

What Does Scripture Say About Women?

What Does the Old Testament Say About Women?

Genesis 1 records that woman and man were created equally in the image of God (1:26-28) and that they both received God's blessing (1:28). In fact, the term generally translated as "man" ('*adam*') does not denote a specific sex, but rather, includes both male and female. Literally, '*adam*' means "from the ground," and thus it could be translated as "humanity." With no distinction between male and female, Genesis 1 describes the order and role of creation.

Genesis 2 expands the creation account, this time showing the interdependence of God's creation: the animals need the plants, the plants need the streams of water, and the person (*ha 'adam*) needs a companion. Woman is to be man's '*ezer kenegedo*' ("helpmeet for him," Gen 2:18 KJV). The word '*ezer*' is most commonly used of God (Ex 18:4; Deut 33:7, 26; Ps 33:20), implying that this helper is not to be subordinate. *kenegedo* literally means "fit," "complement," or "completion," implying that woman was to be an equal counterpart or "partner" to man. This is also implied by the style of this Genesis account, which utilizes a Hebrew method of writing called an "inclusio." Neither the first nor the last is seen as more important or superior; rather the creature created first is incomplete without the creature created last.¹

Similarly, Adam does not name Eve in Genesis 2:23, choosing not to show his authority or priority; the Hebrew naming formula, which requires a specific verb and object, is not found here. In addition, the word used is not a proper name, but simply "woman". This phrase seems to indicate that the differences between man and woman can be seen only when they are in relationship with one another.² The actual naming formula does not occur until after the fall (Gen 3:20), when humankind is already feeling the effects of the curse – one person dominating another. *Notice, the curse describes what will happen, but does not prescribe this type of domination* (Gen 3:16-18).

God's original creation were equal partners, but after sin entered, domination and subordination began to occur. The gospel ideal returns us to the Edenic plan of Genesis 1: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). This statement does not simply refer to salvation but attempts to right all three relationships in which the Jews had perverted God's original plan by making one group subordinate to another. The link to Genesis 1:27 is established clearly by Paul in his usage of similar "male-female" language.

The Old Testament contains numerous examples of women in leadership roles over men. These include Miriam, who functioned as leader and prophet (Ex 15:20-21); Huldah, a prophet (2 Ki 22:13-14); Deborah who was judge and prophet (Jud 4,5); Isaiah's wife who was also a prophet (Isa 8:3); and many other courageous women. Also, women, just as men, could take on a special religious role by taking the Nazarite vow (Num 30:3-5). Although the Old Testament shows that some social inequalities did exist in Israel, these numerous women functioning as leaders demonstrate that there were no legal restrictions barring women from positions of influence, leadership, and authority over men. Even with regard to the priesthood, God's original plan was that all of Israel should be a "kingdom of priests" (Ex 19:6), mediating the covenant to surrounding nations.³

What Does the New Testament Say About Women?

Jesus often told His followers that they were to return to God's original plan, often pointing them to "the beginning" (Matt 19:8). Although Jesus worked within societal norms and made 12 Jewish men his apostles, he demonstrated the principle of equality by allowing Gentiles, slaves, and women to be counted among his disciples (followers): "All of them deserted him and fled... [but] there were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James

the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.” (Mk 15:39-47) In addition, Johanna, the wife of Herod’s steward, Chuza, Susanna, and Mary Magdalene are all listed as Jesus’ disciples (Lk 8:1-3). Jesus even allowed a woman to anoint him as messiah, a function generally performed only by a priest (Mt 26:6-13); and, after the resurrection, he appeared first to a woman, Mary Magdalene, sending her forth as the first apostle (Mk 16:9-11).

Did Paul Want Women to Keep Silent?

Only once does Paul even suggest a woman should be silent (1 Tim 2:11), and this reference could equally apply to men or women. Paul is concerned with an *attitude* in prayer, a way of remaining equally submissive in the church, and not manipulating other members through violence (1 Tim 2:8) or language (1 Tim 2:11). In fact, Paul could *not* be referring to women’s silence in worship, for he refers to their active participation in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14.

