

The Bible's high view of women rooted in the creation account

Lita Cosner

One common accusation that is made against the Bible is that it does not give women the same status as men. Indeed, *superficial* reading of certain passages in the Mosaic Law and Paul's writings initially seems to support such a conclusion. However, a proper reading of Scripture reveals a *high* view of women which is ultimately rooted in creation, and even the controversial passages, when seen in their historical context, are in agreement with this high view.

From the very first chapter of Scripture, women are afforded a higher place than in any other ancient writing; in Genesis 1:27, women are said to be created in the image of God just as men are, yet there is a distinction between the two from the beginning. "Although male and female hold in common the same unique God-given status as image-bearers, there is an inherent distinction within the human family by virtue of their different sexual roles, and this implies that other distinctions are present."¹ In the expanded account of Day 6 in Genesis 2, the author gives a more detailed account of the creation of woman. Up until this point, when God has evaluated His creation, He declared it to be "good". However, in the first and only negative statement, He says that it is "not good" for man to be alone; he needs a "helper corresponding to him" (2:18). God essentially states that man by himself is not adequate; this highlights the high value and necessity of women in the biblical view.² Adam's joyful exclamation (2:23) at their introduction affirms Eve's ontological equality with Adam, yet the fact that he names her indicates that she is subordinate to him in some sense.³ This is important because it shows that there was a pre-Fall relational subordination, so male headship, though doubtlessly twisted and abused by the Fall, was not itself a product of the Fall.

Women and the Fall

Unfortunately, the first account of a woman's actions in the Bible is the one of the most infamous actions in all of Scripture: Eve eats the forbidden fruit and convinces Adam to do the same, resulting in sin and death for themselves and all their descendants. Non-canonical Jewish literature, like *The Apocalypse of Moses*, tends to blame Eve for the Fall, and to have a lower view of women

for this reason. However, nowhere in Scripture is Eve ultimately blamed for the Fall. Uniformly, *Adam* is blamed for the introduction of death. In this passage, the sentence of death is pronounced to Adam, not Eve. It is Adam whom Paul contrasts with Christ; he argues that Christ's action brought life for all those under him just as *Adam's*, not *Eve's*, action brought death for all those under him (Romans 5:12 ff.⁴, 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45).



Sketch by Paul Gustave Doré <www.wikipedia.com>

While non-canonical Jewish literature blames the Fall on Eve, the Bible uniformly states that Adam's sin brought sin and death on his descendants.

Women in the Old Testament

From the time of the patriarchs on, there is evidence that women were not seen as spiritually inferior to men. Rebekah enquires of the Lord about Jacob and Esau wrestling in her womb (Genesis 25:22–23), demonstrating that a woman was free to approach God without a male intercessor. Some women, such as Miriam (Exodus 15:20) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chron. 34:22) were recognized as prophetesses, and seemed to command the same level of respect as their male counterparts. With respect to female judges, Barak refuses to go to battle unless Deborah accompanies him, showing that he believes that God is with her (Judges 4). Women were able to take the Nazirite vow, which constituted taking on the highest level of sanctification possible for a non-Levite Jew, under precisely the same requirements as male Nazirites (Numbers 6). This passage “explicitly emphasizes the potential of women entering into this consecration service to Yahweh. Women could not serve as priests in the Israelite cultus, but this manner of service was open to them and could fulfill their desire for holiness and special service to the Lord.”⁵

Most of the complaints about patriarchy in the Bible come from the Mosaic Law. However, in many ways this was a significant advance for women in the ancient world compared to other law codes. In cases of adultery, *both* the male and the female were to be executed (Leviticus 20:10); in other ancient law codes, only the woman was punished. Where there are differences in the law for men and women, it is beneficial for the woman: for instance, a woman who made a rash vow was excused if her father or husband (depending on her marital status) would not allow her to follow through with it (Numbers 30); there was no such exception for men.



Illustration by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

The Gospels record that women were the first witnesses to the Resurrection.

