

## Chapter 4. Marriage and Family

In 2012, a well-known and respected Hebrew Bible scholar, then teaching at Emanuel Christian Seminary in Tennessee, published a piece in the *Huffington Post* entitled “The Marginalization of Women: A Biblical Value We Don’t Like to Talk About.”<sup>1</sup> He had no difficulty citing examples from both Testaments to support his case. A notable example is found in the Ten Commandments. The tenth commandment reads: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male slave, his female slave, his ox, his donkey, or anything which belongs to your neighbor” (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21). Here the wife is apparently classified as her husband’s property and she’s listed with the slaves and work animals.<sup>2</sup> Many scholars would say that he was belaboring the obvious. Nonetheless, and even though he was a tenured professor, the author was told that he was alienating donors and that he should find employment elsewhere, which, happily, he did.<sup>3</sup>

The following year, Carol L. Meyers, a distinguished feminist scholar of the Hebrew Bible, gave the annual presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature.<sup>4</sup> She addressed the question “Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?” and answered in the negative: “the term ‘patriarchy’ is an inadequate and misleading designation of the social reality of ancient Israel.”<sup>5</sup> Meyers was not responding to the piece in the *Huffington Post*, and her concern was with the implications of the specific term “patriarchy.” She is clear that she is not suggesting that there was gender neutrality in ancient Israel, and she does not dispute that female sexuality is subjected to male control in the Bible, as also in many traditional societies. Nonetheless, she

paints a very different picture of the portrayal of women, both in the Bible and in ancient Israel as we know it from archeology. She insists that “male control of female sexuality does not mean male control of adult women in every aspect of household or community life. In short, male dominance is real; but it was fragmentary, not hegemonic.”<sup>6</sup> Wives are not, in fact, placed on the same level as slaves and cattle, regardless of the formulation in the Decalogue.

There is some truth on both sides of this debate. The sweeping condemnation of the marginalization of women is oversimplified, and disregards the nuances of the ancient evidence. Nonetheless, it has a clear biblical basis, and is no more oversimplified than the way the Bible is generally perceived in popular culture.

### *Feminist biblical scholarship*

Of all the developments that roiled the field of biblical studies in the last third of the twentieth century, none has been more fundamental than feminist scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Prior to this development, few people saw a problem with the androcentric perspective of the biblical text, typified in the use of the masculine *adam*, “man,” as the designation for humanity in general. The pioneers of feminist biblical scholarship, such as Phyllis Trible for the Hebrew Bible and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza for the New Testament, must be credited with removing scales from the eyes of their readers.<sup>8</sup> What they revealed was not a pretty picture. At the least, the Bible as traditionally interpreted seldom takes account of female perspectives, and is often guilty of sexism. For interpreters with religious commitments, whether Jewish or Christians, this new perspective on the Bible was problematic.

Interpreters have adopted various apologetic strategies to deal with this problematic perspective. Phyllis Trible, in an early formulation, claimed that “the intentionality of biblical faith, as distinguished from a general description of biblical religion, is neither to create nor to perpetuate patriarchy but rather to function as salvation for both women and men . . . the hermeneutical challenge is to translate biblical faith without sexism.”<sup>9</sup> But the attempt to salvage a pure grain of biblical faith from the husk of cultural context is problematic, and presupposes a commitment to vindicate the biblical text, appearances notwithstanding. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, unlike Trible, read the Bible in its ancient Near Eastern context, but argued that the Bible has a “gender-free” concept of humanity: “the Hebrew Bible, unlike other ancient literature, does not present any ideas about women as the ‘Other.’ The role of woman is clearly subordinate, but the Hebrew Bible does not ‘explain’ or justify this subordination by portraying women as different or inferior.”<sup>10</sup> But the “gender-free” concept of humanity does not extend beyond the first chapter of Genesis, and requires that we read that chapter in isolation from the rest of the Priestly source. Carol Meyers moved in a different direction.<sup>11</sup> The biblical text is admittedly androcentric, but the social reality was more complex. Women had their own spheres of power and influence.

All of these approaches might be dubbed “hermeneutics of recuperation,” in driven by a clear theological impulse aimed at the redemption of traditions which seem to others to be utterly incompatible with feminist interests.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the approach of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza may be characterized as a “hermeneutic of suspicion.”<sup>13</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza is willing to reject the authority of texts she sees as promoting oppression, but she also engages in the retrieval of tradition. Her most influential book, *In Memory of Her*, is

subtitled *A Feminist Theological Reconstruction*, and seeks to reconstruct the early Jesus movement as a resource for feminism.<sup>14</sup> She is not interested in producing an objective history. “My question, she writes, “was not ‘did it actually happen?’ but do we still have sufficient information and source texts to tell the story of the movement carrying Jesus’ name *otherwise*, envisioning it as that of a discipleship of equals?”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, she argues: “If one cannot prove that wo/men were not members of this group and did not participate in shaping the earliest Jesus traditions, one needs to give the benefit of the doubt to the textual traces suggesting that they did.”<sup>16</sup>

