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Women in the Old Testament: Issues of Authority, Power and Justice

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This article provides an interpretative lens through which the women in the Old Testament might be viewed. Central to this approach is the descriptive task, which in this case suggests that women did occupy places of power within Israelite society. But in addition, such a reading contributes to the prescriptive task, raising the larger questions of justice and equity.

KEYWORDS
Women, Old Testament, Numbers 27, Daughters of Zelophehad, Deuteronomy 25, Biblical Theology

Following Luther's pronouncement of *solo scriptura*, those who joined him in the Reformation quickly embraced the interpretative implications of such a move.[1] Subsequent generation of Protestants have relished in the notion of being a 'people of the Book'. And however various Protestant denominations have attempted to construe what it means to be a 'people of the Book', at minimum most have embraced Scripture as authoritative. This point is critical, I believe, when attempting to address the notion of women in the Old Testament. Our heritage as a 'people of the Book' is frequently tested and strained as we consider the role or roles of women in the Old Testament. As Phyllis Bird has lamented, 'For many both inside the church and out, the view of the alternatives is the same: accept the Bible as the word of God and submit to it, or reject it as the word of men'.[2] In dealing with the role of women in the Old Testament, such a bifurcation of the problem is not helpful; rather we must seek to construct new approaches that take seriously the authoritative role of Scripture, while also embracing the complex nature of the interpretative task.

In attempting to address the notion of women in the Old Testament, the interpreter can move in at least one of two directions: descriptively or prescriptively. The descriptive task involves attempted historical reconstructions, coupled with a catalogue of activities and behaviours exhibited in both biblical and extra-biblical texts. Ideally, such an approach is value-neutral. The intent is to discover the role of women in the ancient world, and more particularly, as evidenced in biblical writings. The importance of this task should not be underestimated. Descriptive analysis is essential to constructing a proper hermeneutic.

But as people of the Book who understand that Scripture is authoritative, the prescriptive value of the text is critical. In other words, what does the Old Testament say about women that would prove critical in our theological, spiritual, ethical and social constructions of meaning? For those interested in history alone, this question may appear at best tangential to the task, but for those whose lives are rooted within communities of faith, such a question is critical to a balanced and informed biblical theology. There are numerous themes and images that could contribute to such a balanced and informed theology, but this article will narrow its

[1] This article was originally presented as a lecture to the Women in Ministry organization at the George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University.

[2] Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 252. See also the comments of Mary Ann Tolbert, 'Protestant Feminists and the Bible: On the Horns of a Dilemma', in *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts* (ed. A. Bach; Philadelphia, PA: Trinity International, 1990), 5–23.

focus to consider the concepts of authority, power and justice as they relate to the notion of women in the Old Testament.

Women in the Old Testament: Reading Descriptively

The descriptive task attempts to depict the role or roles of women in Ancient Israelite religion and the broader communal life of Israel. Frequently in such studies, the descriptive task devolves into merely a listing of names and offices, often heralding the most prominent of females in the biblical text. While laudable, such a pursuit fails to take seriously the difficulty of being descriptive. Moreover, the difficulty of the task is only exacerbated by our unfamiliarity with various ancient social contexts. Space does not allow for a full accounting of the social contexts presented in the biblical literature, but perhaps a few comments may serve to direct, or redirect, our thinking.

First, the Old Testament and the social context presented therein is frequently labelled as 'patriarchal'. In our modern context, such a term denotes absolute control of males over females, or the male head of the family over the household, or in its worst manifestation, the notion of the subservience of women to men. The baggage associated with the term actually prevents the term from being very useful in the descriptive task. As a result, while scholars continue to use the term 'patriarchal', they have placed greater emphasis on the patrilinear and patrilocal nature of Israelite society. Land, wealth and inheritance are passed down through the father's line – hence patrilinear. And because the society is patrinlinear, the female is expected to join with the male's family, hence the patrilocal nature of society. Yet, such a social construction is not limited to Ancient Israel alone. Patrilinear and patrilocal forms of social construction were foundational to all Ancient Near Eastern cultures.[3] To claim that patriarchy must be embraced simply because Israel exhibited a certain form of it, as depicted in Scripture, is to misunderstand the common cultural assumptions evidenced in the social constructions of nearly all Ancient Near Eastern societies.[4]

