offers another interesting insight into the role of women in the leadership of Israel: the priesthood was limited to men.

### THE LIMITATION OF THE PRIESTHOOD

The priesthood was limited to the male descendants of Aaron (Exod 28:1).<sup>30</sup> The rest of the tribe of the Levites was given to the priests to assist and serve them (Num 3:6). Numbers 1:47-54 provides a preview of the Levites' duties. They are to be responsible for taking down, setting up, and transporting the tabernacle. According to verse 51, "if any outsider [גֵּרִי] comes near, he shall be put to death." The Levites are to camp around the tabernacle "so that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the people of Israel" (1:53). The instruction to consecrate the Levites in 3:5 is prefaced with a brief genealogy in 3:1-4, which highlights the fact that Nadab and Abihu—authorized, consecrated sons of Aaron—died when they offered "unauthorized fire" (*הַאֵשׁ הַזֵּרָה*, 3:4). The Levites' duties are described in military terms much like those used for the men of war in chapter 1. The Levites are to "keep guard"

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<sup>30</sup> Egalitarians seem to concede this. See, for example, Scalise, "Women in Ministry," 9; and "Women in the Church," 2.

(שמר) over the tabernacle (1:53; cf. 3:8). The Levites are “mustered” (פקד) just like the army (1:3). Numbers 3:10 seems to emphasize that even the Levites—despite their favored position—had limits which they dared not exceed: “And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider [זר] comes near, he shall be put to death.”

“Stranger” (זר) can refer to a foreigner (Isa 61:5), but in this case the meaning is closer to that of Proverbs (e.g., 2:16) where the “strange woman” (זרה) is not necessarily a foreigner, but a woman to whom the young man has no right. She may be his next-door neighbor or his sister-in-law, but he has no right to her and the temptation which she offers is “out of bounds.” The laymen of Israel are not authorized to act as Levites, and the Levites are not authorized to act as priests. The priests themselves can do only what they are authorized to do. Even the High Priest can enter the Holy of Holies only one day a year when the Glory is in residence (Lev 16).

Leviticus 20 adds additional requirements for the priesthood. A priest may not marry a prostitute or a divorced woman (21:7). Presumably he may marry a widow. The high priest may marry only a virgin (21:13-14). No man who has a physical defect may serve as a priest (21:18-20). The last restriction seems positively scandalous to modern ears. Surely God would not violate the *Americans with Disabilities Act*, would he? Nevertheless, God set the requirements for the priesthood. He enforced those requirements vigorously.

In Numbers 16-17 some 250 men challenged Moses' authority with words strongly reminiscent of those of Miriam and Aaron in chapter 12: “You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?” (16:3). These men included Korah, who was a Levite from the family of Kohath, the family charged with the care and carrying of the most holy furnishings of the tabernacle, and Dathan and Abiram, who were of the tribe of Reuben, Jacob's firstborn. The Reubenites might well have expected preferential position because their progenitor was Jacob's firstborn, just as Miriam and Aaron might have been dissatisfied by Moses' position of authority. These men were offered the opportunity to offer incense before the Lord (16:16-17). They each did so, and each paid for the mistake with his life (16:31-35).

The bronze censers which the men used to offer incense were beaten out into plating for the altar “to be a reminder to the people of Israel, so that no outsider [גֵר], who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the LORD, lest he become like Korah and his company” (16:40 [17:5]). The budding of Aaron’s staff which follows in 17:1-11 [17:16-26] is a sign designed to confirm that Aaron is indeed the Lord’s choice for high priest (17:5 [17:20]), and the laws given in chapter 18 expand on the duties and privileges granted to the priests and Levites to reinforce the point.

While the priesthood is commonly viewed as a sacrificial/mediatorial role in Israel, it held a much broader role. The priests were to teach the people God’s ways: “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses” (Lev 10:10-11; cf. Deut 33:10). They were also to serve as judges to make decisions based on the law on God’s behalf: “Then you shall do according to what they [the priests] declare to you from that place that the Lord will choose. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you. According to the instructions that they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do. You shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left” (Deut 17:10-11). The penalty for disregarding the decision of the priest was death (17:12). Consequently, the teaching role of the priests was a leadership role, much like the role of a teacher in the New Testament.

