

BOOK REVIEW: THE EARTH MOTHER HERESY

ISUFFER NOT A WOMAN — Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence, by Richard and Catherine Clark Kroeger. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, IL, 1992. *Reviewer: W. Harold Fuller, Litt. D., a missiologist and author based in Toronto, Canada, and chairman of the Board of Deacons of a Baptist church.*

Until now, this reviewer had to acknowledge he simply did not understand Paul's statement: "I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man" (1 Tim 2:12).

No explanation rang scripturally true: e.g. "rabbinical male bias" or "a local cultural problem." Exceptions for women teaching or preaching ("only occasionally" or "under male authority" or "if there aren't male missionaries") sounded like semantics.

Now Richard and Catherine Clark Kroeger have opened a window of understanding. Their thesis posits that Paul's injunction in our versions is a *mistranslation* of an obscure verb, used only in this one scripture.

The authors carefully document that the original Greek, *authentain*, had several uses: "to have authority" was one; another was "to originate" (p. 101).

Building on ancient evidence, the Kroegers establish that Ephesus (Timothy's parish) was the seat of a grossly immoral Earth Mother religion which influenced Christopagan heresies. The cult taught that a goddess was the initiator not only of mankind, but of the Creator God himself (120). Men could receive mystic knowledge only through the goddess, consummated through sexual intercourse with the temple priestesses (97).

If *authentain* is translated as "originator," the passage could read: "I do not permit woman to teach nor to represent herself as originator of man." ["Teach nor represent" both referring grammatically to the heresy; 103.]

Paul, then, was not addressing culture, but dangerous theological error. It did not have to do with women teaching men, but with a pagan religion perverting the Church at Ephesus (57). He was appealing to women to learn the truth and refrain from teaching error (181).

This makes sense out of Paul's further statements about Adam's being created first and not being deceived (1 Tim 2:13,14). As one who defends the inerrancy of Scripture, I nevertheless always wondered why Paul, writer of the powerful apologetics of Romans, here seemed to resort to pettiness.

The Kroegers show that Paul was not being petty but was attacking this major heresy head on (124). The cult not only taught that Eve existed first (as the Earth Mother goddess) but also that she deceived Adam into thinking she had been taken from his side (122). Deception was a major tenet of the cult.

The book throws light on other controversial phrases such as "learn in silence," (76); "saved by childbearing," (26), but review space here permits considering only the core thesis.

If the Kroegers are right, why have Bible scholars not presented this alternative rendering long before now? Is it possible we have felt comfortable with a rendering which fit our world view, even if it seemed incongruous with biblical examples of women in teaching and leadership roles?

What do other evangelical reviews say about the book? Those I have read so far do not deny that *authentain* can also mean "to originate." Several of them, however, tend to "skirt around" the central issue of the Kroegers' thesis, finding fault with methodology and concentrating on other arguments about women's role.

Obviously, this healthy debate will continue. The Kroegers do not try to solve the sensitive question of women preachers, but they do argue for the scriptural use of spiritual gifts regardless of gender (14). And of course there are scriptures that describe the relationship of men and women in the family and in the church.

What does *I Suffer Not a Woman* imply to us? As a minimum, it means we can no longer honestly use 1 Tim 2:12 to prohibit spiritual women teaching and leading men (117). Even those who reject the Kroegers' thesis must admit that the alternative renderings of *authentain* make this particular "proof text" too uncertain for establishing a dogma.

However, the book left me with a disturbing question: Have we evangelicals, who rightly oppose contextualization that distorts scripture, innocently perpetuated a gross contextualization of this passage? That is, have we unquestioningly accepted a traditionally masculine hermeneutic, instead of researching the real meaning of *authentain* as used in 1 Tim 2:12?

If so, as the Kroegers point out (11), we have denied ourselves the benefit of some valuable spiritual gifts in the Body of Christ. And in the process, many gifted women, while wanting to obey what seemed a scriptural prohibition, have been deeply hurt (25).

One more relevant question: Does the Kroegers' alternative reading mean that Paul was addressing only a transitory problem? Not at all. For centuries missionaries in many cultures have had to face "Earth Mother" religions (e.g. *Pachamama* in South America). Now as the New Age Movement and radical feminism combine to promote an Earth Mother concept in our own society, the real import of 1 Tim 2:11-15 will become even more relevant.

The principles of God's Word are timeless and universally applicable!