All of these scholars have contributed greatly to our understanding of the Biblical texts, but like most people who have engaged questions relating to gender in the Bible, they have been engaged, in their different ways, in a work of advocacy. My objective here is different. It is simply to assess, as dispassionately as possible, what may reasonably be inferred from the biblical text, whether it supports our modern agendas or not. Fiorenza calls for an “ethics of accountability” that takes responsibility for “the ethical consequences of the biblical text and its meanings.”<sup>17</sup> But an ethically responsible reading must first of all be clear on what meanings are actually supported by the text. It is not ethically responsible to claim that the Bible condemned slavery, when it manifestly did not. If we find a particular biblical position reprehensible, the ethically responsible course is to say so, not to give the benefit of the doubt to whatever positions we find congenial.

### *Adam and Eve*

The story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3 has had inordinate influence on perceptions of the biblical view of women, both in antiquity and in modern

times. Remarkably, we find no reference to it in the Hebrew Bible, but it enters the discussion in the period between the Testaments, and looms large in the New Testament.

Several points in the story bear on the role of women. One of the oldest arguments for the subordination of women, found already in the New Testament, in 1 Tim 2:13, is that “Adam was formed first, then Eve.” It has been argued that before the creation of Eve Adam was undifferentiated, neither male nor female.<sup>18</sup> There is a certain logic to this argument, but it is undercut by the fact that the same word is used for the male before and after the creation of Eve. It is “the man” (*ha-adam*) who acknowledges Eve as “flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone” in Gen 2:23. The fact that she is taken from Adam’s body (rib) also accords priority to Adam, even reversing the order of nature in the process.<sup>19</sup> This reversal does not in itself imply the subjection of women in any severe sense, but it establishes a pecking order nonetheless.

The reason for the creation of the woman in the first place is that “it is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2:18). God proposes to create for him, “a helpmate corresponding to him.” The animals do not qualify. The woman finally fits the bill, and the two become one flesh. The implications for male-female relations are ambiguous. On the one hand, the story suggests that the woman was created to meet a need on the part of the man. A helper is not necessarily inferior to the one being helped, but *qua* helper he or she is taking a subordinate or secondary position, while the goals of the person being helped remain primary.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the emphasis is on companionship and partnership. Again, the story does not suggest repression, but it nonetheless gives precedence to the male.

The only passage in Genesis 2-3 that clearly subordinates the woman to the man is found in Gen 3:16, when God discovers that Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit:

To the woman he said:

I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;

In pain you shall bring forth children,

Yet your desire shall be for your husband

And he shall rule over you.

This pronouncement has the character of a punishment. The snake is condemned to crawl on its belly and eat dust. The man is to eat his bread by the sweat of his brow. Life will be hard, because humanity grasped for more than it was given. The story places the blame for this on humanity. It is concerned to acquit the creator of responsibility for all the suffering and misery of life.<sup>21</sup>

The ethos of this story is antithetical to that of the modern world, where we are taught to reach for the stars and challenge every limit. The ancient world was not geared towards progress, but tended to accept the limits of life as inevitable. (Compare Greek tragedy, where the sin that leads to downfall is *hybris*, the attempt to rise above one's station). The punishments of Genesis 3 are simply a description of life as the author saw it. (Snakes do not actually eat dust, but that was the common perception). No one in the modern world would conclude that men should not find alternatives to physical labor, or indeed that women should not try to mitigate the pain of childbirth. In short, the meaning of the passage cited above is quite clear; what is not so clear is its force. Should it be taken as prescriptive, or just as descriptive?

In Genesis, Adam and Eve are both responsible for the act of disobedience. If either bears greater responsibility, it is Adam, insofar as he seems to hold primacy, and in fact the act becomes known traditionally as “the sin of Adam.” Nonetheless, we read in the book of Ben Sira (early second century BCE): “from a woman sin had its beginning and because of her we all die.”<sup>22</sup> Even more egregiously, 1 Tim 2:14 claims: “Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” Such claims cannot be justified by exegesis of Genesis. Adam may not have been deceived *by the snake*, but he was deceived by Eve, and was just as much a transgressor as she was. At this point, the text seems to be subordinated to the cultural prejudices of a later era.

