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Is the Bible Anti-Woman?

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Are the Scriptures—the Old and the New Testament—biased against women? It's a common enough claim. The wives of the patriarchs are seen as subservient; ancient Hebrew society is said to have treated women as possessions; and the apostle Paul, understood by many to be the real founder of Christianity, is viewed as a fierce woman hater. Given these perceptions, how can we think of the Bible as anything but anti-woman?

Over the past few decades, feminist theology has developed with the ostensible purpose of liberating women and thus empowering them, both in the church and in society. For some, the result has been a total rejection of the Scriptures, with their so-called "irredeemable patriarchy," in favor of a theology in which the roles of men and women are reversed.

Often central to the argument is [Mary Magdalene \(/node/730\)](#), whom many see as posing a challenge to traditional male domination within the church. After all, if we are to believe Dan Brown's celebrated *Da Vinci Code*, wasn't Mary Magdalene Christ's lover and a

13th (and superior) apostle (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-mary-magdalene/1119.aspx>)? Relying on Gnosticism, a spurious alternative to early Christian teaching, Brown has directed a lot of favorable attention toward its literature, which appears supportive of a more dominant role for women in society and in the church.

Meanwhile, in the largest branch of Christendom, another Mary—the mother of Jesus—has effectively been elevated to the position of humanity’s coredeмпtrix (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-mary-mother-of-jesus/147.aspx>) with Christ. But because the Roman Catholic Church has not permitted women to be ordained as priests, many still view it as a deficient religious body—stubbornly maintaining a supposed ancient status quo. Similar debates simmer in other churches, with the antagonists trotting out various biblical passages to support their case.

THE QUMRAN CONNECTION

Unfortunately, people seldom stop to consider the Bible as a totality. The Old Testament and New Testament writers promote a consistent view of God toward women. Contrary to popular opinion, no writer depicts Him as anti-woman.

The New Testament (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-new-testament/18198.aspx>) was written in a Jewish environment that actually had a surprisingly enlightened outlook toward the role of women (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-bible-topics-virtuous-woman/224.aspx>) in society compared with other cultures of that day. And it was based on Old Testament laws, principles and practices. Male priority in the male-female dyad was a function of the number of laws in the Torah that were required of a Jewish man as opposed to a Jewish woman. So while the society was without a doubt intended to be patriarchal in structure, it never condoned the abuse of women.

The years between the events covered in the Old and New Testaments are known as the intertestamental period. We can learn a great deal about how one section of Jewish society of that period viewed women by looking at a document found among the Dead Sea Scrolls ([/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-bible-dead-sea-scrolls/1012.aspx](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-bible-dead-sea-scrolls/1012.aspx)).

The Damascus Document, discovered in Cave Four at Qumran in the Judean Desert in 1952, appears to comprise the rules of association for an Essene community. Some consider the Essenes to have been a celibate sect, but first-century Jewish historian Josephus notes that some of them were married (*The Jewish War* 2.8.2, 13). One of the rules demanded punishment for those who murmured against mothers. While the punishment was less than

that for murmuring against fathers, the fact that failure to uphold the fifth of the Ten Commandments (to honor your father *and* your mother) carried a penalty indicates that women did have rights outside the home. The temple enclosure in Jerusalem provides another example of such rights within the religious community, in that women had a court in which they could assemble, together with Jewish men, and it was closer to the Holy Place than the court where gentiles were allowed to gather.

THE NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

In her research paper “Mothers, Sisters, and Elders: Titles for Women in Second Temple Jewish and Early Christian Communities,” Sidnie White Crawford bridges the gap to the New Testament period. She shows that women enjoyed similar rights in the larger world of Jewish culture (that is, outside the Essene community), and that this fact is attested to in the writings of the apostles. We find that Jewish communities consistently allowed women to have a place outside the home within the spiritual community.

Both written law and the oral law based on the Hebrew Scriptures prescribed safeguards for women. For example, they guaranteed a woman the right of appeal to the religious authorities, should her husband’s relationship with her become abusive. A husband had strictly defined responsibilities toward his wife and family, over which the religious authorities had jurisdiction. This afforded Jewish women a position of honor in first-century society quite unlike that of their counterparts in the dominant Greco-Roman culture. The apostles clearly transmitted these values to the fledgling congregations they established. For example, Luke, in writing the Acts of the Apostles, was very keen to present the names of the women who were part of the church and who helped with its mission.

