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Women In the New Testament: A Middle Eastern Cultural View

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The broader topic of the place of women in the family, in society and in the Church is now discussed over much of the Christian world across a wide spectrum of opinion. Few topics have held as much promise and pain, hope and despair, change and deep uneasiness about change as this topic and it is clear the New Testament is critical to it. This essay focuses on the New Testament. Yet regarding the biblical witness there is a strong tendency to see Scripture through the eyes of traditional interpretation of it, or through the eyes of current ideologies. Here a rigorous attempt will be made to allow Scripture itself to control and correct our understanding of it.

As is known, the NT is deeply influenced by its first century Middle Eastern cultural setting. Trying to discern the fabric of cultural assumptions that underlie the NT has been my life-long focus in NT studies. As a supplement to other historical concerns, this lens will be utilized as we examine our topic.

We will first expose what appear to be two opposing attitudes in the New Testament towards women in the church. We will then see if these two 'opposites' can be reconciled. The problem is simply this: one set of NT texts appears to say 'yes' to women while a second set appears to say 'no'. We turn first to the positives.

Positive attitudes

In the NT, women occupy a remarkable range of clearly identifiable positions. These include:

Jesus had women disciples

Four texts are significant. First, although occurring only once, the word 'disciple' does appear in the NT as a feminine. In Acts 9:36 Tabitha (Dorcas) is called *mathetria* (disciple). Secondly, in St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' family appears and asks to speak with him. Jesus replies,

'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand *towards his disciples*, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother' (Matt. 12:46-50).

In our Middle Eastern cultural context, a speaker who gestures to a crowd of *men* can say, 'Here are my brother, and uncle and cousin'. He *cannot* say, 'Here are my brother, and sister, and mother'. The text specifically affirms that Jesus is gesturing to 'his disciples' whom he addresses with male and female terms. This communicates to the reader that the disciples before him were composed of men *and* women.

Thirdly, is the remarkable report in Luke 8:1-3. In this text the reader is told,

Soon afterward he went through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women ... who provided for them out of their means.

We note that Jesus is *travelling* through cities and villages with a band of men *and* women who are naturally known to be his disciples. This implies that they were spending night after night in strange villages. Today social customs are more relaxed than they were in the first century (as evidenced from the Mishnah and the Talmudes). Yet in the contemporary Middle East, in traditional society, I know of no place where the social scene presented in the text is possible. Women can travel with a group of men, but must spend their nights with relatives. Three points of amazement appear.

First, the story itself is very surprising for the reasons noted above. Secondly, the women are paying for the movement out of resources under their control. Finally, Luke (a man) admits all of this in writing.

Fourthly, in Luke 10:38 Jesus enters the house of Martha. Luke tells us, ‘And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching’. In Acts Paul describes himself as having been ‘brought up at the feet of Gamaliel’ (Acts 22:3). To ‘sit at the feet’ of a rabbi meant to become a disciple of a rabbi. So Mary became a disciple of Jesus. Martha, we are told is ‘distracted’ (not burdened) with much serving. To be distracted one must be distracted from something or by something.

Clearly Martha is distracted *from* the teachings of Jesus by her cooking. In the account, Martha then asks Jesus to send Mary to the kitchen to help her. The point is not the need for someone to peel the potatoes. In our Middle Eastern cultural context, Martha is more naturally understood to be upset over the fact that her ‘little sister’ is seated with the men and has become a disciple of Rabbi Jesus. It is not difficult to imagine what is going through Martha’s mind. She says to herself:

This is disgraceful! What will happen to us! My sister has joined this band of men. What will the neighbours say? What will the family think? After this who will marry her? This is too much to expect!

Jesus does not reply to her words, but to their meaning. In context his answer communicates the following:

Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about *many* things. I understand the *entire* list. One thing is needed. What is missing is not one more plate of food, but rather for you to understand that I am providing the meal and that your sister has already chosen the good portion. I will not allow you to take it from her. A good student is more important to me than a good meal.

The word ‘portion’ can mean a portion of food at a meal.¹ Jesus is defending Mary’s right to continue her ‘theological studies’ with Jesus as one of his disciples.

From these four texts it is clear that in the Gospels women were among the disciples of Jesus.

There are women teachers of theology in the NT

Acts 18:24-28 tells of Apollos’ visit to Ephesus. Apollos is praised for his knowledge of the Scriptures and ‘the things concerning Jesus’. But he knew only the baptism of John. The text affirms,

...but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately

Clearly Priscilla is ‘team teaching’ theology with Aquila and the student is no beginner, no fledgling catechumen; rather he is the famous, eloquent preacher of Alexandria. Furthermore, Luke’s Gospel was indeed sent/ dedicated to Theophilus. But there is little doubt that Luke also intended it to be read by the Church. Thus when he identifies Mary as the author of the Magnificat he indirectly presents her as a teacher of theology, ethics, and social justice for all his readers! The critical discussion about the composition of the Magnificat is known to me. Yet irrespective of one’s view regarding sources and authorship, Luke presents Mary as the singer of this song and thus as a teacher of the readers of his Gospel. These two texts witness to the fact that in the early church women could (Mary) and did (Priscilla) teach theology to men.

The NT affirms the presence of women deacons/ministers in the Early Church

For this topic, two texts must be noted. The first is Rom. 16:1-2, where Paul writes, ‘I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae.’

¹ J. A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (X-XXIV), Doubleday, New York 1985, p 894; cf LXX Gen 43:34 Deut 18:8.