There is no reason given for the choice of Aaron for the priesthood. One might even suggest that the very man who made the golden calf which led Israel into sin (Exod 32) would be a poor choice. One might as well admit that the family of Abraham was not the ideal one, humanly speaking, to elect to carry forward God’s plan of bringing blessing back to the human race. How many today would have chosen the Twelve that Jesus chose? Divine election is ever unconditional. Ronald Pierce draws an intriguing analogy between God’s (seemingly) arbitrary election of the priesthood and his prohibition of women from serving as ecclesiastical leaders.<sup>31</sup> It could very well be that the limitations on the role

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<sup>31</sup> Ronald W. Pierce, “Male/Female Leadership and Korah’s Revolt: An Analogy?” *JETS* 30 (1987): 3-10.

of women in the church cannot be solved by any reasonable explanation except that God commanded it so.

### MOTHERS: THE HANDS WHICH ROCK THE CRADLE

In Paul's discussion of the role of women in the church in 1 Timothy 2, he makes a strange and controversial comment: "Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control." Though space does not permit a full exploration of Paul's meaning in the present study, one might find it curious that immediately after providing two explanations for the necessity of women's submission in the church, both rooted in creation and the fall, Paul mentions childbearing. God's curse on the woman in Genesis 3:16 likewise mentions childbearing. The functional roles of man and wife are firmly rooted in the creation accounts of Genesis 1-2. Hence, the "he shall rule over you" of Genesis 3:16 is not the establishment of a new order but the distortion of an old one.<sup>32</sup> Likewise the wife's "desire" in this same verse should be seen as a desire to control (הקטנא; cf. 4:7) her husband, contrary to the creation order. The curse on the woman is not that she would bear children, but that she would bear them in pain. Adam and Eve were already blessed with fertility and commanded to multiply (1:28). Adam had already been commanded to till the ground (2:15). Adam's curse strikes at the very heart of his role in creation—his working of the ground will now be difficult. Eve's curse also strikes at the very heart of

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<sup>32</sup> Scalise is at least partially correct when she says, "the consequences of sin set forth by God in Genesis 3:16-19 are not prescriptive" (7-8). Grudem, a complementarian, makes much the same point: "It is crucial at this point for us to realize that *we ourselves are never to try to increase or perpetuate the results of the curse*. We should never try to promote or advocate Genesis 3:16 as something good" ("Key Issues," 35; italics original). Scalise's error is in assuming that subordination itself is a result of the curse, which it is not. The Dallas Theological Seminary document "Women in the Church" can surely be faulted at this point: "The superiority of male over female is first mentioned in Scripture as an inevitable consequence of sin not as an inherent quality or right. In the post-Fall order of things, God said man would exploit woman's natural 'helpmate desire' toward him, or more probably, he would retaliate in the face of her 'desire' (cf. Gen. 4:7) to dominate and lead him in order to dominate and subjugate her (Gen. 3:16b). The subjugation of either women or men is a symptom of mankind's fallen nature (cf. e.g., pagan religions)" (1-2).

her role in creation—she will now experience pain in childbearing.<sup>33</sup>

Childbearing is a major theme in the book of Genesis. One may cite the barrenness of Sarah and her response to the news that she would yet bear a child (Gen 18:12). It is perhaps no accident that the word Sarah uses for “pleasure” is נִינְיָן, which may be related to, or at least recall to the reader, the garden of Eden (גֶּדֶן). Rachel, the wife of Jacob is likewise barren, and the rivalry which develops between Rachel and Leah or the favoritism which Jacob shows to the sons eventually born to Rachel needs no rehearsal. Tamar is childless, having lost two husbands and having been promised Judah’s third son Shelah according to the customs of Levirate marriage. Denied Shelah, she resorts to subterfuge to become pregnant by her father-in-law Judah. When her pregnancy is discovered and the fact that Judah is the father is revealed, Judah admits that she was more righteous than he because he failed to give her to Shelah (38:26).<sup>34</sup> When Tamar gives birth, it is to twins (38:27-30) with issues of primogeniture reminiscent of the births of Jacob and Esau (25:22-26).