Paul, bound by the cultural restraints of his day, did not abolish the subordination of Gentiles (Gal 2:11-14), do away with slavery (Eph 6:5-9, Col 3:22; Phm 12; 1 Tim 6:1), or allow women full and equal participation in the ministry of the church in *all* settings (1 Cor 14). But where he could, he employed his ideal (Gal 3:28 – “all one in Christ”). Women functioned as Paul’s fellow ministers in a variety of ways: Priscilla, as fellow evangelist (Rm 16:3-5); Phoebe, as deacon (Rm 16:1,2); Euodea and Syntyche, as fellow preachers of the gospel (Phil 4:2,3); and even Junia, as apostle (Rm. 16:7).

Paul does use the masculine gender when referring to a bishop (1 Tim 3:1-7 & Titus 1:5-9). Even though it is not required, it was assumed that in that culture and place, the candidates for elders would be married men with children. This is clearly seen in 1 Timothy 3:12, where the qualifications for deacon also include one wife, even though Romans 16:1 uses the masculine form of deacon in reference to Phoebe.

Problem Passages

“Problem” passages can be easier to understand with a little cultural knowledge. For instance, understanding what Paul means by man as the “head” (*kephale*) of

woman (1 Cor 11:3) is greatly simplified when one understands the Greek usage of “head.” Of many possible meanings found in the Greek lexicons, none refers to “authority,” “superior rank,” “leader,” “director,” or anything similar.⁴ In fact, in 1 Corinthians 11:3, the definition of “head” appears to be “source.”⁵ So, the text may read: “Just as woman came from Adam’s rib (1 Cor 11:8), now man comes from a woman and all come from God” (1 Cor 11:12). Similarly, Ephesians 5:23 indicates an understanding of “head” other than that of superior rank. One possibility is “one who brings to completion,” which is a Greek metaphorical use of “head.” This would emphasize believers’ mutual need of one another and of Christ. Neither passage teaches a chain of command (Christ - man - woman) but rather “mutual submission” and the need of one another (Eph 5:21, 33).

1 Corinthians 14:33-40 could not be implying that women only were to be silent; men were called to be silenced as well! Other accounts show women prophesying in church (Acts 2:17-18, 1 Cor 11). Rather, 1 Corinthians 14 is about orderly worship (1 Cor 14:33) at a time when many were coming from backgrounds of pagan excesses. In many cases, such as the cult of Isis, women took a very active and noisy role, using ecstatic utterances as a primary means of worship.⁶ In addition, Jewish law did not permit women to speak in church at all. So, this new openness for women to speak and prophesy may have led to much embarrassment. Some mistook this new group for a pagan cult, and Paul may simply be warning the women to use an extra amount of decorum in church.

In these passages, Paul seems to be concerned primarily with practical church problems. His underlying principle always returns to Galatians 3:28. Here Peter accepts Gentiles into the faith, but he continues to deny them as equals in the life and ministry of the church (Gal 2:11). Paul rebukes him for this and strongly asserts that there is no distinction between salvation and ministry; in Christ all are included. “For there is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free, male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus”!

¹Vine, Kenneth. *The Legal and Social Status of Women in the Pentateuch*. BRICOM papers, (1976).

²Hasel, Gerhard, *Man and Woman in Genesis 1-3*, BRICOM papers, (1976).

³*Michiana Newline*, vol.5, no.2 (1987).

⁴Mickelsen, Berkeley & Alvera, “What does kephale mean in the New Testament?” In *Women, Authority, and the Bible*, ed. A. Mickelsen, (Intervarsity Press: IL., 1986), pp. 97-110.

⁵Bedale, S., *The Meaning of kephale in the Pauline Epistles*, JTS 5 (1954): 211-155.

⁶Steveny, G. *The Ordination of Women in the Church*. Trans. E. E. White. T.S. N.P. (1985).