Phoebe is called a *deacon* (*diakonos*) not a *deaconess*. The evidence for the feminine use of this masculine form is slight.² Most likely this masculine ending is used because Phoebe was ordained to a clearly defined ministry, that of deacon (*diakonos*). Thus the formal title appears. Another reason is that the Aramaic word *shammash*, which is used to describe the High Priest officiating in the temple on the day of atonement (M., Yoma 7:5; B.T. Yoma 47a). But the feminine *shammasha* means a prostitute.³ The need for an honourable title would dictate the use of the masculine in a church where a significant number had Aramaic as a part of their linguistic heritage.

In any case, for centuries scholars have observed the official nature of Phoebe's position. Regarding this verse, John Calvin wrote,

He begins by commending Phoebe... first on account of her office, because she exercised a very honourable and holy ministry in the Church.⁴

In the contemporary scene Cranfield concludes,

We regard it as virtually certain that Phoebe is being described as *a* or possibly, *the* 'deacon' of the church in question, and that this occurrence of *diakonos* is to be classified with its occurrences in Philippians 1.1 and 1 Timothy 3.8 and 12.⁵

We would add to this that in 1 Tim. 4:6 *diakonos* is applied to Timothy himself where it is usually translated 'minister.' While recognizing that Romans is written when the church's ministry was in an early and more undefined stage, Dunn feels that, 'servant' is inadequate. He writes, *diakonos* together with *ousa* points more to a recognized ministry ... or position of responsibility within the congregation.⁶

Paul refers to himself and to Apollos as *diakono*i in 1 Cor. 3:5.

Furthermore, Phoebe is called a *prostatis* over/to many. This word was applied to the leader of worship in a Graeco-Roman temple as well as to a governor, a chieftain, and the leader of a democracy.⁷ Dunn argues for patron/protector, or leader/ruler⁸ A ninth century Arabic version translated this phrase, '*qa'ima'ala katherin wa'alayya*', in authority over many and over myself as well.⁹

² W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, tr. and adapted by W. F. Arridt, F.W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker, U. of Chicago Press 1979(cited hereafter as BAGD) pp 184f.

³ M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, Padres, New York 1950, p 1602.

⁴ J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, tr. R. Mackenzie, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1976, p 320.

⁵ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1985, p 374.

⁶ J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, vol. II, Word Publishers, Waco 1990, pp 886f.

⁷ H. G. Liddell, and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, New Edition revised by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie, Oxford U. Press, Oxford 1966, c. 1940, (cited as: L. & S.) p 1526.

⁸ Dunn, op cit., pp 888f.

⁹ M. D. Gison, ed., *An Arabic Version of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians with part of the Epistle to the Ephesians from a Ninth Century MS. in the Convent of St. Catharine on Mount Sinai*, Studia Sinaitica No. II, Cambridge U. Press, London 1894, p 35.

A second text relevant to women deacons is 1 Tim 3:8-11. Here the qualifications for deacons and for 'the women' appear. The two lists exhibit striking parallels which can be seen as follows:

1 Timothy 3:8-11

Deacons likewise must be:

1. Serious (*semnous*)
2. Not double-tongued (*dilogous*)
3. Not addicted to much wine
4. Not greedy for gain
5. They must hold fast to the mystery of *the faith* (*ekhontas to musterion tes pisteos*)

The women likewise must be:

1. Serious (*semnas*)
2. Not slanderers (*diabolous*)
3. Temperate
4. —
5. *Faithful* in all things (NRSV) (*pistas en pasin*)
Better: *Believing* in all things with a clear conscience (NRSV)

These two lists are obviously intended to be parallel. The critical item for our subject is number five. The deacons must hold onto *the faith*. As seen above, the parallel item for the qualifications of the women is ‘*pistas en pasin*.’ The other six occurrences of this word in 1 Timothy are translated as referring to the *act of believing* in the faith. Here alone it is consistently translated ‘faithful in all things,’ referring to a character trait. Does not the parallel nature of the two lists make clear that ‘believing in all things’ is what is intended? These women can best be seen as engaged in activities directly related to the faith in the same way as the men. Deacons in Acts 6 appear in Acts 7 and 8 as *preachers of the word* (cf. Stephen and Philip). Regarding ‘the women’ here in 1 Timothy John Chrysostom wrote,

Some have thought that this is said of women generally, but it is not so, for why should he introduce anything about women to interfere with his subject. He is speaking to those who hold the rank of Deaconesses.¹⁰

The NT has women prophets

Eph. 2:20 affirms that the household of God is built on ‘the apostles and prophets’. Thus, whoever they were, these early Christian prophets occupied a high place in the NT church. Furthermore, some of these prophets were women. In Acts Paul stays in Caesarea with Philip the evangelist whose daughters prophesied (Acts 21:19).

In 1 Cor. 11:4-5 Paul offers advice to men and women prophets on headcovering *while prophesying*. However one interprets this puzzling text, it is clear that both men and women were praying and prophesying. Praying could refer to private devotions. Prophesying is necessarily a public act.

A woman apostle

Rom. 16:7 reads,

Greet Andronicus and Junian, my relatives and my fellow prisoners; they are notable among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.

Two people in this text are called ‘notable among the apostles.’ Our interest focuses on the name Junian which is the accusative singular of a first declension Greek noun. Unfortunately this particular accusative can be masculine or feminine. The question becomes: What is the nominative of this name Junian? The first declension allows for two options. It could be Junia, in which case the person is a woman. This option would

¹⁰ J. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, vol. X11, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1979, p 441.

mean that Paul was sending greetings to a man and a woman, both apostles, probably a husband and wife like Priscilla and Aquila whom he has just mentioned.