### *Women in the Hebrew Bible*

There is a wide spectrum of material relating to women in the Hebrew Bible, too wide to review here in any detail.<sup>23</sup> There is much that seems problematic from a modern viewpoint, although it may have been readily accepted in the ancient world.<sup>24</sup> Women did not inherit, unless there were no sons, but in that case the inheritance passed to the daughters (Numbers 27). A woman’s religious vows could be nullified by her father or her husband (Num 30:3-15). Polygamy was accepted down to the common era, although it is rarely attested in the postexilic era (roughly, after 500 BCE). Adultery was understood as having relations with the wife of another man. Both parties were liable to death (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22), but Proverbs 6:29-35 suggests that the aggrieved husband had some discretion in the matter: the man who commits adultery “will get wounds and dishonor, and his disgrace will not be wiped away. For jealousy arouses a husband’s fury, and he shows no restraint

when he takes revenge. He will accept no compensation and refuses a bribe no matter how great.” According to Deuteronomy, a woman who was found not to be a virgin when she married, was to be stoned (Deut 22:20-21). If a man accused his bride of not being a virgin, he was to be fined 100 shekels (which went to the woman’s father), but she would remain his wife and he could not divorce her (Deut 22:13-19). If a man lay with a woman who was engaged to be married to another man, both were liable to death, but if it happened in the open country where she could not cry for help, only the man was liable. If a man raped a virgin who was not engaged, he was to pay 50 shekels to the young woman’s father, and marry her. He could not then divorce her (Deut 22:28-9). According to Exodus 22:17, the father could refuse to give the young woman to her rapist, but the rapist still had to pay the bride-price.

The laws about marriage have a clear economic aspect.<sup>25</sup> The “bride-price” or *mohar* is a sum of money paid by the groom to the family of the bride.<sup>26</sup> While biblical law never stipulates such a payment for normal marriage, the references in the discussion of rape and seduction show that it was customary. The term occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible, the passage in Exodus 22 to which we have just referred, Gen 34:12 (in the aftermath of the rape of Dinah, when Hamor, the rapist, offers to pay any *mohar* her family should demand), and 1 Sam 18:25, where Saul demands of David a *mohar* of 100 Philistine foreskins, for the hand of his daughter Michal). The amount could vary, depending on social status. While this payment may give the impression that marriage was a purchase, the reality was more complex, and anthropologists prefer to speak of “bridewealth.”<sup>27</sup> Such payments are known in many traditional societies. In part, they compensated the father for transferring control of the young woman to her husband. In the later period,



they served as a deterrent to divorce, since the payment would be forfeited. In the postexilic period, the main marriage payment was the dowry, the money that the bride brought with her into the marriage, and which remained her property. In marriage contracts from the fifth century BCE, from a garrison of Judean mercenaries in the south of Egypt, it appears that the *mohar* was added to the dowry. Eventually, the *mohar* became a promissory note, payable only in the event of divorce. Both the *mohar* and the dowry then provided security for the wife in the case of divorce.<sup>28</sup> It should be borne in mind that even the law requiring a rapist to marry his victim was designed for the economic protection of the woman, who would probably not find another husband, since she was “damaged goods.”

It should also be borne in mind that the laws do not necessarily reflect actual practice. Exceptions could certainly be made. The story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 provides a nice example. Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah, had been widowed. Her brother-in-law, Onan, was supposed to raise up offspring for his brother, but instead spilled his seed on the ground. He was then put to death by the Lord (by method unspecified). Judah hesitated to give her to his third son, Shelah, lest he die also. So Tamar took matters into her own hands, dressed as a prostitute and waited for Judah at a sheep-shearing. Subsequently she became pregnant. Judah, in righteous anger, ordered that she be brought out and burned. But she had taken tokens from him, which she produced to show that he was the father. At that point, the execution was called off, and Judah admitted that she was more righteous than he was. In the New Testament, too, Jesus famously intervenes to save a woman taken in adultery, in John 8. Even when laws are severe, people find a *modus vivendi*.

## *Divorce*

The right of a man to divorce his wife is simply taken for granted in the Hebrew Bible. The classic passage is found in Deuteronomy 24:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him, because he finds something objectionable about her, so he writes a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man hates her . . .

The point in this passage is that the first husband may not take her back, once she has been married to another man. There is no discussion of the permissibility of divorce. That is just assumed. The grounds cited for divorce in this hypothetical case are notoriously vague. The phrase "something objectionable" (*erwat davar*) means some improper or indecent behavior, but it was open to diverse interpretations. It was invoked in a famous debate between the rabbis Hillel and Shammai in the first century BCE. The Shammaites tried to restrict the grounds for divorce to cases of unchastity, but the school of Hillel ruled that divorce was permitted "even if she ruined a dish for him." Rabbi Akiba went further: "Even if he found another fairer than her" (m. Git. 9-10).

The word "hate" (*sane'*) which is used in Deuteronomy 24 in connection with the second husband who divorces the woman is simply a technical term for divorce, and should be translated "repudiate" rather than "dislike. To say "I hate my wife/husband" serves as a formula of divorce.

