

Book Review: *Beyond Sex Roles*

By Gilbert Bilezikian (Baker, 2006)

Reviewed by GLEN G. SCORGIE

Perhaps the best way to appreciate the significance of *Beyond Sex Roles*, now re-published in a third edition, is to recall the historical context of the mid-1980s in which it was first written. The modern biblical equality movement was still in its infancy. Some Christian writers were already arguing for gender equality and mutuality in the 1970s and early 1980s, but not all of them grounded their arguments in a high view of Scripture. Helpful exceptions included Patricia Gundry, Margaret Howe, Mary Evans, and Aída Besançon Spencer, but the list was not long and it did not include many men.

Naturally there was “push back” from the defenders of traditional Christian patriarchy, and that resistance included a book published in 1981 by James B. Hurley, now professor of marriage and family therapy at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. He had just earned a Ph.D. from Cambridge University for his close reading of the biblical text on this topic. *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, the fruit of his research, was selected as a Gold Medallion Book of the Year by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. Hurley argued that benevolent male authority is God’s will for male-female relationships.

This is where Gilbert Bilezikian—gifted scholar and communicator, native of France, long-time Wheaton professor of theology, and a founding leader of Willow Creek Community Church—came in. He recognized Hurley as a worthy opponent, and, if you’ll pardon an insider pun, decided to go “head” to “head” with him. In *Beyond Sex Roles* (first edition, 1985), Bilezikian reverently explored the same passages of Scripture as Hurley had, and offered a meticulously-supported “second opinion” on its true meaning and intent.

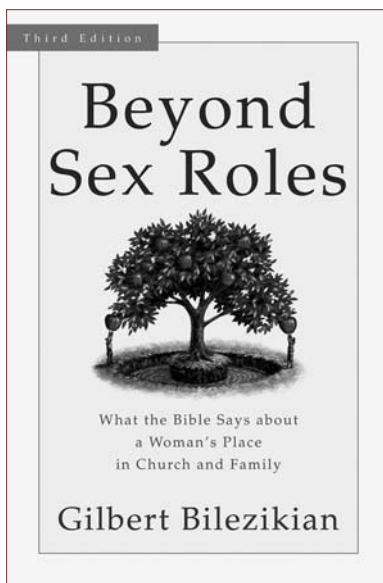
Reading Bilezikian in one hand and Hurley in the other is like having a ring-side seat while two heavyweights duke it out. There are no cheap shots or sneers in Bilezikian’s rebuttal, but there’s plenty of Gallic passion, and more than a little bracing wit and candor. He describes an anonymous former colleague, for example, as “a pompous and bombastic man” who managed to survive because his duties were fulfilled by an unsung female assistant “gifted with genius-level intelligence and a phenomenal capacity for hard work” (p. 9). Many can identify. Elsewhere he asserts that “by maintaining women in relations of dependency, men guarantee the infantilization of their female companions” (p. 162). He even dares to label the subjection of women as satanic in origin (p. 41). You get the idea. Bilezikian packs a punch.

Most importantly, *Beyond Sex Roles* offers strong proof that people who took the Bible very, very seriously could legitimately affirm gender equality and mutuality. Two years later Bilezikian helped found Christians for Biblical Equality, and in 1989 he helped write the CBE manifesto “Men, Women, and Biblical Equality.” The rest is our living history.

Through its three editions, the book’s main text and notes have remained relatively unchanged. In the third edition (2006), three new sections have been added at the end, replacing the polemical appendix from the second edition (1991). Frantic readers will appreciate the convenient new sixteen-page summary of the book. A series of ten “review exercises” encourages readers to engage Scripture directly as they sort things out for themselves. These two appendices were previously published in *Priscilla Papers*. The last innovation is an updated bibliography prepared by Alan Johnson.

Egalitarian scholarship has broadened and deepened since this pioneering work was first published. Understandably, many of its arguments have since been more fully

developed elsewhere. The book also contains some interpretations that have not survived the rigors of scholarly debate over the last twenty years. But what impresses me is how many features of *Beyond Sex Roles* anticipate (and undoubtedly helped shape) the current egalitarian consensus. One is the insight that gender equality is the goal of a progressively revealed and inexorably *restoring* movement of God’s Spirit through Scripture and history. Already back in the 1980s Bilezikian was drawing us into this hopeful and compelling vision. And the book was never about just gender. It is infused with the conviction that Christ was, and by his Spirit still is, dismantling all the vertical structures of power and oppression in fallen human society, in order to make way for one new, liberating and inclusive *community* of God. The author invites us to live ahead of the curve. For these and other reasons, this book has my vote for the CBE version of Cooperstown.



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