On the other hand, if the nominative form is Jounias (a contraction of Junianus,¹¹ then the text refers to two men. Which of these options is more probable? Initially we observe that the witness of the Fathers is consistent.

Preaching on this text, Chrysostom said,

‘Greet Andronicus and Junia ... who are outstanding among the apostles.’

To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been, that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle.¹²

Jounian was also read as a feminine by Origen of Alexandria, Jerome, Peter Abelard and others. The Catholic scholar, Bernadette Brooten, quoted above, was unable to find any Latin commentary on Romans that had this name as a masculine before the late thirteenth century. The name appears as a feminine (Junia) in the Syriac Peshitta and in all the numerous MSS and published Arabic versions available to me stretching from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries. The male name Junias first appeared in the Middle East in 1860! In the English language the famous Authorized Version reads, ‘Salute Andronicus and Junia ... who are of note among the apostles’.

The first noticeable shift from Junia to Junias was apparently made by Faber Stapulensis, writing in Paris in 1512. His work subsequently influenced Luther’s commentary on Romans. Luther then incorporated the masculine Junias into his German translation of the Bible which in time influenced other versions. However, the theoretical masculine name Junias has never been found in any Latin or Greek text. The name Junia, however, has appeared over two hundred and fifty times.¹³ Thus to insist on this being a masculine name is like finding a text with the name Mary in it and arguing that it refers to a man! Such an argument is theoretically possible but would surely hinge on the finding of at least one text where Mary is clearly a male name.

It appears that during the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries a name known by the Church, East and West, to be female gradually became the name of a man in the West. In the Middle East this shift of gender did not take place until the nineteenth century. The shift in both cases was made without reference to any evidence.

We must now ask, is the title ‘apostle’ significant? In the NT this title was primarily applied to the twelve. Paul, James, Barnabas and the two people in this text were also called apostles. From the shortness of the list and the prominence of the first three names, it is clear that they were a highly select group. In 1 Cor. the Apostles head the list of church orders (12:29). As noted, the Church is built on them (Eph. 2:20). The title is best understood to have maintained its original meaning, which was an eye-witness to Jesus who had received a direct commission from him.¹⁴ Thus, the title of apostle (as applied to Junia) cannot be seen as a casual reference to an insignificant early Christian witness. With Chrysostom, the Early Fathers, Arabic and Syriac Christianity, and the Authorized Version translators, we can affirm with full confidence that Junia (feminine) was an apostle.

¹¹ Dunn, op cit., p 894.

¹² B. Brooten, “Junia...Outstanding among the Apostles” (Romans 16:7) in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, eds L. and A. Swidler, Paulist Press, New York 1977, p 141.

¹³ Dunn, op cit., p 167.

¹⁴ K. H. Ringsdorf, ‘Apostolos’, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. G. Kittel, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1964, pp 422f. Dunn, op cit., pp 894f.

Women elders

There remains the question of *elders*. The central text is 1 Tim. 5:1-2. Initially, the widely-debated question of the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles can be set aside. The material is often called deuterio-Pauline. I prefer the view of E. E. Ellis who argues that the Pastorals present Paul at the end of his life addressing new topics through an amanuensis.¹⁵ With a full awareness of the modern debate and the theological and linguistic issues involved, we will look at the text as Scripture handed down to us as a letter of Paul to Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus. Our conclusions, we trust, are valid for our topic irrespective of a composition date from the sixties or the nineties.

The text under consideration is open to two interpretations. The first is reflected in the time-honored translation of these two verses, which is as follows:

Do not rebuke an *older man* but exhort him as you would a father; younger men like brothers, *older women* like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity (RSV).

This translation is built on the assumption that chapter five opens a new subject. At the end of chapter four there is specific reference to *the council of elders* who ordained Timothy. This *council* of elders, the *presbuterion*, was composed of the *presbuteroi*, the elders. That much is clear. The problem arises in 5:1-2, where the same word appears twice, first as a masculine singular (*presbutero*) and then as a feminine plural (*presbuteras*). These two words are usually translated as ‘older man’ and ‘older women’, as seen above. Support for this translation is found in the fact that ‘young men’ and ‘young women’ are mentioned in the text. Thus it is easy to see age references all through the verse. But this is not the only option.

It is also possible to argue as follows. (First, a word of explanation: the science of rhetorical criticism in biblical studies is more than one hundred and fifty years old.¹⁶ But it has only been given serious attention in the last two decades.) One of the frequently used devices, now found to be extensively present in both the OT and the NT, is chiasm, which we prefer to call ‘inverted parallelism’. This particular rhetorical device presents a series of ideas, comes to a climax and then repeats the series backwards. The ideas/units that repeat can be individual lines but often appear as paragraphs. This form of rhetoric is common in both Greek and Hebrew literature. It is so extensive in the NT that Johanna Dewey has observed, ‘The question has now become, where is it not found?’¹⁷

In regard to our text, if we observe the larger section in which 5:1-2 appears, the following outline emerges:

1. These instructions (as a minister) 4:6-11
2. Timothy and the Elders (and the young) 4:12-5:2
3. Older widows (and the young) 5:3-16
4. Timothy and the Elders 5:17-20
5. These rules (in regard to ordination) 5:21-22

Numbers 1 and 5 discuss ‘instructions as a minister’ and ‘rules as regards ordination’. They form a pair. Paragraphs 2 and 4 form a second pair and are on the topic of ‘Timothy and the Elders’. The widows form

¹⁵ E. E. Ellis, ‘The Authorship of the Pastorals: A Resume and Assessment of Recent Trends,’ in *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1979, pp 49-57.