In Biblical law, women are not allowed to initiate divorce. That right is taken for granted, however, in the papyri from the Judean colony at Elephantine in Egypt, from the fifth century BCE.<sup>29</sup> Josephus mentions two

cases where women in the Herodian household initiated divorce, but the practice of a royal house may have been exceptional, and indeed Josephus comments that the divorces were “not in accordance with Jewish law.”<sup>30</sup> Josephus also says that his first wife left him, when he followed Vespasian to Rome.<sup>31</sup> He was divorced a second time on his own initiative.<sup>32</sup> The evidence of the papyri from the Judean desert, from the early second century CE, is ambiguous and disputed.<sup>33</sup>

Only one prophet in the Hebrew Bible raised his voice against divorce. This was Malachi, an anonymous prophet from the Persian period. (“Malachi” means “my messenger.” The name is taken from Mal 3:1, which says: “behold I will send my messenger”). The passage addressing divorce, Mal 2:14-16 is unfortunately corrupt. It begins by denouncing people who have been unfaithful to the wives of their youths. Mal 2:16 is usually translated “I hate divorce, and covering one’s garment with violence.” The word “hate,” however, is actually a term for divorce. The verse should probably be translated “for one divorces and sends away, and covers his garment with violence.”<sup>34</sup> Even so, it is clear that Malachi disapproves of divorce, which no doubt imposed hardship on the women who were sent away.

Malachi’s protest against divorce was exceptional in the Hebrew Bible. Some of the Greek translators read the line “but if you hate, send away!” a reading that conforms to the general acceptance of divorce but makes little sense in the context.<sup>35</sup> Most probably, the translator could not believe that a prophet would condemn divorce.

Malachi’s objection to divorce may have been based on Gen 2:24, where man and wife are said to become one flesh. (Mal 2:15 says elliptically: “did he

not make one, flesh and spirit in it”). If so, this was the first instance in the biblical tradition where Genesis was invoked against the practice of divorce. Another example of this is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, in the *Damascus Document* (CD) a sectarian rule book from the first century BCE. This text denounces those who are “caught in fornication by taking two wives in their lifetime, whereas the principle of creation is, male and female he created them” (CD 4:20-5:2). In that case, the objection is not to divorce, which was accepted in the *Damascus Document*, but to remarriage. Such an objection was highly unusual in Jewish tradition, since remarriage was often thought to be the whole reason for divorce, but it reflects the unusually strict interpretation of the Torah characteristic of the sectarians of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

#### *An androcentric perspective*

Even if the Hebrew Bible is not consistently patriarchal in a technical sense, it is consistently androcentric. Women are sometimes viewed positively. There are a few, though exceptional, female leaders such as Deborah in the Book of Judges. Proverbs 31 contains a remarkable paean to the “capable wife.” But even there, the woman is praised because of the honor she brings to her husband, while he sits in the city gate. Women had their place in Israelite and Judean society, but it was a place tightly circumscribed by the men in their lives.

Ben Sira, whose book is in the Roman Catholic Old Testament and Protestant Apocrypha, although it is not found in the Hebrew Bible, sums up the obstacles that confronted young women, at least from a father’s perspective:

A daughter is a secret anxiety to her father,

and worry over her robs him of sleep;  
 When she is young, for fear she may not marry, or if married, for fear she  
 may be repudiated;  
 While a virgin, for fear she may be seduced  
 And become pregnant in her father's house,  
 Or having a husband, for fear she may go astray,  
 Or though married, for fear she may be barren (Sir 42:9-10).

We may assume that Ben Sira was genuinely concerned for his daughters, but he does not seem to have placed much trust in them, or indeed to allow them much agency. He engages in a bitter tirade against the "headstrong daughter," in Sir 26:10-12, which borders on the obscene, although he balances it with praise of the good wife, again from an androcentric perspective: "a silent wife is a gift from the Lord."<sup>36</sup>

To say that the Hebrew Bible is androcentric, and greatly concerned with controlling women's sexuality, is not to say that it is misogynistic. Only a few passages raise concerns in this regard. The comment of Qoheleth, "I have found more bitter than death the woman who is a trap . . . one who pleases God escapes her," (Qoh 7:26) does not necessarily apply to all women. His further comment: "one man in a thousand I have found, but a woman among these I have not found," is surely an atypical jaundiced view of a disillusioned individual.

The most troubling passages with regard to misogyny are found in the prophets, who sometimes compare Israel, or Jerusalem, to an adulterous woman. The prophet Hosea, who lived in the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE compared the covenant between YHWH and Israel to a marriage, in which Israel had been unfaithful, because of "whoring after other

gods.” Consequently, YHWH would divorce Israel, but also threatens that if she does not desist he will “strip her naked and expose her as in the day she was born” (Hos 2:3), and “uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers” (2:10).<sup>37</sup> Ezekiel is more extreme:

I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring blood upon you in wrath and jealousy . . . they shall strip you of your clothes and take your beautiful objects and leave you naked and bare. They shall bring up a mob against you, and they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords. They shall burn your houses and execute judgments on you in the sight of many women (Ezek 16: 38-41).