Second, Ancient Israelite society exhibited what Carol Meyers refers to as 'cultural asymmetry'.[5] By this she means that the relationship between male and female, as presented in the Old Testament narratives exhibits considerable 'asymmetry'. She explains:

> 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 be perceived as oppressive. In objecting to the tendency to label as discriminatory texts that favour men, we do not intend to be apologetic, but rather to sensitize the reader of Scripture to the antiquity of the texts, the otherness of the society that produced them, and the lack of evidence that the Eves of Ancient Israel felt oppressed, degraded, or unfairly treated in the face of cultural asymmetry.[6]

Meyers' observation is critical in carrying out the descriptive task, and worth noting here. Some have explained that asymmetry as being based on a public-private dichotomy, which seeks to create 'gendered spheres'. The female is restricted to the domestic sphere, while the male to the public sphere. In contemporary rhetoric, however, such observations have led to pejorative statements, often imbued with a presumed sense of biblical authority, like 'the home is the place for a woman', and other even more off-putting comments. Such rhetoric, however, is ill-informed at best. In an agrarian peasant society, as frequently depicted in many biblical narratives, and moreover, one that is kinship based, the home *is* the central focus of society. Rather than a tertiary component of that society, the home was most likely the primary locus of societal affairs.[7] Modern notions of gendered spheres have

[3] For example, see Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religion Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Oudtestamentische Studiën; Leiden: Brill, 2003).

[4] Marsman notes that in Ugarit, marriages were generally patrilocal. He does note that the Ugaritic deity, Ba'lu, lived in the house of his father-in-law until he could establish his own residence (*Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 455). There are no hints of matrilocal forms of marriage in Ancient Israel, however.

[5] Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford, 1988), 34.

[6] Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 34.

[7] Carol Meyers, *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 60.

lead to the assumption that power is found in public spheres, while subordination, perhaps even passivity, is evidenced in the domestic sphere. Yet, Meyers has argued vigorously against such a reading of Ancient Israelite culture, particularly in the social arrangements of early Israel.

Rather than subordinating one sphere to another, Meyers reconstructs categories. Drawing off the earlier work of Max Weber and Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, Meyers draws a distinction between power and authority. Authority is defined as the culturally legitimated right to make decisions and command obedience. In the vast majority of patriarchal societies, with respect to male–female relations, males possess authority – at least as defined here. Power, however is defined as 'the ability to control despite or independent of official authority'.[8] Although power may not have the same cultural sanctions as does authority, it nonetheless has the capacity to shape social interaction and even social constructs. Meyers suggests that while women do not participate in the structures that grant authority, women, nonetheless, do have power.

Such a differentiation is critical in assessing the women of the Old Testament. Such recognition proves critical in dealing with what have traditionally been deemed as anomalies in the male-dominated society of Ancient Israel. If one embraces a traditional notion of patriarchy in which men have all the authority and power, and further that women are subordinate to it, then women such as Deborah, Huldah and even Miriam seem to challenge such a model.[9] And if one embraces a strongly patriarchal model – one that afforded women no power in Ancient Israel – then one must offer an explanation for the appearance of such women in leadership roles, and moreover, one must explain why there is not some apologetic in the text itself for these anomalies. If, however, Israelite society was comprised of systems of authority, as well as systems of power, then the function of women within that society demands a far more nuanced analysis.[10] Space will only allow for two illustrations of how the above descriptive comments inform the reading of the biblical text.

[8] Meyers, *Households and Holiness*, 40.

[9] Pamela J. Scalise, 'Women in Ministry: Reclaiming our Old Testament Heritage', *Review and Expositor* 83 (1986): 7–13.

[10] Perhaps the most extensive analysis is that of Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*.

