

CHAPTER V BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF GODLY WOMEN

Any doctrine of women that we consider must pass several stern tests. First, it must measure up against the passages dealing with the relationship of men and women, and not just the ambiguous ones.

Second, whatever position we take on the role of women must be consistently adhered to in all passages, and we can't change interpretations depending on the course title. When we study the Fall of Man while studying Romans, we must treat the curse of Eve the same as when we teach Marriage, and the same as when we teach The Role of Women in the church. Read the literature in your Sunday School classes on these topics over the last few years, and you will find that we often change interpretations with the course title.

But third—and this may be the hardest one—we must be able to measure the interpretation against God's own application of the rule. If we insist that a rule is eternal, then we have all of history to see if God agrees. How has God dealt with women throughout time?

We must remember that God's curse on Eve (Genesis 3:16) was squarely in effect throughout the Old Testament, and even today the domination of wives by husbands continues even in some Christian homes. Thus, when we look at history, we don't expect to see men and women treated equally. Rather we expect that men will dominate women, as God said in Genesis 3. But if Genesis 3 is a curse rather than a command, we also expect there will be notable exceptions from the general rule, proving the curse to be a curse and not a law and pointing us to God's Edenic ideal.

Patriarchal Age. During the Patriarchal Age, so far as is recorded, God spoke primarily to the heads of households—who were invariably male. This is hardly surprising considering the male-dominant culture that arose after Adam and Eve left Eden. In fact, we will find that all society outside the Church has been male-dominant ever since the Fall of Man, and even the Church has been male dominated in most locations. But this fact merely proves what we already know—that following God's curse of Eve, men would dominate women.

The Mosaic Dispensation. During the age of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, there were no woman rulers. But after the Law of Moses was given, things changed.

The Law of Moses normally treats men and women exactly the same. There are some places, however, where men are preferred over women.

For example, only a man may divorce his spouse (Deut. 23:21-4), but Jesus reversed this bias (Mark 10:1-12).

In the temple, there was a Holy of Holies that could be entered by the high priest (always a man) and only on the Day of Atonement. But the writer of Hebrews tells us that these rules have been eliminated. All Christians may now enter the Holy of Holies itself (Most Holy Place, in the NIV):

(Heb 10:19-22) Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith,

having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

All Christians are able to enter the Most Holy Place, regardless of what position they would have had under the Law of Moses. Moreover, Peter teaches us that we are now *all* priests. The Church is a "holy priesthood." And so we see that even the most "sexist" rules of the Mosaic Dispensation have been reversed and eliminated in Jesus!

Miriam. Miriam, the sister of Moses, was subject to Moses, as was all Israel, and yet she was a prophetess.

(Exo. 15:20) Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing.

In fact, the Bible also calls her a "leader" of all Israel.

(Micah 6:4) I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.

Miriam was certainly lower ranking than Moses, but no distinction is made between her and Aaron. Aaron was the high priest, and while Micah subordinates the prophetess and the priest to Moses, he subordinates neither to the other.

Deborah. The Law of Moses ushered in the Period of the Judges, during which God ruled Israel through individual judges. Notable among the judges is Deborah.

(Judg. 4:4-5) Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided.

*Also translated "judging." The root word is *shaphat*, which means not only to judge, but also to lead or to exact vengeance or retribution. Judges 2:16-19 refers to all the heroes of Judges as "judges [*shaphat*] who saved them of the hands of these raiders," clearly emphasizing the role of "judges" as military leaders, rather than adjudicators. Only a few of the "judges" are referred to as actually judging disputes. Therefore, modern commentators and translators, including the NIV, often prefer to translate *shaphat* as "leader" in the book of Judges. R. K. Harrison, in *Introduction to the Old Testament* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1969), pp. 680-681, concludes, The term "judge" carried a wider meaning in antiquity than does its English counterpart. ... In this latter sense of "ruler" the Hebrew term *shaphat* corresponded the *shuphetim* or regents of Phoenicia, the Akkadian office of *shapitu*, and the *sufetes* or chief magistrates of Carthage, who were similar in status to the Roman consuls. The concept of the "judge" in Judges can thus be seen to be related to similar offices in the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean regions on the one hand, and to the situation that existed in days of Moses (cf. Exod. 18:21ff; Deut. 1:9ff) on the other. As Harrison was writing in a context far from the dispute over the role of women, his conclusions carry considerable weight.

Plainly, Deborah was literally a judge. She decided disputes, and thus had authority over men and women. Moreover, the Bible calls Deborah a prophetess and a leader. How could this be true if God has decreed for all time that women can have no authority over a man and cannot teach a man? How silent was Deborah when men were present?