Both of these passages are metaphorical. Neither prophet is inciting violence against actual women. But the force of the metaphor depends on the credibility of the literal meaning. Readers are expected to agree that this is an appropriate way to deal with an adulterous woman, at least in principle. If God treats his unfaithful wife this way, would it not be appropriate for a human husband to do likewise? Accordingly, some feminist scholars refer to such passages as “prophetic pornography.”<sup>38</sup>

These metaphorical passages are not representative of the view of women in the Hebrew Bible as a whole, and they were never meant to be prescriptive for the treatment of women. Nonetheless, they provide language that lends itself to support abusive views of women. At the least, it is language that has to be handled with care.

### **The New Testament**

Family concerns have a central place in the Hebrew Bible. The ideal blessing was to see your children and your children’s children. The situation

in the New Testament is different. Because of the imminent eschatological horizon, most New Testament authors do not think about seeing their grandchildren, or even about seeing their children for that matter.

Jesus does not often preach about families in the Gospels, and when he mentions them at all, what he has to say can be quite shocking. Consider Luke 14:26:

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

The word “hate” is used here as it was used in Aramaic marriage contracts, to mean “repudiate.” Matthew has a milder form of the saying:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

One suspects that the more radical formulation of Luke is more authentic. We should note, however, that Luke says that disciples of Jesus must even “hate” life itself. Elsewhere he tells a disciple to follow him rather bury his father (Luke 9:59-60; Matt 8:21-22). Another is told not to turn back to say farewell to those at home. In the Gospel of Mark, he brushes off his mother and brothers (and sisters in some manuscripts) by asking “Who are my mother and my brothers?” and then supplying the answer: “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Do these sayings show that Jesus was anti-family?<sup>39</sup> Not necessarily. The sayings are addressed to those who would be Jesus’ disciples. This was a new, revolutionary, movement, and like many such movements it required nothing less than total dedication. Jesus himself was not married. Those of his followers who had families seem to have left them behind. We should expect

that this would cause some tension, although relations with Peter's mother-in-law (Matt 8:14; Mark 1:29-32. Luke 4:38-41) seem genial. Jesus and his disciples visit her house, and Jesus heals her.<sup>40</sup> But Jesus evidently did not consider marriage to be the higher calling. He allowed that some people might "make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of God" (Matt 19:11-12), but he also allowed that "not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given." He affirmed that "in the resurrection of the dead, people neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels in heaven" (Mark 12:25; Matt 22:30). Perhaps those who "made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of God" were already anticipating the resurrected state.<sup>41</sup> Celibacy was unusual in ancient Judaism, but there is a celebrated, if controversial, parallel in the case of the Essenes, the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls, at least some of whom were celibate, and who also thought that they were mingling with the angels.<sup>42</sup> It is also true, as we shall see momentarily, that Paul thought the time was too short to bother with marriage, although it may be necessary for some people. It is not entirely sure, however, that this was the thinking of Jesus. As we shall see in a later chapter, he preached a gospel of radical detachment from this world and its material things. Whether this detachment was based on eschatological expectation, however, is uncertain and controversial.

While Jesus had chosen not to marry (although he could in principle have married if he had lived longer), he certainly did not reject the institution of marriage for most people. His views on divorce are found in all three Synoptic Gospels, and also in Paul.<sup>43</sup> Paul writes in 1 Cor 7:10:

To the unmarried I give this command – not I but the Lord – that the wife should not separate from her husband, but if she does separate, let her



remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband, and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

This seems to be an absolute prohibition of divorce, and it corresponds to the saying attributed to Jesus in Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18. Both Mark and Luke say bluntly that anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery. Mark spells out the rationale, by citing Genesis, to the effect that God had created male and female and ordained that the two should become one flesh. “Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Mark 10:9; cf. Matt 19:3-8). Moses had only allowed otherwise as a concession to human weakness.

Matthew, however, muddies the waters by allowing an exception in the case of unchastity (Matt 5:32; 19:3-9). Paul also allowed an exception in cases where a believer was married to an unbeliever. If the unbeliever was willing to persevere in the marriage, they should not separate, but if the unbeliever wanted to separate, the believer was not bound.<sup>44</sup> The Markan and Lukan Jesus, however, allowed no exception, and again, one suspects that the more radical formulation is the more likely to be authentic. Interestingly, many modern churches disregard the teaching of Jesus on this issue. Perhaps, like Moses, they make a concession to human weakness.

As we have seen, Jesus’ stand on divorce was unusual in the context of Judaism, but not unprecedented. The Damascus Document in the Dead Sea Scrolls also invoked Genesis, and denounced those who married a second wife while the first one was alive. In that case, remarriage rather than divorce was the issue.<sup>45</sup> It is the prohibition of remarriage that evokes the protest of the disciples in Matthew 19: “if such is the case of a man and his wife, it is better

not to marry.” This statement, in turn, prompts the statement about eunuchs who make themselves such for the sake of the kingdom.