¹⁶ K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1980, pp 45ff.

¹⁷ J. Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure and Theology in Mark 2:1 - 3:6*, Scholars Press, Chico, California 1980, p 35.

paragraph 3 in the centre. The entire passage discusses *ministry*. With this very simple outline in mind, a closer look at each paragraph is necessary. We will examine each of the ‘pairs’ of paragraphs. Paragraphs 1 and 5 will be examined and compared first. We will then skip briefly to the centre in paragraph 3 and finally observe the thrust of paragraphs 4 and 2 where our text is located.

1. *The outside pair* (1 and 5)

The first paragraph (4:6-11) opens with, ‘If you put these *instructions* before the brethren you will be a good *diakonos/minister* of Jesus Christ’. This section most naturally ends with the words ‘*Command and teach* these things’ (v 11). Paragraph 5 (5:21-22) is clearly parallel to this opening section. It charges Timothy to ‘keep these *rules*’ (v 21) and to ‘not be hasty in the laying on of hands’ (v 22). So the topic of ‘*rules* which relate to *ministry*’ is again in focus.

2. *The centre* (3)

The centre section (5:3-16) opens and closes with references to ‘real widows’ (vv 3, 5, 16) and their *enrolment* (v 9). In between Paul describes *young widows* who should *not* be enrolled (vv 11-15).

3. *The second pair* (4 and 2)

We saw how the topic discussed in the opening paragraph reappeared in the fifth paragraph. The critical question is, are paragraphs 2 (4:12-5:2) and 4 (5:17-20) intentionally composed as a pair? I am convinced that they are.

First observe paragraph 4, which is clearly discussing elders who are officials in the ministry of the Church, *not* old men. The material breaks into two sections, vv 17-18 and vv 19-20. The first two verses discuss the ‘good elders’ who are ruling well, busy at preaching and teaching and should be paid for their efforts. In vv 19-20 Timothy is advised about dealing with ‘troublesome elders’.

We turn finally to paragraph 2 (4:12-5:2) where *presbuteroi* are also discussed. The early Greek paragraph divisions (*kefalaia*) left 5:1-2 standing alone. The Fathers who made these divisions were honest enough not to relate these verses to what followed. Did they have a hidden agenda when they chose *not* to attach them to the previous paragraph?

Against the *kefalalia*, Archbishop Langton’s thirteenth century chapter divisions (now in use), attach these verses to the discussion of widows which follow. But those instructions regarding widows have no mention of the *presbuteroi*. Is it not more appropriate to see 5:1-2 as a part of the previous paragraph which does mention *presbuteroi*? I am convinced that it is. Did Langton share the hidden agenda mentioned above?

We will examine 4:12-5:2 as a unit which focuses on Timothy and the *presbuteroi*.

Once again the *presbuteroi* are of two kinds. Paul first mentions the elders who have ordained Timothy (4:12-16). Granted, these verses focus on Timothy’s duties as a leader of worship; but the context is that of Timothy’s ordination by elders who are not criticized. He then discusses the *difficult* elders (5:1-2). These are obviously people whom Timothy is sorely tempted to attack. He is told ‘Don’t do it’. Treat the *presbutero* like a father, he is advised, and the *presbuteras* (plural) like mothers. Thus the two topics of ‘helpful elders’ and ‘difficult elders’ appear in both paragraph 4 (4:17-20) and paragraph 2 (4:12-5:2). In each case the good elders are mentioned first and the difficult elders second. Thus paragraphs 2 and 4 can be seen as parallel discussions of *ministry*. If this is true, then the *presbuteras* in 5:2 are women elders ordained and engaged in ministry in Timothy’s congregation. The NRSV places ‘or an *elder*, or a *presbyter*’ as a marginal note to *presbutero* in 5:1

but curiously not to *presbuteras* in 5:2. In regard to 5:1-2, Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic Studies at Temple University (USA), writes,

... in [1 Timothy] 5:1-2 the words *presbytero* and *presbyteras* are usually translated as ‘an older man’ and ‘older women’, but in this context of discussion of the various ‘officers’ of the church, a perfectly proper translation — which, if not more likely, is at least possible — would be ‘male presbyter’ and ‘woman presbyters’.¹⁸

What then can be said about the references to youth in 5:1-2? Aside from 5:1-2 under discussion, twice in the larger passage we have observed references to *youth* in texts that also discuss formal ministries (4:12-16 and 5:9-16). The same phenomenon occurs in 1 Pet. 5:1-5. The two cases in 5:1 and 5:2 fit easily into this pattern.

In summary, the NT has clear cases of women disciples, teachers, prophets and deacons/ministers. We have near certitude in perceiving Junia to be a female apostle. It is possible to see female elders in 1 Tim. 5:2. Thus women appear on nearly all, if not all, levels of leadership in the NT Church.

Negative attitudes

On the negative side are two critical texts. The first of these is 1 Cor. 14:33-36 which tells the women to be silent in church. The second is 1 Tim. 2:11-15 which adds that they must not teach or ‘have authority’ over men. These two texts seem to affirm the exact opposite of all that we have thus far observed. Faced with both the positives and the negatives, at least five alternatives are available to the reader of the NT.

1. Dismiss the biblical witness as contradictory and thus irrelevant.
2. Take the texts that say ‘yes’ to women as normative and ignore the others.
3. Focus on 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Tim. 2 and overlook the women disciples, teachers, deacons/ministers, prophets, and woman apostle.
4. Conclude that the NT is at loggerheads with itself and that the Church can only choose one biblical view against the other.
5. Look once more at the negative texts to see if their historical settings allow for more unity in the outlook of the NT than we have suspected.

