

Women in the Bible

Because the Bible has been used throughout history to support patriarchy and oppress women, it's important to correctly understand the roles of women in the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT).

I. Patriarchal Culture in Biblical Times

- A. Women took little part in public life, and their head and face were often veiled.
- B. A wife's subordinate position was comparable to that of a slave.
- C. A wife's duty was to serve the household, bear children, and wash her husband's feet.
- D. Women were easily divorced for minor offenses.
- E. Adultery was an offense against a husband, not a woman.
- F. A woman's witness was accepted only in exceptional cases.
- G. Women's religious life was strictly limited. They
 1. Could go no further in the temple than the Court of Gentiles and Women,
 2. Were not counted for a quorum in the synagogue meeting,
 3. Could hold no religious office or role,
 4. Could not study the Torah.
- H. Many viewed it as disgraceful for a man to talk with or teach a woman.
- I. Common attitudes of men toward women can be seen in these statements:
 1. Rabbi Eliezer: "It would be better to burn the words of the Torah than to entrust them to a woman."
 2. "Blessed be Thou, O Lord our God . . . for you did not make me a gentile."
 3. "Blessed be Thou, O Lord our God . . . for you did not make me a woman."
 4. "Blessed be Thou, O Lord our God . . . for you did not make me a slave."
 5. Jewish historian Josephus: "A woman is inferior to a man in everything."

II. The Old Testament (OT) on Women

- A. Lessons from Genesis 1—3
 1. Both man and woman are created in God’s image and given dominion together over the earth (Gn 1:26-27; 5:1-2).
 2. The OT word for “helper” (*ezer*) is not associated with inferiority or subordination. Rather, it has the sense of co-worker and companion (Gn 2:18).
 3. The literary climax of the story is the creation of woman (Gn 2:20-22).
 4. Men and women are meant to be interdependent (Gn 2:23-25).
 5. Male domination over the woman is described, not prescribed, and is rooted in the fall and curse (Gn 3).
- B. Noteworthy women in OT history
 1. Hebrew midwives were instrumental in the Exodus (Ex 2:15-22).
 2. Miriam worked with Moses and Aaron (Ex 15; Nm 12:1-15; Mic 6:4).
 3. Deborah functioned, like Samuel, as a judge (Jg 4—5).
 4. Huldah was a prophetess in Josiah’s reform (2 Kg 22:14-20; 2 Chr 34:22-28).
 5. As queen of Persia, Esther helped to save her Jewish people.

III. Jesus and Women

- A. Jesus freed women from double standards in Jewish culture.
 1. He taught that lust is also a sin against women (Mt 5:27).
 2. He taught against divorce in order to protect womn (Mt 5:32; Mk 10:2-12).
 3. He freed a woman who was caught in adultery (Jn 8:1-11).
- B. Jesus rejected taboos and stereotypes associated with women.
 1. He responded positively to a hemorrhaging (“unclean”) woman (Mk 5:24-34).
 2. He expanded the role of women beyond kitchen and family (Lk 10:38-42, 11:27-28).
 3. He broke cultural barriers by publicly associating with and teaching women (Lk 7:36-50; Jn 4).
 4. Jesus revealed his identity and resurrection first to women (Jn 4:24-26; Jn 11:25; Mt 28:1-10; Mk 16:1-8; Lk 24:1-10; Jn 20:11-18).
- C. Jesus not only affirmed the worth and gifts of women but also engaged them as his disciples.
 1. He commended their faith and response (Mk 5:34, 36; Lk 7:50; Lk 4:24-26).
 2. He taught women to put their spiritual call first (Lk 10:38-42, 11:27-28).
 3. He related with women as his ministering disciples and companions (Lk 8:1-3, 23:55; Mt 27:55-56; Mk 15:40-43).

IV. Women in New Testament (NT) Church Ministry

- A. Women were prophetesses and prophesied.
 - 1. Women were to prophesy in the messianic age (Jl 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21)
 - 2. Anna in Jerusalem (Lk 2:36-38)
 - 3. Four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9)
 - 4. Corinthian women in worship (1 Cor 11:5)
- B. Women were leaders of house churches (the only churches at the time).
 - 1. Nympha was a house church leader in Colossae (Col 4:15)
 - 2. Lydia invited church meetings into her home (Acts 16:15)
 - 3. Mary held church meetings in her home (Acts 12:12)
 - 4. Priscilla in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:5; Acts 18:26)
- C. Women were apostles and traveling evangelists.
 - 1. Junia (Rom 16:7: regarded as a woman for 1,000 years)
 - 2. Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18; Rom 16:3-4)
 - 3. Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2-3)
- D. Women were congregational deacons and respected workers.
 - 1. Phoebe, a deaconess (Rom 16:1-2)
 - 2. Other women as deacons (1 Tim 3:11)
 - 3. Other workers Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis (Rom 16:6,12)
- E. NT servant/leader designations are fluid and loose.
 - 1. Paul interchanges “apostle” and “deacon” (2 Cor 11:13,15)
 - 2. Paul interchanges “deacon” with “co-worker” (1 Cor 3:5,9)
 - 3. Women in apostolic ministry taught men (Acts 18:26)

V. Paul and Women

- A. Christ signals a new place and relationships for women (Gal 3:28).
- B. Paul related with women as apostolic co-workers (see IV. C—E above).
- C. Two texts in New Testament letters are difficult:
 1. First Corinthians 14:34-36: Paul is likely citing a quotation that he challenges, considering the conflict with 1 Corinthians 11:5 and his rebuke in 14:36.
 2. First Timothy 2:11-12: this likely is a situational corrective in view of the problems of false teachings (Gnosticism and asceticism) and untrained women in the church at Ephesus.

These texts are to be taken as corrective instructions for specific situations then, not as normative teachings for today. (If these restrictive texts were meant to be universally binding, how do we explain that women were apostles at the same time that Paul was proclaiming and teaching the gospel?)

Adapted by Steve Thomas from Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Herald, 1983); and Mary J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible: An Overview of All the Crucial Passages on Women's Roles* (InterVarsity, 1984).