Judg. 4:6-9,14 She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"

Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."

"Very well," Deborah said, "I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will hand Sisera over to a woman." ...

Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, followed by ten thousand men.

Here we see that Deborah gave orders to the general of Israel's army, and he obeyed. She was obviously the highest-ranking person in the nation. She was married, and yet God granted her a role of genuine authority and leadership over men.

To celebrate the victory won at Deborah's command, Deborah wrote the Song of Deborah with Barak, which is an inspired writing and which comprises the fifth chapter of Judges. And so we add to her accomplishments: author of a chapter of the Bible.

F. Lagard Smith argues that Deborah is an apparent exception to the universal, eternal rule of female subordination only because God could find no man in Israel to act as judge. God thus called Deborah to urge "a return to *strong* male leadership." The problem with Smith's interpretation is that nothing in the Bible indicates that God was unhappy with existing male leadership. God was unhappy that Barak refused to honor Deborah's command to attack without Deborah's going with Barak (Judges 4:8-9), and thus Deborah declared that Barak would not have the honor of the victory. But nowhere does God declare that he is displeased with male leadership in general or that Deborah was called to be a judge to teach the men a lesson. Moreover, the "evidence" that Smith relies on, the reluctance of Barak to go to battle without Deborah's presence, occurred well after Deborah was made a judge and leader—indeed, after Deborah had command over Barak. Most importantly, Barak's mistake was in failing to take orders from a woman, not in failing to give orders!

Moreover, there are numerous cases where God raised up a male leader who initially refused to take on leadership. For example, Gideon was reluctant to honor God's call to leadership (Judg. 6:11-15) if not downright cowardly. But God made Gideon into a mighty warrior. Similarly, Moses was very reluctant to honor God's call to leadership (Exo. 4:1-17), and yet God raised Moses up as the greatest of all leaders. Plainly, God can raise up male leadership when He wishes, regardless of the willingness of men to lead, and therefore God did not make Deborah a leader for lack of men to lead.

William J. Webb points out that the judge Shamgar ruled at the same time as Deborah, so that God clearly had a male judge available had He preferred a male ruler.

The Kings. Many have suggested that the fact that Israel's kings were all men indicates that women are to be subordinate to men forever. But this argument fails. First, Israel has kings at a time when the curse of Genesis 3 was in full effect. Second, God Himself opposed the establishment of kings, and thus the nature of kings (inheritance of the throne by the oldest male child) cannot be considered a part of God's eternal design.

We see from the following passage that God replaced the system of judges with male kings only grudgingly, saying that asking for kings was equivalent to rejecting God:

(1 Sam. 8:4-8) So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have." But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD.

And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you."

Clearly, the rule of Israel by judges was God's preferred method. Moreover, God individually selected each judge—even Deborah—while after David, kings were selected either by birthright or by coup.

Old Testament Prophets. While the kings of Judah were all men, during the period of monarchy God's prophets, who were called directly by God, included women.

(2 Kings 22:14-20) Hilkiyah the priest, Ahikam, Acbor, Shaphan and Asaiah went to speak to the prophetess Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the Second District.

She said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Tell the man who sent you to me,

'This is what the LORD says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the king of Judah has read. Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and provoked me to anger by all the idols their hands have made, my anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched.'

Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD. Therefore I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.'" So they took her answer back to the king.

In response to this prophecy, Josiah, king of Judah, led his nation in its last reformation before being taken into Babylonian captivity. Even the king—among the godliest of all the kings—heeded the words of Huldah the prophetess.

The Good Wife. God's vision of the ultimate women in Old Testament times is found in Proverbs 31:10-31, which describes the "good wife" in a frequently quoted passage.

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.

She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard. She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.

In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers. She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet. She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple. Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.

She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.

She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all." Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

Interestingly, the proverb states that the husband "has no lack of gain" and is known at the city gates due to his wife's industry. She is, therefore, not only a working wife, but also a wife active in community affairs. She develops a mercantile business on her own initiative and engages in very successful agricultural ventures.⁴² Moreover, "faithful instruction is on her tongue." She is a teacher. For all these things she is praised by her husband, her children, and her community.

This ideal woman has much in common with the "you can have it all" woman of today—a good marriage, children, her own businesses, and a role in the community. While she is indeed a homemaker, she is not just a homemaker. To be honest students, we must ask, why does God describe as the ideal woman a woman who is not only a homemaker, mother, and wife, but also a business woman and teacher?