To borrow a phrase, we will proceed to ‘have a go’ at alternative five. What can be said about 1 Cor. 14:33-36 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15?

I have argued elsewhere that 1 Cor. 11-14 is a single essay.¹⁹ In these chapters Paul’s outline is organized using the same inverted parallelism already noted in 1 Tim. The themes are as follows:

1. Disorders in worship:
 - a. Dress of women/men prophets (11:2-16)
 - b. Disorders in the Eucharist (11:17-34)
2. The spiritual gifts (ch. 12)
3. Love (ch. 13)
4. The spiritual gifts (14:1-25)
5. Disorders in worship:
 - a. Prophets all talk at once (14:26-33a)
 - b. Women talk in church (14:33b-36)

¹⁸ L Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1979, p 315.

¹⁹ K. E. Bailey, “The Structure of 1 Corinthians and Paul’s Theological Method With Special Reference to 4:17,” *Novum Testamentum*, vol. XXV (1983), pp 170-73.

Disorders in worship open and close this four-chapter section of the epistle. The placing of the two discussions of spiritual gifts creates a second set of parallels. The chapter on love (ch. 13) forms a powerful climax in the centre. Thus, as noted, chapters 11-14 form a single unit. Our interest focuses on the discussions regarding women in the Church that open and close this four-chapter unit.

In 11:4-5 the men *and the women* are prophesying. Thus the reader knows that the prophets who interrupt one another in chapter 14 are comprised of *both* men and women. So when the women in 14:34-35 are told to be silent and listen to the prophets, it is clear that *some of those prophets are women*.

Also relevant is the fact that 14:26-36 lists three groups of people who are disturbing the worship. These are as follows:

1. The *prophets* are told:
Don't all talk at once.
Be silent in the church.
2. The *speakers in tongues* are told:
If there is no interpreter,
be silent in the church.
3. *Married women* with Christian husbands (who attend) are told:
Don't ask questions during the worship and don't chat.
Ask your husbands at home and *be silent* in the church.

Each of these groups is told to be silent when it disturbs worship. Paul is not issuing a command for perpetual prophetic silence! In like manner, when they disrupt public worship the women are asked to be quiet. Thus Paul is saying to the women:

‘Women, please keep silent in worship and listen to the female and male prophets. Don't interrupt them with questions, and don't talk/ chat in church. If you can't understand what is being said, ask your husbands at home. They understand more Greek than you do and will be able to explain things to you.’

The scene is easy to reconstruct. Corinth was a tough immoral town. Transportation workers, porters and metal workers made up a significant portion of the population. It is easy to assume that the inhabitants came from different places and spoke different languages. Their common language was Greek. The men were naturally ‘out and about’ more than the women and thus were more likely to be at ease in that common language. It follows that in church the women could perhaps not easily follow what was being said and so would begin to ask questions or lose interest and start ‘chatting’.

A documented case of this phenomenon is recorded in a sermon of John Chrysostom, preached in the cathedral of Antioch in the latter part of the fourth century. Stenographers recorded Chrysostom as follows:

Text- And if they (the women) will learn anything let them ask their husbands at home.

Chrysostom: Then indeed the women, from such teaching keep silence; but now there is apt to be great noise among them, much clamour and talking, and nowhere so much as in this place (the cathedral). They may all be seen here talking more than in market, or at the bath. For, as if they came hither for recreation, they are all engaged in conversing upon unprofitable subjects. Thus all is confusion, and they seem not to understand, that unless they are quiet, they cannot learn anything that is useful. For when our discourse strains against the talking, and no one minds what is said, what good can it do to them?²⁰

²⁰ Chrysostom, op cit., p 435.

If this was the scene in the cathedral of the great city of Antioch in the fourth century, what can we imagine for Corinth in the days of Paul? Corinth was, no doubt, even more disorderly. (The present writer has personally experienced Chrysostom's predicament in isolated middle-eastern village churches!) The women of Corinth were told (when they disrupted worship) to be silent. Paul assumed that the readers remembered the women prophets of 11:5 when he wrote 14:35-36. He then reinforced the unity this four-chapter essay with a brief summary. It reads as follows:

1. If anyone thinks that he is a *prophet* (ch 11)
2. or *spiritual* (ch 12)
3. He should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a *command of the Lord* (ch 13). If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.
4. So, my brethren, Earnestly desire to *prophecy* and do not forbid *speaking in tongues* (14:1-25).
5. But all things should be done in decency and in order (26-36).

If these four verses are (as we suggest) a summary of the entire essay, then *the command of the Lord* referred to in paragraph 3 is the command to 'love one another', which is definitively explained in ch. 13. If however, 14:34-40 is only read in a linear fashion, then the 'command of the Lord' becomes the command to tell the women to be silent in church, not the love command. If then the link with ch. 11 is forgotten, the women prophets are forgotten. Together these two misunderstandings of the text can and have been shaped by some into a club with which to threaten women into silence in the name of 'the command of the Lord'. More recently they have been used by many to attack the integrity of the Apostle Paul. Paul's intent is simply to solve a problem strikingly similar to Chrysostom's difficulties with the chatting women of Antioch.

Finally then, what is to be done with the *crux interpretum* of 1 Tim. 2:11-15? As discussed above, whether 1 Tim. is history from the sixties or carefully written theological drama from the nineties, the Church was still in existence in Ephesus at the end of the first century and the temple of Artemis was also intact and functioning. I am myself convinced of the earlier date, but the following suggestions can, we trust, help clarify the text as Scripture in either case. What then can be said?