Numbers 27: The Daughters of Zelophehad

In Numbers 27, the daughters of Zelophehad present an issue before 'Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation at the tent of meeting' (v. 2). In principle the case concerns patrilineal matters – what will happen to family land when the father dies with no male to inherit that land. As the pericope begins, the issue of gender moves to the fore. 'Zelophehad was son of Hepher, son of Manasseh son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clan' (v. 1). The identity of Zelophehad can only be known as it is presented within the patrilinear construction of that society. But in the line before this description of Zelophehad, the text reads, 'Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward', and then following Zelophehad's lengthy genealogy, the text reads, 'The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglath, Milcah, and Tirzah.' Zelophehad the male has no males. The five daughters appear before those with authority, namely the males, and they imply the law or tradition in their question: 'Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son?' (v. 4). As mentioned above, the males possessed the authority – they had the culturally legitimated right to make decisions. The daughters were not in such a position – but they did have power. If the home and, by extension, the land were central to a kinship social structure, then the authoritative law had to be challenged. If the women had no power and were fully immersed in a weighty patriarchal system, then it would appear unlikely that they could have raised such a challenge. But if women possessed some form of power, particularly as it related to one of the central arenas of their society, the home, then the daughters of Zelophehad could exercise that power in their demand for a change in the law. Thomas Dozeman summarizes well the implications of such a reading:

> The request of the daughters of Zelophehad for the right to inherit has caught the attention of modern readers because of the issues of gender rights implied in their legal request. A careful reading of Numbers 27:1–11, 36 certainly emphasizes that change is indeed built into biblical tradition. As such, it provides a basis for evaluating change in gender roles in our own culture. But these texts also underscore how the social background of biblical literature is often far removed from contemporary life and unable to provide concrete models for contemporary social concerns. The power of the text for teaching and

> preaching is not in its specific teaching on inheritance of daughters, but in its modeling of social change.[11]

The stress then in this story is on change, as suggested by Dozeman, but even further, it is on the contest between authority and power, which ultimately results in a changed social construction – a change that leads to a just outcome. Such a reading is not Pollyannaish – it clearly recognizes the asymmetrical relationship between genders in the Old Testament, but it also presses the reader to consider texts where women without authority, nonetheless exhibit power. The resulting change by those with authority, however, is in response to perceived injustice. This triangulation between authority, power and justice is critical to studying the role of women in the Old Testament.

Deuteronomy 25: The Widow and the Levir

The second text for consideration appears in Deuteronomy 25:5–10. This text deals with the notion of levirate marriage, and in particular, the responsibilities of each party in that arrangement. The notion of a patrilineal society is clearly at work in the demands of this law, as is the expectation of endogamous marriage: 'When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger' (v. 5). The responsibility resides with the brothers of the deceased man to ensure that a child is born. Such an act prevents the loss of property to those outside the family and ensures the preservation of the 'name' or family unit of the deceased man.[12] But the brother-in-law may opt not to perform the role of the *levir*, and beyond the legal expectation, there may have not been any economic incentive to do so. For example, if the family property was undivided, then the property of the deceased brother would have reverted back to the family, hence benefiting the living brother or brothers. Thus, in some regard, the living brothers would have much more to gain by opting *not* to perform the role of *levir*.

But the law also involves an issue of justice. As Ekhart Otto has suggested, this law 'was not simply a mirror of the legal institution of the levirate and its main concern of stabilizing the patrilineal family, but that its intention was to improve the legal and economic position of widowed woman'.[13] If the brother-in-law refused to provide the widowed woman with a male heir, then the woman was granted certain rights. She could take the man before the elders at the gate (those with authority) and present her case there. If the man persisted in his refusal, the woman then would remove *his* sandal and spit in *his* face. The sandal was a token symbol of having 'walked over' the property. By removing the sandal from the man, the widow not only publicly shamed the brother-in-law, but in effect removed his claim to the deceased brother's property. Note that it is not those in the city gate – those with authority – that shame the brother-in-law, but the widowed woman herself who performs the public act of chastisement. And it is the widowed woman who also has the power to strip the brother-in-law of any right to her deceased husband's land.