References to God as Female. There are also a number of Old Testament passages where God refers to Himself as a mother: Isaiah 46:3; Isaiah 49:15; Isaiah. 66:12-13. The imagery of these passages showing God as female is minimized in some translations, such as the New International Version. The American Standard Version, for example, is more true to the original language and more plainly shows God using female images of Himself. These passages have fallen into some disrepute due to their abuse by some liberals, such as the Sophia "Goddess" cult that worships God as the goddess of wisdom. But the fact that a few have pushed these passages too far does not change the fact that God honors women by comparing Himself to the female.

Indeed, Jesus declared in Matthew 23:3,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

Thus, both God and Christ refer to themselves with female imagery. According to John T. Willis, professor of the Old Testament at Abilene Christian University,

To be sure, OT writers frequently compare God with a father ..., but God is not a sexual being. "Father" is simply one of many human figures that may appropriately be used to denote certain attributes or characteristics of God. ... There are ways in which God is like a father; there are also ways in which God is like a mother. The OT writers do not hesitate to call attention to these latter, but in doing so, they indicate their highest regard for woman.

The Gospel Prophetesses. Before the birth of Jesus, and therefore under the Mosaic Dispensation, three prophetesses were inspired by God to speak and to instruct men. The first is Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist (Luke 1:42-45). Mary, the mother of Jesus, was also inspired to praise God in response to learning that God had selected her to bear the Messiah (Luke 1:46-55).

Anna the prophetess also prophesied about Jesus, and did so in the temple courts, the most public place of worship in all Israel (Luke 2:36-37). Moreover, she testified about Jesus in the temple courts "to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). The words of all three prophetesses are preserved in scriptures as inspired speech. Anna was not only prophesying, she was teaching. Her words were the teaching of men in public.

Christian Dispensation. In the New Testament, the women are given even greater honor than the women of the Old Testament.

Jesus. Jesus said much that relates to the theme of this book, and His words will be referred to as we work through the key passages. We should note, first, that Jesus never talked down to or subordinated women. He uniformly honored women. His attitude toward women would be considered "liberated" today and it was revolutionary in the First Century. Women were a part of His inner circle. As is discussed in more detail later, the Jews in the First Century believed that it was wrong to teach women about God's law (except for the penalty for adultery!), and yet He taught women (such as Mary and Martha) even when men weren't present. He dealt with the Samaritan woman as a sinner but a significant person worthy of His time and effort. His dealing with the woman taken in adultery repudiated the hypocritical sexism of the day. After all, the man she was with was not taken out to be stoned! Just as important, Jesus never taught the subordination of women to men or even wives to husbands. Jesus never denied women the right to speak, to teach, or to exercise authority.

Less frequently observed are the compliments Jesus paid to women. The sinful woman who washed his feet with her tears "loved much" (Luke 7:47). The Canaanite woman with a demon-possessed daughter had "great faith" (Matt. 15:27). The widow who gave two very small copper coins "put more into the treasury than all the others" (Mark 12:43). On the other hand, Jesus accused the apostles themselves of being of "little faith" (Matt. 8:26). It was Peter who had to declare his love for Jesus three times after denying Jesus three times. It was a rich young ruler who refused to surrender his wealth for Jesus. It seems Jesus had an extremely high view of women.

Pentecost. Jesus' inclusion of women among his disciples begins a pattern that is reflected in the conduct of His apostles. Women disciples were with the apostles at the very beginning:

(Acts 1:12-14) Then [the apostles] returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

The text is ambiguous as to whether the women were present when the Spirit descended, but clearly Peter understood that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit were for women. He quoted the prophet Joel in his sermon that day:

(Acts 2:17-18) In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

The passage emphasizes the equal rights of men and women to the gifts of the Spirit. We know that prophecy is more than predicting the future. It includes “forthtelling” as well as “foretelling.” Thus, Joel prophesied that women would have the miraculous power to speak words of encouragement, rebuke, exhortation, and condemnation. The prophets of the Old Testament are still legendary for their ability to so vividly declare the word of God that even kings trembled, and Joel prophesied that the Messianic age would be ushered in with this gift—in women! Thus, it is not surprising that in Acts 21 we read of the four daughters of Philip the evangelist who prophesied or that in 1 Corinthians 11 we read of women prophesying in the presence of men in the assembly. Paul rebukes their failure to cover their heads, but not their prophesying.

It therefore appears probable that women were among those who received the Spirit at Pentecost. After all, the essence of Peter’s argument is that those listening to his sermon were seeing the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. And the essence of Joel’s prophecy is that the gift of prophecy will be given to women! Peter could have picked numerous other Old Testament prophecies of the Spirit arriving in the age of the Messiah, but Peter chose as his text the only passage that emphasizes women having the gift of prophecy.