The Purity Laws

There are two instances where the Jewish purity laws are considered by some to be especially misogynistic, those concerning uncleanness related to a woman’s menstrual cycle (Lev. 15:19–24), and those relating to childbirth (Lev. 12). These will be examined separately.

The form of uncleanness incurred by menstruation seems to be less serious than other uncleanness; someone who touches a menstruating woman is unclean until evening, but does not have to wash, as with other forms of uncleanness. Hartley points out that this law is not discriminatory against women because both men and women are made unclean when they have discharges; women are unclean for a longer period simply because their menstrual cycles last longer than a man’s seminal emission. This could even be beneficial for the woman, as her husband is prohibited from sexual intercourse with her during a time when it would be more uncomfortable for her.⁶

A woman who gave birth to a daughter incurred both the more severe and the less severe uncleanness for twice as long; the total period of uncleanness after the birth of a son was forty days, compared to eighty days for a daughter. The reason for the differing length of uncleanness is unknown; however, this is not a reflection on the comparative worth of sons and daughters: greater periods of uncleanness was not an indication of lesser social value. Indeed, the Holy Scriptures themselves were regarded as books that “defiled the hands” precisely *because* they were holy, as shown in the rabbinical literature:

“The Sadducees say, we cry out against you, O you Pharisees, for you say, ‘the Holy Scriptures render the hands impure,’ [and] ‘the writings of Hamiram do not render the hands impure.’ Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai said, Have we naught against the Pharisees save this! For lo, they say, ‘the bones of an ass are pure, and the bones of Yohanan the high priest are impure.’ They say to him, As is our love for them, so is their impurity—that no man make spoons of the bones of his father or mother. He said to them, Even so the Holy Scriptures: As is our love for them, so is their impurity; the writings of Hamiram which are held in no account do not render the hands impure.”⁷

It is notable that the sacrifices for a male and female child were the same; this is one way of affirming the equal worth of sons and daughters in God’s sight.⁸ In any case, ritual uncleanness was never seen to be sinful even in the rabbinic literature; it was unavoidable for the average Jew. And since ritual cleanness only affected one’s ability to participate in Temple worship and the feasts (with the exception of Passover), it is doubtful how much ritual uncleanness would affect one’s day-to-day life.

Other laws were for women’s benefit as well. A woman who was raped was provided for by forcing the

man who raped her to support her for the rest of her life (Genesis 22:28–9). Even the women of conquered people had to be treated with dignity. Jewish daughters could even inherit property when there were no sons (Numbers 27, 36).

Many women are portrayed positively in Scripture. The Hebrew midwives who spared the Hebrew male children were blessed by God with their own families (Exodus 1:15–21). Rahab is portrayed positively for hiding the Hebrew spies (Numbers 6, Hebrews 11:31, James 2:25), and ultimately became absorbed into the Jewish people and was an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Ruth is a model of loyalty and faithfulness who became the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:17), and thus another ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Esther’s obedience to her cousin Mordecai led to the deliverance of the Diaspora Jews in Persia. Wisdom is personified as a woman in Proverbs, and it would be hard to find more glowing praise of a woman in ancient literature than Proverbs 31.

Women are never caricatured as evil in the Bible, in contrast to some of the rabbinic literature. Some individual women such as Jezebel and Delilah are portrayed as evil, but this is never turned into a generalization of women’s inherent nature. There are also many evil men portrayed in Scripture as well as women, so this cannot be used as proof of an anti-female agenda in Scripture.

It is ironic in light of the charges of patriarchy in Judaism to consider that it was easier for a female Gentile to convert to Judaism; the circumcision requirement for men meant that women were more likely to convert fully, while men often opted to become “God-fearers”, those who worshipped the true God without fully converting to Judaism.