First, the author speaks to Timothy as a young man and calls him 'my son'. Secondly, Timothy is ill with stomach problems and other 'frequent ailments' (4:23). Thirdly, he is apparently under stress and wants to leave because now, for the second time, Paul urges him to stay (1:3). Finally, some form of a gnostic heresy has broken out in the Church. Chapter 4:1-3 offers details. The author warns against those who 'forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods'. For these heretics the body was evil. Obviously someone was pressuring the Church in these directions. Who then was teaching such things?

We can only speculate, but there are a few helpful historical hints. In the early forms of gnosticism known to us, women teachers played prominent roles. Simon Magus is accused by Justin and Eusebius of having had a consort called who was a prostitute from Tyre. She was called *ennois* (divine intelligence). The gnostic document, *The Acts of Paul*, adds a consort called Thekla to Paul. Montanus had Prisca and Maximilla as his female prophetesses. In 2 Timothy 3 the author sharply criticizes men but also mentions 'weak women who are swayed by various impulses and who will listen to anybody'. In 1 Tim. 5:15 the author specifically mentions 'women ... who have already strayed after Satan'. To this another dimension must be added.

The great temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The roof was supported by 127 columns that were 65 feet high (roughly seven storeys). The building was 221 feet wide and 425 feet long. Within the temple as an institution, women exercised power on two levels. First, the temple was controlled by a group of virgins and castrated men. The later were called *Magabizes*. Then second, under their

control were thousands of female priestess-slaves called *hierodules*. There is specific evidence for priestesses, receptionists, supervisors, drummers, bearers of the sceptre, cleaners, acrobats, flute players and bankers. The economy of the town and province was profoundly linked to the temple as an institution (cf. Acts 19:23-29). The entire town set aside one month a year for ceremonies, games and festivities connected to the cult.²¹ The focus of all of this was Artemis, a female goddess with rows of multiple breasts. Thus the Ephesian lived in a city and district where the huge seven-storey-high temple, a wonder of the world, dominated the skyline. As an institution it was naturally a powerful force in all aspects of their lives. The focus of all this was a goddess whose worship was controlled by virgins who shared leadership with males only if they were castrated.

In such an atmosphere, what kind of female-male relations would have developed? What possibility would any male religious leadership have had for a sense of dignity and self-respect? What kind of female attitudes would have prevailed in such a city? How easy would it have been for the values of the society to have penetrated the Church? Castration being the ultimate violence against the male, would not anti-male sexism in various forms have been inevitable?

No church is ever totally isolated from the sins of its culture. It does not take too much imagination to fill in the spaces between the lines of 1 Tim. and surmise what may have prompted Timothy's desire to leave. It is easy to assume that a group of women had asserted enough power to gain adherents to their heretical views. As noted, avoidance of marriage (and childbearing), along with abstinence from foods, appear to have been a part of the package which was damaging the social and theological foundations of the Church. As 2:12 makes clear (see below), these same women were brutalizing the men in the process.

Timothy was young, sick, depressed and male. He could not manage. Paul, or Paul through an amanuensis, or a student of Paul in Paul's name, was informed that things were going very badly in Ephesus. He wrote this stinging reply hoping to save the Church. With this as a possible scenario, we must examine the text itself. Each section requires scrutiny.

Paul writes, 'Let a woman learn in quietness with all submissiveness'. He opens with a command, 'Let a woman learn...' Judith Hauptmann, in an essay on 'Images of Women in the Talmud', notes Rabbi Eliezer's view that it is better to burn the words of the Torah than to give them to women.²² By contrast, other Talmudic texts make clear that some women *were* exposed to Torah and Talmud. However there is no command that they should learn. That was for the men. The general view was that the woman's task was to keep the house and free the men to study the tradition.²³ At least from the second century AD each male worshipper offered daily thanks to God for not having made him a woman. Greeks expressed similar views.²⁴ Misogyny was also a part of Roman society. Indeed it was a part of the times. Against this background Paul gives a clear directive that a Christian woman must *learn* the faith. He is obviously referring to women who need instruction. He does not say, 'Dismiss them from the classroom', or 'They are not capable of understanding'. Rather he commands, 'Let a woman learn!'

²¹ G. B. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised*, 5 vols., Eerdmans Grand Rapids 1982-87, vol. 1, pp 306-308 'Artemis'.

²² J. Hauptman, 'Images of Women in the Talmud,' in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary R. Ruether, Simon and Schuster, New York 1974, p 203.

²³ *Ibid.*, p 209.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p 196.

Secondly, we have traditionally translated the full command, ‘Let a woman learn *in silence*’. The Greek can also be translated, ‘Let a woman learn in quietness’, which is perhaps more appropriate to the tense situation in the church in Ephesus. Angry students forced into silence learn little. But an atmosphere of ‘quietness’ encourages study and fosters understanding. In regard to this text Chrysostom writes, ‘He was speaking of quietness...’.²⁵ This legitimate translation option appears in a variety of Arabic versions for a thousand years. In 867 AD Bashir ibn al-Siri translated ‘let a woman learn in *tranquility*’ (*tata’ allim fi sukun*).²⁶ *Sukun* is a rich Arabic word that means ‘calm, tranquility, peace’.²⁷ This word brilliantly picks up the nuances of the total scene in Ephesus to which Paul was writing. As we will see below, these women had become counterproductively aggressive. The author asks them to calm down and to pursue theological instruction in tranquility.