Similar to the story of Zelophehad's daughters, this text illustrates the triangulation of authority, power and justice. As in the earlier text, the woman is operating within the domestic context, but clearly one in which she wields some power, even against the primary male in the household. And similar to Zelophehad's daughters, the widow confronts those in positions of authority – those at the gate – because of the dire circumstances. Although the males have authority, the widow retains the power to redress the brother-in-law, protect the property of her deceased husband, and in effect secure her own future.[14] More critically, however, the widow has the right to make just that which was unjust.

Although beyond the purview of this article, the family laws throughout the book of Deuteronomy appear to have increased the position of and rights assigned to the female in Ancient Israel.[15] Obviously

[11] Thomas B. Dozeman, 'Numbers', *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 222.

[12] Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 266.

[13] Eckhart Otto, 'False Weights in the Scales of Biblical Justice?' in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (ed. V. H. Matthews, B. M. Levinson, and T. Frymer-Kensky; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 139. This point is also articulated by Wright, but without the depth of argumentation offered by Otto.

[14] Of course, should the widow remarry, the property would revert back to the family of her deceased husband (Otto, 'False Weights in the Scales of Biblical Justice?', 140).

[15] Although for an important critique of this position, see Carolyn Pressler, *The View of Women Found in the Deuteronomic Laws* (BZAW, 216; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991).

such changes did not fully thwart or even really retard the patrilinear and patrilocal nature of Israelite society, but they did provide women with rights and titles previously unrecognized. As Otto explains, 'in modern eyes this may be too little and by no means enough – but in antiquity and for women living at that time, it meant very much'.[16]

Women in the Old Testament: Reading Prescriptively

The brief discussion above focused on the triangulation of authority, power and justice, but failed to deal with those texts that present a more blatant subordination of women to the desires of men (e.g. Numbers 5). One could simply surmise that the stories in Numbers 27 and Deuteronomy 25 are like those related to Deborah, Huldah and Miraim – mere anomalies. Moreover, one could aver that the texts which exhibit a more blatant form of subordination are actually more representative for those interested in dealing with women in the Old Testament. In fact, some have used those texts which represent a more blatant form of subordination as part of their argument for a modern notion of patriarchy, particularly with emphasis on the subordination of women to men. I would like to suggest otherwise, particularly in view of the discussion above.

In a lecture delivered in 1992, Bruce Waltke goes so far as to suggest that patriarchy, and by that he means subordination of women to men, was never condemned by the prophets.[17] According to Waltke, the silence of the prophets on this matter legitimizes patriarchy as a universal for social construction. Because it was never condemned, says Waltke, it must therefore be understood as normative or prescriptive. Of course, the same could be said of polygyny – the marriage of multiple wives. Nowhere in the biblical text is polygyny explicitly condemned, yet there is ample evidence that it was practiced. One would be hard pressed to suggest that its frequent appearance throughout the Old Testament as well as the absence of any prophetic critique warrants us to view it as a universal for social construction. Just because it was never condemned, it does not follow that it must be adopted.

The comments by Waltke above, as well as his amplification of this theme in his lecture, imply the identification of human systems of order with the divine plan. Such a move can be dangerous at best, and idolatrous in its most virulent strains.[18] Acknowledging that Ancient Israelite society was predicated upon patrilinear and patrilocal concerns in no way implies that all subsequent societies must act accordingly. These are merely the social constructs present within that society *at that time*. Attention to such items is important because history and circumstance do matter in interpretation.[19]

But I would contend that we must move beyond the descriptive task alone – beyond history and circumstance – in dealing with the implications of patriarchy in our interpretation. I would contend that all of these stories – Deborah, Huldah, Miriam, Zelophehad's daughters, the widow and countless other women – must be read within the larger canon of Scripture. They are part of a narrative; one that tells a story and offers a message. Fundamental to the message of the Christian Bible is a 'message of liberation, wholeness, and healing, governed by principles of love and justice'.[20] Therefore to read any story apart from the larger story is to be in danger of misreading both. The stories of Zelophehad's daughters and the widow in Deuteronomy 25 are clearly set within a patriarchal context – but its setting is not what has the final word. The final word is justice. It is the type of justice that Amos called for when the poor were oppressed by those in authority in Samaria, and it is the type of justice demanded by Jeremiah as temple authorities arrogantly announced, 'This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord' (Jer 7). Admittedly not all stories told in the Old Testament end in justice.[21] But those stories are not the final word. Central to

[16] Otto, 'False Weights in the Scales of Biblical Justice?', 140.