Women in the New Testament

Judaism is perhaps surpassed only by Christianity in its high view of women. Many New Testament women are portrayed positively; Mary the mother of Jesus is portrayed willing to believe God and to be the mother of the Messiah, even though she could be divorced, publicly humiliated, and even stoned for becoming pregnant before marriage (Matthew 1; Luke 1). Women made up a large part of Jesus’ following, and Jesus was probably financed by wealthy women such as Mary Magdalene; the Bible refers to “many women” being among His followers and caring for His needs (Matthew 27:55), though only men were chosen to be apostles. It is noteworthy that women were the first witnesses of the Resurrection, because by the time of Jesus the Jewish culture had so strayed from a Scriptural mindset that women were generally considered to be less reliable witnesses than men; their testimony was not considered to be valid in a court of law.

Some people admit that Jesus Himself had a high view of women, but allege that his followers corrupted His message and relegated women to “second-class” in

the Church. But this does not take into account that the above positive portrayals of women in the context of Jesus’ ministry were recorded and preserved by those in the very Church they accuse of being misogynistic. And it is clear that women held important positions in the early church; Priscilla (also called Prisca) was active in ministry as a partner to her husband, Aquila, and is even listed first in most mentions of the couple, indicating that she may have been the more prominent of the two in certain contexts (Acts 18, Romans 16:3, 1 Cor. 16:19, 2 Tim. 4:19). Phoebe was probably the letter carrier for Romans (16:1). Women were allowed to pray and prophesy in meetings of the early church; Paul lays down rules for how women are to pray and prophesy, namely that they do so with their head covered, but does not prohibit it (1 Cor. 11:1–16).

Paul is often called a “misogynist” because of his commands that a woman not teach or have authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12). But this is simply an instance of Paul affirming that in the created order, men and women are different, and have different roles in worship. The role of men is to teach, and the role of women is to learn in submission. But, again, Paul is not saying that the teacher is ontologically superior to the women learning from him. Paul only prohibits women from teaching men in the church; they are encouraged to teach other women and their children, including their sons (2 Timothy 1:5, 3:14–5).⁹ The word ἀὐθεντεῖν (*authenthein*) in 1 Timothy 2:12 is a New Testament *hapax legomenon* which only occurs a few times in secular Greek literature. Some claim that this has a negative connotation, unlike the neutral term ἐξουσιάζω (*exousiazō*) which can be positive or negative based on the context. All the same, Moo argues that *authenthein* means simply “exercise authority”, in the neutral sense of “have dominion over”, not the negative sense of “lord it over”.¹⁰ This was based on the meanings of the word in the times closest to Paul’s writings,^{11,12} and it was overwhelmingly the case in Patristic writings.¹³ Moo also argues that Paul used *exousiazō* only three times so it was hardly in his usual vocabulary.

Note also, Paul doesn’t ground his teaching on cultural factors but on a straightforward understanding of the Genesis creation account. I.e. Paul accepts Adam and Eve as real people, and even affirms the facts that Adam was created first (Genesis 2) and that Eve was deceived while Adam was not (but sinned anyway, Genesis 3).

1 Corinthians 14:34–35, “The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church,” must be seen in the light of its context. Three chapters earlier Paul did not condemn the practice of women prophesying in church, meaning that they *were* allowed to speak in church in some contexts. And in 1 Corinthians 14 he is talking about *order*

in the church. Carson argues that Paul is prohibiting women from participating in the oral evaluation of prophecies; though they were allowed to prophesy themselves, they were to remain silent when prophecies were weighed.¹⁴

Do differing roles inherently devalue women?

Few would disagree with the assertion that the Bible does prescribe different roles for men and women (the debate usually centers on whether those differences are based in cultural or universal commands). Some would argue that any difference in roles is demeaning to women, and that the Bible devalues women because women are not allowed to do everything that men are allowed to do. But one could argue that by affirming the *goodness* of the inherent differences between the sexes, the biblical worldview is more *pro-woman*, whereas the feminist view actually *devalues* women by devaluing or ignoring innate differences between women and men. To the feminists, women and men are interchangeable (except that men are bad!); to the Christian, they are both indispensable.