THE GOSPEL TRUTH

Feminists who wish to use the Bible as a basis for their theology frequently rally to the resurrection accounts: the women were at Jesus’ tomb early and were therefore the first witnesses of the risen Christ. Some also emphasize the presence of the women at the crucifixion site. What these feminists fail to recognize is that the Romans would have construed the appearance of male disciples in any number at either event as a political statement and, as such, perhaps even a capital offense. With their views on gender, however, the Romans did not see the women as a threat to their authority.

But in focusing solely on the end of the Gospel accounts, readers will likely fail to appreciate some of the most trenchant material about Jesus—material that should shape the relationship of all human beings toward one another, irrespective of gender or ethnicity.

Matthew's is the first Gospel and the first biography of Jesus Christ. The account begins with a genealogy that includes the names of five women from the annals of Jewish history. From time to time, commentators have wrestled with Matthew's reasoning. Why include women in such a public manner in the genealogy of Jesus Christ when Luke, known for his [inclusiveness of women \(/node/663\)](/node/663), mentions none in his genealogy?

Matthew's account is clearly shaped to achieve a specific purpose. It starts with the trio, in chronological order, of Abraham, David and the Messiah—identified as Jesus—and concludes in the same manner (Matthew 1:1, 17). Between these two statements, Matthew crafts three sections of the genealogy, with 14 generations in each. Four of the women are named in the first section, while the fifth, Mary, the mother of Jesus, comes at the end of the third. The inclusion of the women is not in any way accidental or unintentional.

In considering Matthew's purpose, commentators have often focused on the first four women to the exclusion of Mary. The first four are frequently identified with sex scandals—real or perceived—in which they were involved. Tamar feigned the role of a prostitute to have her father-in-law sleep with her so she could conceive. Rahab was considered the harlot of Jericho. Commentators postulate a midnight tryst for Ruth (with Boaz) to maintain the sexual theme in the genealogy. And of course, Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, is well known for her dalliance with King David, which led to a pregnancy and her husband's death. But this explanation omits any reason for Mary's place in the list and must therefore be considered deficient. Nor is the argument that the women were sinners any more convincing. *All* the people mentioned in the genealogy, male and female (except Jesus), are considered sinners according to the biblical record.

Clearly, the presence of women in the genealogy speaks to the inclusiveness of women on a *universal* scale, as three of the five women mentioned are from gentile nations. Thus, Matthew's genealogy teaches the inclusiveness of all humanity, overriding the tradition of his day. The apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Galatians, speaks to this inclusiveness in opposition to the traditional Jewish outlook on society: "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" (Galatians 3:28). The privilege of being Jew and not Greek, free and not a slave, male and not female, remains part of a Jewish prayer of thanks to this day.

Jewish literature, starting before the birth of Jesus and carrying on into the Aramaic commentaries written in the second and third centuries of the current era, looked on the first four women mentioned by Matthew as righteous people. They were women whose sins had been forgiven, and whose subsequent actions had been motivated and controlled through the Holy Spirit. Both Philo and Josephus enlarge on this aspect of the biblical record. This clearly ties in with Matthew's account of Mary and provides a common bond with the other four women. Furthermore, the four were instrumental in preserving the covenants that God made with Abraham and David, of which the Messiah was to be the rightful heir. They therefore played an important role in God's plan for His people, as Matthew notes with regard to Mary.

Righteousness is a theme throughout the first chapter of Matthew. The Gospel writer describes Joseph, Mary's husband-to-be, as a just or righteous man (verse 19). From the context we see that oppression, abuse and brutality—behaviors that feminists commonly complain is typical in patriarchy—are conspicuously absent from Joseph's treatment of Mary. Joseph sought a godly solution to the problems of his pregnant fiancée, a solution that recognized her needs, not his bruised ego. He is presented as seeking the mercy of God rather than the available penalties of the Torah. Similarly, the Hebrew Scriptures define Abraham, David and the Messiah by righteousness (Genesis 18:19; 2 Samuel 8:15; Isaiah 9:7).