Junias. Junias (Junia in the KJV), a feminine name, is described by Paul as outstanding (“of note” (KJV)) among the apostles (Rom. 16:7). Even the early church fathers⁴⁶ (hardly a “liberated” group) considered her to have had an apostolic role.⁴⁷ Certainly she was not one of the Twelve, nor must we conclude that she was of the same order as Paul, and yet her role as an “ambassador”⁴⁸ must have been quite important to earn such a title, especially from Paul, who defended his rights as an apostle vigorously. Notice that the Bible also refers to Titus (2 Cor. 8:23),⁴⁹ Andronicus (Rom. 16:7), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25),⁵⁰ James (Gal. 1:19; 1 Cor. 15:7),⁵¹ and Barnabas (Acts 14:14) as “apostles.”⁵² This is certainly a worthy group, and we must acknowledge the teaching and leadership roles of all the members of the group whom the Bible describes in any detail at all. The title must imply some role analogous to the apostles themselves.⁵³

The notion of a woman being referred to as an apostle by Paul is so foreign to many that two arguments have been offered to avoid the implication of the statement. First, many have suggested that Junias was a man, despite the plainly feminine form of the name.⁵⁴ However, all early Christian writers commenting on the passage considered Junias female, with the first suggestion that Junias was a man appearing in the late 14th Century.⁵⁵

⁴⁶ Uninspired Christian leaders from the 1st through 4th centuries, whose writings have been preserved but not as part of scripture.

⁴⁷ James Walters, “Phoebe and Junia(s),” published in Osburn, editor, *Essays on Women 1*, pages 185-190. Walters is an associate professor of New Testament at Harding University.

⁴⁸ The literal translation of the word normally translated “apostle.”

⁴⁹ The NIV translates “apostles” as “representatives.”

⁵⁰ The NIV translates “apostle” as “messenger”.

⁵¹ This James is the brother of Jesus, not the apostle, and the author of the book of James.

⁵² The translators sometimes obscure these references. Thus, the NIV does not consistently translate *apostolos* as “apostle.”

⁵³ Walters, *ibid.*

⁵⁴ In Greek, “-as” is a feminine ending.

⁵⁵ The early church considered Junias a female much longer than the early church insisted on a *cappella* singing.

Second, some suggest that “outstanding among the apostles” means “considered outstanding by the apostles,” thus avoiding the sense that Junias was an apostle. However, scholars are virtually unanimous in interpreting Paul as referring to Junias as an apostle. “This is the way the phrase was understood by all the patristic writers,⁵⁶ by most all modern commentators, and by virtually all English translations.”⁵⁷

John Chrysostom, writing in the late 4th Century, states the view of the early Christians:

*To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles—just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title apostle.*⁵⁸

Phoebe. Phoebe, a woman, is described by Paul as a deacon of the church at Cenchrea (not as a deaconess, the word being masculine).⁵⁹ Some would translate *diakonos* in this passage as “servant” rather than deacon. This issue will be taken up later when we discuss deacons in particular.

Priscilla. Priscilla (Prisca) and Aquila are a familiar pair. Contrary to the customs of the day, the wife is often mentioned first. In fact, of the Bible's six references to Priscilla, she is mentioned first four times. “Evidently, she was an outstanding person in her own right.”⁶⁰ This would occur in the First Century only if everyone, including the husband, understood that the wife held the more important or prominent position. Moreover, Priscilla is specifically referred to as having taught Apollos—a man.⁶¹

Other Women. Paul's many other references to particular women as being among his circle of evangelists and worthy of honor are too numerous to list.

Summary. We see, therefore, that men certainly held most of the leadership roles throughout biblical times. And yet the record plainly contradicts any notion that God prohibits women from leading men, having authority over men, teaching men, or speaking in the presence of men, as we have traditionally interpreted these commands. Neither the Law of Moses nor Jesus ever commanded women to be submissive to men, except in the sense that we are all to submit to one another or that wives are to be complements to their husbands. If God made an eternal law that women are forever subordinate to men, you would think that Moses or Jesus would have said so plainly.

⁵⁶ Early Christian writers.

⁵⁷ James Walters, “Phoebe’ and ‘Junia(s)’—Rom. 16:1-2,7,” in Osburn, *Essays on Woman*, at page 187.

⁵⁸ Translated by Walters, *ibid*, page 185.

⁵⁹ Romans 16:1. There was no Greek word for deaconess until many centuries later.

⁶⁰ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Wm. B. Eerdmans 1978), page 246.

⁶¹ Acts 18:26. Priscilla is mentioned first in this passage.