Christians have always affirmed that it is possible for individuals to submit to others without implying an ontological inferiority. Jesus, God the Son, submitted to the Father (Luke 22:42); and no orthodox Christian would claim that Jesus was less God than the Father because of it (Phil. 2:6, John 10:30). Indeed, Christ submitted to His mother and stepfather (Luke 2:51), although He was infinitely *superior*. In the same way, the command for wives to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22 ff.) does not dehumanize women, especially as the husbands are then commanded to love their wives as sacrificially as Christ loved the Church.

The relational maleness of God

Some feminist scholars claim that even the idea of a male God is demeaning to women. They argue that women cannot be fully in God's image if God is in any meaningful sense male and not female. Some go so far as to advocate throwing out male imagery and names for God altogether, instead adopting female imagery and names. There are bizarre examples of Bible translations like Oxford's *New Inclusive Translation* which calls Jesus "The Human One" instead of His self-designation "Son of Man" and calls the Father "Father-Mother".¹⁵

Christians believe that it is only possible to know the information about God that He reveals to us Himself through Scripture. Of course, God is Spirit (John 4:24), so is biologically neither male nor female, and He does not have a sexual nature. Rita Gross objects: "If we do not mean that God is male when we use masculine pronouns and imagery, then why should there be any objections to using female imagery and pronouns as well."¹⁶ The simple answer is that God is described in male terms because that best describes how God relates to His creation; God has



Illustration from <www.wikipedia.com>

While feminist theologians attribute female names and attributes to the Godhead, these are blatantly unbiblical.

revealed Himself to humanity in male terms. God became incarnate as a man, not a woman.

Identifying God in female terms leads to a fundamental change in how God is viewed:

"He is no longer Lord over the world, but a mother birthing it. He is no longer king over his realm, but the world is actually part of his (her?) body. It seems that the evangelicals who wish to simply add mother to the list of names for God in the Scriptures, have no way of preventing this kind of revision of the way in which God relates to the world. Once the authority of scripture is given up with regard to the name (mother), there is no authority to which they may appeal to argue against the natural revisions of the God-world relationship associated with feminine language."¹⁷

The Bible is clear about the "otherness" of God; the creation narrative in Genesis clearly illustrates that God existed before the creation and is completely separate from it. Those who identify God in female terms have no way to prevent this fundamental change in the view of God where the creation becomes part of God (*pantheism*), and thus in some way humanity becomes divine in this view as well.

Does the Bible use female imagery for God?

Some feminist theologians and writers claim that Scripture contains feminine or maternal imagery as well as masculine imagery. Some of this is simply linguistic gender; both Hebrew and Greek, like French and Spanish, use gender for nouns. The words for “spirit” (רוּחַ *rûach*) and wisdom (חֵכֶם *chokmāh*) take the feminine gender in Hebrew. But this does not make them intrinsically feminine any more than truth or sin, both of which take the feminine article in Greek (ἀλήθεια (*alētheia*) and ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*)).¹⁸ Furthermore, when *ruach* is used for the Spirit of God, it is always combined with the masculine *Elohim* and takes on its masculine characteristics. E.g. in 1 Kings 22:24: ‘Which way did the Spirit of the Lord go ...?’, the word *rûach* takes the masculine verb אָבַר *‘ābar*: “went”.¹⁹

Another type of instance that is claimed as evidence of God being described in feminine terms is in similes and metaphors. But similes and metaphors always are comparing attributes of one thing with attributes of another they never mean that one thing is literally the other thing. When God is called a “rock” in Deuteronomy 32:4, it is nonsensical to ask, “Granite or limestone?” because it is correctly understood to be non-literal. The same principle applies a few verses later when God is compared to an eagle who protects its young (32:11). It is ridiculous to infer from the imagery that God is female; it would be just as justified in the context to assume that this verse teaches that God has feathers and wings! This is not even simply a question of bad hermeneutics (which it is), but of poor basic reading comprehension, whether intentional or not, on the part of these scholars.

Male imagery referring to God

The male imagery used to depict God is fundamentally different from the female similes found in Scripture. God may be *like* a mother in certain aspects, but He *is* Father; Jesus prayed to Him as Father and taught His disciples to do the same (Matt 6:9). The Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, became incarnate as a man, not a woman, and Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit with the pronoun “He” (John 14:16–17). These are not similes or metaphors, but teaching regarding the very nature of God and how He relates to His creation, and how the members of the Godhead relate to each other.