[17] Bruce K. Waltke, 'The Role of Women in the Old Testament'. Lecture delivered at Regent Summer School and later at Peninsula Bible Church. For a full transcript of the lecture, see http://www/pbc.org/library/files/html/bw_women.html.

[18] Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities*, 252.

[19] As Otto has warned, 'one could say that perforce exegetes should be more aware of the historical dimension when dealing with such precarious and controversial subjects' such as the role of women in the Old Testament ('False Weights in the Scales of Biblical Justice', 146 n.71).

[20] Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities*, 251.

[21] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (OBT; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984).

the story in both the Old and New Testaments is justice. And it is justice that has the final word.

In conclusion, then, how does such a reading of women in the Old Testament, and of these texts in particular, shape our approach to social construction and biblical interpretation? In Numbers 27 and Deuteronomy 25, when the authority of some threatened the power of others, injustice was confronted and systems were changed. In our own society, and in our own religious denominations, when the authority of some threatens the power of authors, there is injustice. And similar to these two texts, injustice must be confronted and systems must be changed. Such an approach takes history and circumstance seriously. Such an approach takes Scripture seriously. Were we to do anything less, we might cease to remain a 'people of the Book'.

THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

Alexander S. Jensen, *SCM Core Text: Theological Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2007. £21.99. pp. xiv + 237. ISBN 978–0–334–02901–4).

Most introductory books on hermeneutics fail for one or both of these reasons: first, they assume that the students have grasped the significance of hermeneutics within the theological enterprise; and/or second, they employ a jargon belonging to the disciplines of logic, epistemology, or hermeneutics which is not only foreign to those not directly interested in those disciplines (e.g. those interested in the Christian Scriptures who are required to study hermeneutics as part of their courses) but which ignores the fact that the discipline, and its terminology, are not self-explanatory. This book is a notable exception: not only does it explain its contents admirably but it explains its own significance within a set of core theological questions, while demonstrating the continual presence of hermeneutics in theology by presenting a simple history of biblical interpretation exhibiting the sequence of hermeneutical approaches that have been part of the Western/Latin theological tradition.

Jensen sets out his stall in the first pages. The assumptions of our world and that of the texts we interact with are different, hence the basic questions for any theologian/reader of the Scriptures who does not want to be imprisoned in their own unwitting assumptions: how does one distinguish that 'other world of the text' and then relate to that text in the pursuit of truth. Moreover, we often find that we are giving unconscious adherence to outdated strategies for understanding, and so fall into a variety of traps, such as fundamentalism, and hence we must pay attention to hermeneutics. A class, or Scripture reading group, working through these introductory pages – even if they ignored the rest of the book – would gain much. The reader is then taken on a quick guide through hermeneutical theory from antiquity to the eighteenth century (pp. 9–77). This surveys all the classical semiologies, e.g. Augustine, and shows that there was never a 'halcyon time' when the Scriptures were 'simply read'. One small improvement in this section would have been more detail on how we can see early Christian writers, e.g. Paul or Luke, using particular hermeneutical approaches to their Scriptures.

The largest section of the book then covers the period from the Enlightenment to the contemporary scene of Postmodernity (pp. 78–206), and Jensen includes within this not only the major semiological theories, but approaches favoured by particular groups: e.g. feminist and post-colonial hermeneutics. The pace is orderly, the material is introduced properly, and at no time is the book's language a barrier to communication. While the book will have a special appeal to those who view theology very much from the perspective of biblical interpretation, this section introduces all the key debates in contemporary theology. The work's last two chapters are more speculative and constitute Jensen's attempt at creating a 'hermeneutical theology'.

This is a model textbook that will find its way on to a variety of reading lists, but it is user friendly and will repay reading by anyone, e.g. a preacher, who engages with the Scriptures as part of a quest for religious understanding.

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