Jesus’ stand on divorce shows that he upheld marriage, understood monogamously on the basis of Genesis, although he apparently dispensed his followers from the command to increase and multiply. He was not much of a family man, however, whether this was because of eschatological expectation or because of his ethic of radical detachment. Leaving family was the price to be paid for membership in the new community of the kingdom. The cost is acknowledged in Mark 10, where Peter says to Jesus: “Look, we have left everything and followed you,” and Jesus responds that those who have left “house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children of fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,” will receive family a hundredfold in this life (in the new community of disciples) and in the age to come eternal life.

Jesus’ disciples included women as well as men. Some feminist scholars have entertained a romantic view of a “discipleship of equals” freed from the constraints of the patriarchal family, because they called no one father in this world (Matt 23:9).<sup>46</sup> This is surely an overstatement. There was never any doubt as to who was the leader in the Jesus movement and who were the followers. The people singled out as twelve apostles are all male.<sup>47</sup> This fact is not a valid argument against the ordination of women; the apostles were not “ordained” in the sense that modern clergy are. But it shows that the community of Jesus’ followers was not quite a discipleship of equals. It is true, however, that the female followers of Jesus were freed from the constraints of family life just as much as the men were. It is also true that that freedom came with cost, for the women as well as the men.

### *Paul's view of marriage*

In the case of Paul, the role of eschatology is indisputable. He lays out his views on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7.<sup>48</sup> He begins by declaring that “it is well for a man not to touch a woman,” but he realizes that this is an unrealistic goal. So, to avoid sexual immorality, each man and woman should have a spouse, and they should not deny one another. But his preference is that each one remain in the state in which he or she was called. It is no sin to marry, but “those who marry will experience distress in this life.” The unmarried, supposedly are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord, while the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife. Paul explains:

The appointed time has grown short; from now on let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:29-31).

Perhaps the most striking thing about this passage is that it appears to endorse an ideal of celibacy for women as well as for men.<sup>49</sup> Celibacy was controversial in early Christianity because it was disruptive of Roman family values.

### *Neither male nor female*

It is in light of this imminent eschatology, too, that Paul's famous statement in Galatians 3:28 must be understood:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Two other passages in the Pauline corpus (1 Cor 12:13 and Col 3:11) repeat the abolition of distinction between Jew and Greek and slave and free, but omit the mention of male and female. The formula in Galatians is thought to be pre-Pauline, and to have originated as part of a baptismal liturgy.<sup>50</sup> It is a strikingly novel sentiment in the context of the ancient world, as it undermines the distinctions on which the order of society was based.<sup>51</sup>

In the Pauline context, what this declaration means is that it makes no difference for one's standing with Christ whether one is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. It does not mean that social differentiation has disappeared. Paul still thought that women should cover their heads when they prophesied, and that men should not. He did not demand the emancipation of slaves. On the contrary, he argued that people should stay in the state in which they were, and not cause social upheaval, for the present order was passing away in any case. The declaration is nonetheless highly progressive, as it meant that Greeks, slaves and women were all welcome in the Christian community. As Schüssler Fiorenza put it, "patriarchal marriage – and sexual relationships between male and female – is no longer constitutive of the new community in Christ."<sup>52</sup> It disputes the value most people attached to freedom as against slavery, or to maleness as against femaleness. But it disputes them because the time is short, and so they no longer matter. Eschatology here is a great leveler, that undermines the importance attached to societal distinctions. Nonetheless, it did not abolish patriarchal marriage (or slavery) for the present, and the conventional distinctions would re-emerge very quickly in the Pauline tradition.

Already in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul reminded the Corinthians that “Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife” (1 Cor 11:2).<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, he held that women should not pray or prophesy with their heads uncovered.<sup>54</sup> But he did not say that women should not prophesy at all. Again, in a dubious exegesis of Genesis, he argued that man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man (11:8-9), but he qualified all of this by saying that “in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman, but all things come from God” (11:11-12). In the end, he seems to realize that his attempted exegesis is not very convincing, and falls back on an authoritarian appeal to the practice of the churches.

Paul seems to have recognized that women had a legitimate role to play in spreading the Gospel. In Romans 16, Paul sends greetings to several women whom he acknowledges as co-workers, including Prisca, the companion of Aquila, Mary, “who worked hard among you,” and Junias, “who was prominent among the apostles.”

In 1 Cor 14:34-35, however, we have a much more extreme statement: women should be silent in the congregations. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in the congregation.

It is difficult to reconcile this statement with 1 Corinthians 11, where there was no objection to women speaking in the congregation, so many scholars, though not all, regard it as later insertion.<sup>55</sup> The purpose of the insertion

would be to bring the Pauline congregations into line with prevalent views of the place of women in society in the Greco-Roman world.

### *The household codes*

The concern for conformity to Greco-Roman mores finds clear expression in a series of passages that address the proper social demeanor of women, children, and slaves. These passages are commonly called “household codes.”<sup>56</sup> They are found in Colossians 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 5:21-6:9; 1 Peter 2:13-25; 1 Timothy 2:11-12 (in a passage concerned with deacons), and Titus 2:3-5. The tone of these passages is well reflected in 1 Peter 2:13-15:

For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and praise those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.