In the texts which follow the Pentateuch, one might examine the story of Ruth. Ruth is the daughter-in-law of Naomi. Though there is, it seems, no one to take Ruth in Levirate marriage (1:11-13), Ruth returns to Israel with Naomi after Naomi’s sojourn in Ruth’s native Moab. Boaz serves as kinsman-redeemer, taking Ruth as his wife (4:9-10, 13). Ruth in turn bears a son named Obed who is an ancestor of David (4:17). The blessing given to Boaz by the men of the city when he seals the deal to purchase the property of Ruth’s husband and acquire Ruth as his wife is telling:

“We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the Lord will give you by this young woman” (4:11-12).

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<sup>33</sup> Grudem, “Key Issues,” 34.

<sup>34</sup> Perhaps one might note that *Tamar* was to be given to *Shelah*, not the other way around, even though Shelah is apparently young enough to need some time before being old enough for marriage. Cf. footnote 8.

This blessing connects Boaz and Ruth to Perez, the son of Tamar, as does the genealogy in 4:16-22.

Space is insufficient to detail the pain of Hannah at her childlessness (1 Sam 1) or the tragedy of Michal's childlessness (2 Sam 6:23), or the suggestions that childlessness could even be a judgment of God (Lev 20:20-21; Deut 28:4, 11, 18). The OT clearly places a high priority on childbearing as the primary role of the wife. It may, in fact, be this theology of childbearing to which Paul is alluding in 1 Timothy 2:15. Paul goes on in 1 Timothy 5:14 to suggest that "younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households well, and give the adversary no occasion for slander."

### CONCLUSION

Scalise makes a startling concession in her argument for women in ministry. It is worth quoting her at length:

The place of women in Israelite society was narrowly circumscribed by law and custom. An adult woman was a minor in the eyes of the law and lived under the authority of her nearest male relative. Even her vows to God could be cancelled by her father or husband (Num 30:3-16). Her husband could divorce her (Deut 24:1-4) or take another wife (Exod 21:10; Deut 21:15-17), but she could not divorce him. She was subject to trial by ordeal if her husband even suspected her of unfaithfulness (Num. 5:11-31). She could inherit the family lands only if there were no male heirs, but she was then required to marry within her own clan because the land would pass to her husband (Num 27:1-11; 36). This male dominated structure of society is reflected in the Old Testament narrative as well as in the law.

In spite of these restrictions, a few exceptional women obeyed God's call to positions of leadership in the community.<sup>35</sup>

Scalise then proceeds with the examples of women such as Deborah, Miriam, and Huldah. Though we might suggest that she states some matters too strongly with regard to the law (e.g., that women were considered "minors"), she sees clearly that the law did restrict the role of women and she can only find "a few exceptional women" who defied this role. Her methodology seems to assume that the law was bad—the product of men who wished to oppress women—while the narratives support women in leadership

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<sup>35</sup> Scalise, "Women in Ministry," 8-9.

roles. In other words, the normative laws are discounted as “obviously” wrong and the narratives, as understood by the feminists, are made normative.

Complementarians must admit that the Pentateuch does not say explicitly that wives must submit to their husbands, nor does it say that women may not serve as national or regional leaders. Egalitarians insist that women served as leaders in Israel (and in turn may serve as leaders in the church). Nevertheless, the texts cited by egalitarians as proof that women were permitted to hold leadership positions simply do not bear up under scrutiny. If the egalitarians be correct that women were the equals of their husbands in the OT and served in roles of national leadership over men, they would have significant support for their contention that NT women may lead in the church. The egalitarians are not correct in this. A number of laws restrict the rights of wives. We could add others to those already mentioned, such as the law in Deuteronomy 21 which regulates the taking of captives as wives. The narratives of the Pentateuch, rightly understood, demonstrate an awareness that women were to be subordinate to their husbands. Not one clear case of female leadership can be adduced from the OT. Even the odd case of Deborah seems to prove that the expectation was that men should lead and that Deborah’s involvement in the battle against Sisera was extraordinary. The whole tenor and theology of the Pentateuch point to the need for wives to submit to their husbands.