It is as though Matthew is starting his account of the life of Jesus Christ by stating that, under a true understanding of God's purposes, a woman's place in society is different from that prescribed by other communities of the day. It is not just in the home or in the religious community that women have a function; they can be chosen by God to preserve the nation and achieve His ends. They have a place in the message of Jesus Christ and a purpose in the plan of God.

But merely listing women as righteous and as participants in God's plan for humanity doesn't of itself change women's lot then or now. What, then, *is* the purpose of women in God's plan, and how does it relate to the patriarchal structure that so many despise?

A simple question may help address the real issue: Does Matthew record Jesus as instructing his disciples in the area that is of greatest concern to feminists—namely, oppression? He certainly presents Jesus as a Torah-observant Jew. Yet even a superficial reading of Matthew's Gospel shows that the *level* of observance of law that Jesus taught was

radically different from what others had taught. He established a higher standard that challenged the Jewish religious leaders as well as the Roman Empire and every other culture of the day. And the challenge remains today.

POWER PLAY

Central to the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai was the concept of loving one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus Christ and the religious leaders of the time recognized this as the second great commandment of the entire Torah (Matthew 22:36–40). This required a level of respect for life that was missing in the brutal world of the Roman Empire. Neither the Jewish religious leaders nor Jesus' own disciples had ever appreciated what Jesus now taught about this commandment. It had been reinterpreted in many ways, but always to the advantage of the self. So Jesus had to confront the false dichotomy of loving neighbors and hating enemies (Matthew 5:43–47). Luke's account of Jesus' teaching shows that even a person perceived as an enemy can be a neighbor (Luke 10:25–37). In fact, all four Gospel writers address the same issue (see Mark 12:28–34; John 10:11; 13:35). Simply put, Jesus taught that life is to be lived for the benefit of others, not the self. The Gospel writers show that Jesus elevated this understanding to a higher plane. Loving a neighbor could no longer be a passive act. It demanded active concern.

This truth about what is needed in human relationships continues throughout Matthew's Gospel. His record of Jesus' words repeatedly points to the creation of a social environment based on service and care instead of power. Whereas the patriarchal system was often interpreted as equating male authority with *power*, Matthew shows Jesus teaching that power is not what gives authority to a person; rather, it is service to others that establishes authority (Matthew 18:1–5; 19:30; 20:16, 20–28; 23:8–12).

If the basis of following Christ is to serve one another, what does this say about the relationship of a husband to a wife, or of a wife to a husband? Shouldn't they both be seeking to serve the other's well-being? What part does brutality, oppression or abusiveness have in such a model? What part should they have in society at large?

Matthew concludes his account with Jesus instructing His disciples for the last time. Again, His instruction mentions power with a different emphasis. He tells them that all power in heaven and in earth is entrusted to Him because of His sacrifice. The disciples were to be empowered by the Holy Spirit in their mission, but only insofar as they followed the example and instruction Jesus had given them (Matthew 28:16–20). Matthew's Gospel makes it clear

that Christ's example and instruction incorporated obedience to the Torah of God, not just as a routine, or for self-interest, but as a means to learning the caring nature of humanity's Creator. Followers of Jesus Christ can be empowered in their lives as they learn to love God and to love their neighbors as themselves. Without that focus, any attempt to change human relationships is in vain.

It's worth stopping to consider the implications of this approach. True followers of the teachings of Jesus Christ would never have embraced the ideas about hierarchy that developed in the second through fourth centuries. Those followers would never have looked to the Roman Empire for an understanding of organization. Present-day scholars talk about a breach between "orthodox" Christians and Gnostic "heretics" over male hierarchies and the role of women; but these would have been nonissues for anyone who truly followed Christ. If such a division did occur in the broader Christian domain, it is an indication that something had gone terribly wrong with people's understanding of Jesus Christ's teachings.

Likewise today, continued feminist anxiety over male oppression indicates that we have not learned the lessons of concern for others. Rather, a greedy grasping for power and control still drives and characterizes societies to this day, begging a far more important question:

We may call ourselves Christians, but are we really followers of Jesus Christ?