Was male imagery and incarnation a concession to a patriarchal culture?

Some scholars admit that the Bible depicts God in male terms, but argue that it was simply because the patriarchal culture would not accept a female God. Some go so far as to argue that the only reason that Jesus couldn’t have been a female is because the culture was not ready for a female Messiah. However, much of this so-called patriarchy is contained in the Mosaic Law, which God gave to Israel!

God could have revealed Himself in female terms if it were an accurate portrayal of His nature, and He could have prepared the culture for a female Messiah. On a similar note, it is also claimed that the only reason Jesus had to be male was that a female would not be accepted as a teacher in first century Palestine. It is not even clear if the culture was as patriarchal as is claimed; many ancient cultures worshipped goddesses (see, e.g. Acts 19:27–28) and Paul even had to straighten out the Corinthians about women’s proper place in church services (1 Corinthians 14:33–38).

This objection is absurd even on the face of it—the Prophets and Jesus themselves frequently *challenged* the culture of their day, where it didn’t match God’s standards. Indeed, humanly speaking, Jesus’ enemies wouldn’t have bothered to crucify Him if he had not been a staunch critic of much of the culture.

Some go so far as to claim that Jesus was either genetically or psychologically female; since Jesus did not have a human father, the argument goes, all His genetic material came from Mary. They argue that since Mary did not have a Y chromosome, Jesus must have been genetically female, though male in appearance. But it should be obvious that the God who created the universe surely would have no problem in creating a Y chromosome.

Is it anti-female to refer to God with male pronouns?

A truly biblical understanding of God is far from anti-female, because both male and female are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–28). Some imagery used in the Bible may even be easier for females to understand and relate to; e.g. the Church as the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22–33, Revelation 21:9, 17).

The issue is: *who defines how we relate to God: us or God?* If we refer to humans by the names, and even with the pronouns, that they wish to be known by, it seems to be common courtesy to do the same for God. If God reveals Himself as Father, King, Lord, etc, it seems obscene to insist on calling Him Mother, Goddess, etc. As Michael Bott argued, “respecting the requested manner of address is good manners at least. So we call God our ‘Father’ because to do otherwise is simply rude.”²⁰ Furthermore, in the Bible naming someone or something symbolized authority over that person.

Does secularism have anything better to offer?

Early Christianity and ancient Judaism before it were both light-years ahead of their cultures regarding the treatment of women. On the other hand; secularists have been shown to be anti-female. Many evolutionists, including Darwin, have argued that women are inferior to men,²¹ since the weaker men are eliminated by war and other things, but weaker women are not eliminated by such forces—instead, men protect weak women. Thus the male

population is worked on by natural selection where only the strongest survive, but the women who men find attractive, not necessarily the strongest or most “fit”, reproduce. One evolutionist even argued that females were closer to animals than to males. Indeed, sexual equality would be totally unexpected under consistent evolutionary theory, since males and females throughout the biosphere experienced different selective pressures. We see the fruits of this with the widespread abortion of baby girls.²²

Conclusion

Far from being repressive for women, the biblical worldview is better for women than its secular counterpart, because it recognizes and celebrates the innate differences between men and women while affirming the ontological equality of men and women as created in God’s image. This positive view of women is seen throughout Scripture. That Christians with a biblical view of God insist on calling Him by the male names He has given Himself in no way reflects negatively on the biblical view of women, because both men and women are created in the image of God. Because of this, Christians are commanded to treat both men and women with proper dignity and respect. Replacing biblical language for God with unbiblical female names and terminology does not elevate women, but is an attempt to redefine God Himself. The same hermeneutic that allows exegetes to replace “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” with “Mother, Daughter, and Life-bearing Womb” would also free humans to reinterpret any part of Scripture to fit with the spirit of the age—including the many parts of the Bible which are explicitly pro-female! If we are free to redefine even one word of Scripture, not one word of it is unchangeable.

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