The concern is to avoid giving scandal, by letting it appear that Christians were acting inappropriately.

The proper order of the household, in the Greek tradition, had been articulated in an authoritative way by Aristotle.<sup>57</sup> A father should rule over his children, a husband over his wife, and a master over his slaves:

For the male is by nature better fitted to command than the female . . . and the older and fully developed person than the younger and immature. It is true that in most cases of democratic government the ruler and ruled interchange in turn . . . but the male stand in this relationship to the female continuously. The rule of the father over the children, on the other hand, is that of a king (*Politics* I.1259b).<sup>58</sup>

Aristotle argued that this household order was in the interest of the state (*Politics* 2.1269b).

This view of the relationship between men and women was standard in the Hellenistic and Roman world, and was also accepted in Hellenistic Judaism. Philo held that “a woman should not be a busybody, meddling with matters outsider her household concerns, but should seek a life of seclusion.”<sup>59</sup>

Josephus went farther:

The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed, for the authority has been given by God to the man (*Against Apion* 2.201).

This is not the only occasion on which Josephus claims the authority of the Law for things it never actually says. We have seen another example of this in the case of abortion. In the ancient world, as in the modern, people tended to project their beliefs into the Bible, whether it actually provided a basis for them or not.

The New Testament epistles sometimes temper this hierarchy. Colossians 3:18, tells husbands to love their wives and never treat them harshly, and also not to provoke their children. Ephesians 5:25 tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church. Sometimes this well-intentioned exhortation only reinforces the underlying patriarchal attitude. 1 Peter 3:7 tells husbands to honor their wives “as the weaker sex.” Do not try this at home in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!

The most extreme example of biblical sexism is found in 1 Timothy 2:11-12: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.” The author

repeats the faulty exegesis of Paul, that Adam was formed first, and was not the one who was deceived. The passage grants, condescendingly, that a woman can be saved through childbearing.

It has been argued, reasonably, that the so-called Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, represent a reaction against another strand of early Christianity, represented *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which glorified young women such as Thecla, who rejected marriage and family life in order to embrace Christianity, and thereby caused scandal and disruption in the socially conservative Roman world,<sup>60</sup> and also against the teaching of Marcion, who rejected marriage and procreation, and also rejected the God of the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>61</sup> This may well be, but it was the reactionary epistles, not the radical Acts, that were included in the biblical canon.

We will revisit the Pastoral Epistles in connection with biblical attitudes to slavery. These Epistles are sharply in contrast with modern western values, but they are arguably equally in conflict with the teachings of Jesus and even those of Paul. These epistles are a long way from the ideal that in Christ there is no male or female. More than most parts of the Bible, they render any concept of biblical authority problematic in the modern world.



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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Rollston, "The Marginalization of Women: A Biblical Value We Don't Like to Talk About," *Huffington Post*, August 31, 2012 ([www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-rollston/the-marginalization-of-women-biblical-value-we-don-t-like-to-talk-about\\_b\\_1933648.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-rollston/the-marginalization-of-women-biblical-value-we-don-t-like-to-talk-about_b_1933648.html)).

<sup>2</sup> Christopher A. Rollston, "Women, the Bible, and the Nineteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution," in Flannery and Werline, *The Bible in Political Debate*, 155-66 (here 161).

<sup>3</sup> He is now professor at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

<sup>4</sup> Carol L. Meyers, "Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133(2014) 8-27. The address was delivered on November 23, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See the discussion in my book, *The Bible after Babel. Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 75-98.

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); *Texts of Terror: Literary-feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41(1973) 30-48 (31).

<sup>10</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002) xv.

<sup>11</sup> Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve. Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford, 1988); revised ed.: *Rediscovering Eve* (New York: Oxford, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> *The Postmodern Bible*, 245-6

<sup>13</sup> *The Postmodern Bible*, 247-8.

<sup>14</sup> E. S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist-theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; New York: Crossroad/ London: SCM, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: continuum, 2000) 48-9

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: De-Centering Biblical scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107(1988) 3-17(15). Compare the argument of Dale Martin, discussed in the Introduction to this volume.

<sup>18</sup> Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 98.

<sup>19</sup> Dana Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 28: "flying in the face of what every reader knows to be reality, he [the author of Genesis 2] claims that woman comes out of man – claims for himself, that is, woman's biological function of child-bearing."

<sup>20</sup> See the comments of David J. A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (JSOTSup 94; Sheffield Academic Press, 1990) 30-31.

<sup>21</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 101.

<sup>22</sup> Sir 25:24. This statement is anomalous even in Ben Sira, and may be a secondary addition.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); Alice Bach, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible. A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999); Cynthia R. Chapman, *The House of the Mother. The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (AYBRL; New Haven: Yale, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> For a concise list of examples, see Rollston, "Women, The Bible, and the Nineteenth Amendment," 161-2.