Thirdly, they are to submit; but to what? We are not told. Yet in the context of the extended discussion of ‘sound doctrine’ with which the epistle opens, the natural assumption is that the author intends them to submit to the orthodox teachings of the Church. Paul has instructed Timothy in ‘sound doctrine’ (I Tim. 1: 10) and here a wayward part of Timothy’s parish is told to accept the authoritative nature of the theological instructions Timothy has received.

Paul continues with:

I permit no woman to teach,
or to lord it over the men,
for she is to be in quietness.

It is possible to hear this text contradicting all of the positives observed above. But Priscilla taught Apollos, and every reader of Luke 1:46-55 was instructed by Mary. The women prophets of Corinth (1 Cor 11:5) and Caesarea (Acts 21:9) edified the Church. Each section of this verse requires comment. The first line can be understood as follows:

I permit none of these theologically ignorant women (in Ephesus) to teach, because they have brought their syncretistic religious beliefs with them into the Church.

We are obliged to ask, were all of the women in Ephesus heretics? Certainly not. However Paul *cannot* expect the young Timothy to administer theological exams in the midst of a crisis! The Gordian knot must be cut or its rope will strangle all of them. Paul cuts it with ‘I permit *no* woman to teach!’ *All* of them are asked to study the faith! Is this not an appropriate ruling, given the tensions of such circumstances?

The second line of this sentence illuminates the precise situation in Ephesus. The keyword is *authenteo* (to lord it over) which appears only here in all of the NT. The noun form of this word (*authentēs*) entered the Turkish language as *effendi*, the title for the Sultan with his life and death powers over the people of his empire. It is a very strong word and can also be translated ‘to commit murder’ or ‘assert absolute sway’.²⁸ Marcus Barth translates it with the Authorised Version as ‘usurp authority’.²⁹

²⁵ Chrysostom, op. cit., p 435.

²⁶ H. Staal, ed. and tr., *Mt. Sinai Arabic Codex 151*, vol. 1, *Puline Epistles. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores Arabici Tomus 40*, A. E. Peeters, Lovanii 1983, p 185. See also: *Vatican Arabic MS. No. 13* (8th century) J. Dawud, tr., *Novum Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi, Versio Arabica*, Typis Fratrum Praedictorum, Osul, Iraq, 1899.

²⁷ H. Wehr, *A dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. M. Cowan, Cornell U. Press, Ithaca 1961, p 418.

²⁸ *L. & S.*, p 275.

²⁹ M. Barth, *Ephesians*, Anchor Bible vol. 34A, Doubleday, New York 1974, p 714, n. 406.

It is impossible to see this ruling as a general principle that everywhere governed the life of the NT Church. As a deacon/minister of the church in Cenchreae, Phoebe surely exercised *some* form of authority over men. Priscilla had theological authority over her student Apollos. The women prophets naturally carried the authority which their message gave them. Lydia is prominent in the founding of the church in Philippi. The weight which Mary the mother of Jesus carried in the Early Church is unknown, but it is impossible to imagine that she had none! Older women in middle-eastern society are generally powerful figures. Are we to imagine that the Apostles totally disregarded her views? Did the one who 'kept all things in her heart' have no opinions on any aspect of the faith and life of the Church? So what is intended here?

I would submit that the overtones of this rare, very strong word, make clear the author's meaning. In Ephesus some women had acquired absolute authority over the men in the church and were verbally (and perhaps theologically) brutalizing them. Paul calls for a halt to this dehumanizing attack. Again our centuries-long middle-eastern exegetical tradition is instructive. The Peshitta Syriac (fourth century) translates with *mamraha*. The root of this word has to do with insolence and bullying. The early Arabic versions, translated from Greek, Syriac and Coptic, read either '*yata 'amaru*' (to plot; to be domineering; to act as 'lord and master'; to be imperious³⁰) or '*yajtari*' (to be insolent). The last two centuries have preferred '*yatasallat*' (to hold absolute sway). Thus middle-eastern Christianity at least from the third century onward has always remembered that something dark and sub-Christian was involved.

As noted, the male leadership in the local temple was castrated. The author of 1 Tim. was perhaps saying to the Ephesian Christians, 'There is no place for any carry-over of these Ephesian attitudes into the fellowship of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord of women and men'. An expanded and interpreted translation of the intent of this verse might be:

I do not allow these ignorant women to batter the men. They are to stop shouting and calm down.

Two wrongs do not make a right. The great standard set in Gal. 3:28 affirms that 'in Christ ... there is no longer male and female' (NRSV). Progress towards that goal of full equality cannot be made if either gender is asserting de-humanizing power over the other. In Galatians Paul is very harsh with male heretics. Here he deals with female destroyers of the faith. It is only fair to observe that in some places in the English-speaking world today, anti-male sexism is sufficiently intense that men find themselves intimidated, with leadership opportunities denied them because they are male, and under constant hostile monitoring for any failures in rigid linguistic conformity. Biblical theology is under attack by radical feminists and in some quarters academic freedom is on the verge of being threatened. Neither gender is completely innocent of mistreating the other and if Paul's vision in Galatians is to be followed neither gender has the right to absolute control over the other. This text can be seen as relevant to a part of this collection of problems.

Verses 11-12 are as follows: 'For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.' Difficulties continue. What is meant here? This text appears to be in direct clash with Gal. 3:28 on the one hand and Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15:21-22 on the other. Gal. 3:28 (as noted) says that in Christ there is no more 'male *and* female' (NRSV). Paul is quoting Gen. 1:27 and affirming that in Christ this order is no longer relevant.³¹ Here, apparently it is significant. This is indeed a *crux interpretum*. Yet in this text Paul is angry and is surely not attempting to write a calm dispassionate essay that can be critically compared to what he wrote decades earlier in another time and to another situation.

³⁰ Wehr, op cit., p 26.

³¹ K. Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1966, passim.

Furthermore, we can observe at least one other occasion of stress where Paul affirmed opposing views on a single topic. In 1 Cor. 12:4-11 he carefully states that God gives *different* gifts to different people as *he* wills! Then, returning in ch. 14 to the subject of the spiritual gifts, and fully warmed to his subject, Paul blurts out, ‘Now I want you all to speak in tongues!’(14:5).

In this latter text it appears that all must have *one* gift (tongues) which all are free to choose as the right gift for themselves! In this second statement Paul appears to affirm the exact opposite of what he has just said in 12:4-11! However, in our middle-eastern culture people are expected to become emotional over the things they care about. When they do, they are permitted to make their point by exaggeration. No one presses the logic of these exaggerations. This rhetorical style may well be the key to 1 Cor. 12 and 14. It may also assist us with the text before us.

The second problem is as follows: In Romans Paul says, ‘Sin came into the world through one man’. The same idea appears in 1 Cor. 15:21-22 which reads, ‘by a man came death...’ But here, as in Ben Sirach (25:24), Eve is blamed for everything! If someone in the Pauline theological circle rather than Paul is the author, the problem remains. What can be said?

Chrysostom is again helpful. He makes a connection between Romans 5 and this text. He writes,

After the example of Adam’s *transgression*... so here the female sex *transgressed*, not the male. As all *men* died through one (Adam), because that one sinned, so the whole *female* race transgressed because the woman was in the transgression.³²

Building on Chrysostom’s insight, the following is a possible reconstruction of the situation in Ephesus. It is generally assumed that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians while resident in Ephesus. As noted, I Corinthians, like Romans, affirms ‘...in Adam all die.’ There can be little doubt that Paul’s second-Adam theology, set forth in 1 Cor. 15:42-50, was also proclaimed by Paul in the city of Ephesus. If any first century person was so inclined, Paul’s views set forth in Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15 *could* have been understood as *very* bad news for men. In Rom. 5:12 the reader is told ‘Sin came into the world through *one man*...’ In vv 13-19 which follow, there is a total of eight further references to that *one man’s sin*!

On the basis of these texts, it is theoretically possible to accuse Paul of harbouring bitter anti-male biases! Trespass (*parabasis*) is the key problem and one man is held responsible for *all* of it. The question is not, what did Paul mean? Rather we would ask, could anti-male women have used such ideas for their own purposes? Obviously, they could have.

Thus perhaps some theologically illiterate women in Ephesus had been exposed to Paul’s views in some form and had concluded that *men* had polluted the earth with their sin. Therefore the more innocent women must push them aside. The author of 1 Tim. may be responding by taking up the story of Genesis with a bold statement, ‘*Eve was a transgressor!*’ meaning, she *also* is to be blamed, not only Adam. Chrysostom seems to have understood our text as the other side of the coin to Paul’s first-Adam/second-Adam theology. Chrysostom’s views turn the text into a thoughtful response to what appears to have been a critical misunderstanding.

The last section of the text is as follows:

... and she will prosper (*sozo*) through bearing children if *they* continue in faith and love and holiness and good judgment.

³² Chrysostom, op. cit., p 436 (italics mine).

There are two attractive ways to understand this text. The first is to take ‘the childbearing’ as meaning one specific occurrence of childbearing, namely the birth of Jesus. In this case the text would need to be translated, ‘and she will be saved through the birth of the child.’ The intent of the text would then be:

How can these heretics teach women not to bear children when God entered history to save *through childbearing!*

However, many interpreters argue from internal evidence that here the definite article refers to childbearing in general. If this be true, there is a second possible way to understand the text.

The verb *sozo* (save?), which is at the heart of this text, has a variety of meanings. In this same chapter Paul affirms that we are *saved* (*sozo*) through Jesus Christ ‘who gave himself a ransom for all’ (2:6). The reader is told that salvation is through the cross of Christ. Are we then to understand him, ten verses later, to say, ‘Well, actually for women there is a second way to be saved, have a baby!’? This cannot be the intent of the author. A solution to this problem is available when we observe that *sozo* can refer to salvation but it can also mean ‘good health’ and occasionally has a more general sense of ‘to prosper’.³³ As noted, someone in the Church in Ephesus was teaching the women that they should not get married, and thus naturally, not have children. Paul counters with:

Childbearing is not an evil act! It is an act blessed by God. A woman can *prosper* through childbearing; if *they*, (the husband and the wife) continue in faith and love and holiness with good judgment.

The text shifts from a singular ‘she’ to a plural ‘they’. This plural is best understood to refer to the husband and wife and not to women in general. Children can be a blessing to the family. But if faith, love, holiness and good judgment (*sofrosune*)³⁴ are missing, the family will not necessarily prosper by having children.

In conclusion, when history is taken seriously, 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15 tell women to be silent when they disrupt public worship and when they teach heresy. Special problems in Corinth and Ephesus were dealt with firmly for the sake of the upbuilding of the body of Christ in those places. I submit that these admonitions can be understood to be in harmony with the clear affirmations of the presence of women as disciples, teachers, prophets, deacons, (one) apostle, along with the possibility of women elders.

In this manner all the NT texts considered can be seen as supportive of the great vision in Gal. 3:28 where ‘in Christ ... there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.’

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³³ BAGD, p 796.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p 802; cf. Acts 26:25.