<sup>25</sup> Tracy M. Lemos, *Marriage Gifts and Social Change in Ancient Palestine: 1200 BCE to 200 CE* (New York: Cambridge, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 1.26-29; Michael Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 200.

<sup>27</sup> Tracy M. Lemos, "Were Israelite Women Chattel? Shedding New Light on an Old Question," in J. J. Collins, T. M. Lemos, and S. M. Olyan, ed., *Worship, Women and War. Essays in Honor of Susan Niditch* (Brown Judaic Studies 357; Providence: Brown University, 2015) 227-41, especially 232-5; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "An Alternative Term for 'bride-Price,'" *Man* 31(1931) 36-39.

<sup>28</sup> See further my article "Marriage, Divorce, and Family in Second Temple Judaism," in Leo G. Perdue, et al., *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster, 1997) 104-62 (113-5); Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 200-16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ant* 15.259 (Herod's sister Salome), 18.136 (Herodias, Agrippa's daughter).

<sup>30</sup> Josephus, *Ant* 15.259; 18.136.

<sup>31</sup> Josephus, *Life*, 414-5.

<sup>32</sup> *Life*, 426.

<sup>33</sup> Collins, "Marriage, Divorce, and Family," 120.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-7.

<sup>35</sup> So the *Scroll of the Minor Prophets* found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. See Russell Fuller, "Text-Critical Problems in Malachi 2:10-16," *JBL* 110(1991) 47-57.

<sup>36</sup> See further Claudia Camp, "understanding a Patriarchy: Women in Second-Century Jerusalem through the Eyes of Ben Sira, in A. J. Levine, ed., "Women Like This": *New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 1-39; eadem, *Ben Sira and the Men Who Handle Books. Gender and the Rise of Canon-Consciousness* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013) especially 82-99..

<sup>37</sup> Renita J. Weems, "Gomer: Victim of Violence or Victim of Metaphor," *Semeia* 49(1989) 87-104. See further her book, *Battered Love. Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> T. Drorah Setel, "Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea," in Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 86-95; J. Cheryl Exum, "Prophetic Pornography," in eadem, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Sheffield: Phoenix, 2012) 105-31.

<sup>39</sup> So Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 104-5.

<sup>40</sup> The nonconformist expositor Matthew Henry (1662-1714) cited this passage as evidence of Jesus approval of married life.

<sup>41</sup> So Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 105.

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- <sup>42</sup> Joseph M. Baumgarten, "Celibacy," in Lawrence H. Schiffman and James C. VanderKam, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Oxford, 2000) 122-5.
- <sup>43</sup> See the decisive discussion by John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Vol. 4. Law and Love* (AYBRL; New Haven: Yale, 2009) 74-181.
- <sup>44</sup> 1 Cor 7:12-16; Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 4: 101-2; J. A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians* (AYB 32; New Haven, Yale, 2008) 296-304.
- <sup>45</sup> For the details and arguments see my article "Divorce and Remarriage in the Damascus Document," in Christine Hayes, Tzvi Novick and Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, ed., *The Faces of Torah. Studies in the Texts and Contexts of Ancient Judaism in Honor of Steven Fraade* (JAJSup; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017) 81-93.
- <sup>46</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 140-51.
- <sup>47</sup> Matt 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16.
- <sup>48</sup> Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 272-87.
- <sup>49</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Reading Real Women through the Undisputed Letters of Paul," in Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, ed., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford, 1999) 199-220, here 211-3.
- <sup>50</sup> H. D. Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 184.
- <sup>51</sup> J. L. Martyn, *Galatians* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 376.
- <sup>52</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 211.
- <sup>53</sup> See the commentary of Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 404-25,
- <sup>54</sup> On the overtones of women with uncovered hair, see Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 227-8; MacDonald, "Reading Real Women," 215.
- <sup>55</sup> See MacDonald, "Reading Real Women," 216. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 231, tries to resolve the contradiction by proposing that 1 Corinthians 14 only applies to married women.
- <sup>56</sup> David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive. The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (SBLMS 26; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981); idem, "Household Codes," *ABD* 3.318-20.
- <sup>57</sup> See Balch, "Household Codes," 318; Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 255.
- <sup>58</sup> Aristotle allowed an exception in cases where the wife was an heiress (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1160b).
- <sup>59</sup> *Special Laws* 3.170-1.
- <sup>60</sup> Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle. The Battle for Paul. Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Rereading Paul. Early Interpretations of Paul on Women and Gender," in Kraemer and D'Angelo, ed., *Women and Christian Origins*, 236-53, here 249. For a translation of the Acts of Paul and Thecla see James Keith Elliott, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament: a collection of apocryphal Christian literature in an English translation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999) 372-374.
- <sup>61</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Female Body as Social Space in 1 Timothy," *NTS* 57(2011) 155-75.