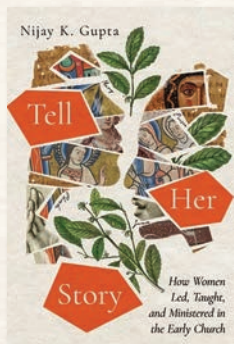


Book Review

Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church

By Brianna Cortez



Whereas most books on women in ministry primarily focus on contested Bible verses used to restrict women's leadership, Nijay K. Gupta's *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* takes a different approach. Gupta studies women throughout the Old and New Testament first, as if to say, *these* are the stories we need to

shape our view of women—the ones that depict what women did, how they served, and what the Spirit enabled them to do.

Part One: Before the Women of the Early Churches

When asked the question, “What can women do?” Gupta responds by asking, “What *did* they do?” He sets out to answer this question right from the beginning by highlighting one of the most interesting leaders from the Old Testament—Deborah. When Israel lacked direct and sustained leadership,¹ God used Deborah, a strong and wise prophet-judge, to deliver them.² No stone is left unturned here. Gupta spends a lot of time exploring the book of Judges, helping readers understand what a judge is, comparing Deborah to other judges of the Bible, and much more. Gupta expertly pushes back against common arguments that downplay Deborah's impact, such as, “There were no suitable men available.” He responds, “If we look at judges as a whole, especially Gideon and Samson, it is clear that they were not chosen for their virtue or strong faith. In fact, Deborah appears to be the most faithful, the most prophetically tuned into God, and the wisest of them all.”³ So when people say, “Women can't,” Gupta responds, “Deborah did!”⁴

Gupta also tackles Genesis 1–3. Long-time egalitarians will find themselves nodding along with most of the exegesis in this chapter, but those new to the subject will find a well-argued, non-hierarchical view of Genesis 1–2. According to Gupta, Adam and Eve are both made in the image of God, they were both given the task of ruling over the earth,⁵ and Eve was not Adam's subordinate helper but

his strong counterpart in accomplishing their God-given mission.⁶ Gupta describes the fall as an “unraveling” in which Adam and Eve's relationship with each other, God, and the garden falls apart.⁷ As such, patriarchy—men ruling over women—was not a part of God's initial plan but a symptom of this undoing.

It should be noted, however, that the implications of the word *teshuqah* (longing, desire) in Genesis 3:16 are highly debated by Bible scholars. Gupta briefly considers the word and seems to lean toward understanding the woman's longing as putting her at odds with the man, resulting in a struggle of wills rather than harmony.⁸ That said, it remains unclear where he lands on the issue, which may cause some readers to pause. Overall, though, readers will find the chapter on Genesis to be effective and concise.

Skipping forward in time, chapter three sets the scene of the ancient Greco-Roman world. What did it look like for women to live in a patriarchal society? Gupta acknowledges that the ancient Greco-Roman world was not a safe or ideal place for women. Women were looked down upon as gullible, easily tempted, and incapable of reason, and they rarely held positions of power.⁹ At the same time, Gupta points out that women (especially wealthy women) could break away from these social restraints.¹⁰ He speaks out against common misconceptions, such as the home being merely a private space, and shares a vast wealth of knowledge on social status, households, and patronage that all readers will appreciate.¹¹

Gupta ends Part One by briefly considering women throughout Jesus's ministry, including Mary (the mother of Jesus), Mary Magdalene, Elizabeth, Anna, the Samaritan woman, and others. Through these Bible women, he shows that women's voices can teach us about God,¹² that God gives women divine insight,¹³ and how women can be disciples.¹⁴

Part Two: Women in the Early Church

Part Two is the pinnacle of *Tell Her Story*. Gupta's expertise shines here as he helps readers take off their culture-tinted glasses. He impactfully shows that leadership in the early

church was different from the Greco-Roman culture as it “deviated from cultural tendencies to establish a power and status hierarchy.”¹⁵ This part also delves into Paul’s co-workers and their job descriptions. To Gupta’s best knowledge, *diakonoi* were “ministry providers” and leaders who served people,¹⁶ and the title *episkopos* was a more formal leadership position meaning “overseer.”¹⁷ He notes that although no one, woman or man, is named as an overseer, it would be natural for householders to be overseers.¹⁸ Therefore, the rare woman householder could have been an overseer as well. For elders, Gupta suggests that a group of older figures in the community were sought for their wisdom.¹⁹ Readers looking for answers to how the early church was structured will appreciate this section and, whether they ultimately agree or disagree, Gupta makes a compelling case.

While the previous chapters were powerful, the portions dedicated to specific women were captivating. This book is called *Tell Her Story*, after all! Among the women with their own chapters are Phoebe, Prisca, and Junia. Gupta also discusses a great host of other women throughout Paul’s letters (many of whom served as ministry leaders and overseers), including Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Julia, Nereus’s sister, Rufus’s mother, Lydia, Euodia, Syntyche, Apphia, and Nympha, and so many others. Women were serving and leading everywhere that men were.²⁰ As for Phoebe, Prisca, and Junia, Gupta is careful to let readers know what is speculative and what can be backed with evidence. For example, he is uncertain whether Phoebe read Paul’s letter out loud, though he finds it plausible. She was likely Paul’s trusted ministry agent who served the church on his behalf as a ministry provider.²¹ He argues that Prisca was more active in ministry than Aquila²² and the primary teacher of Apollos.²³ And lastly, for Junia, Gupta reveals that she was indeed an apostle and a woman.²⁴ These chapters are all rich with biblical and historical insights on these female leaders that readers will eagerly soak in.

What About. . . ?

Even though the book does not focus on “limiting” Bible verses, readers searching for answers to contested verses will not be completely disappointed. Gupta sheds light on 1 Timothy 2 and the household codes in Colossians 3 in his “What About. . . ?” section. Here, he shows that a fuller view of women in Scripture is not only desired but also essential to interpret and apply passages that appear to limit women’s leadership.

Overall, *Tell Her Story* brings the narratives of prominent women throughout God’s Word front and center, causing our misconceptions to fade into the background—a mere blip in the overarching story. From this vantage point, readers will soon realize that women leading alongside men was not a rare happenstance but common in God’s newly created order. So, can women lead the church? Gupta concludes that women in the early church certainly did.²⁵

Notes

1. Nijay Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2023), 13.
2. Gupta, 14.
3. Gupta, 15–16.
4. Gupta, 136.
5. Gupta, 23.
6. Gupta, 25.
7. Gupta, 27.
8. See pages 28–29.
9. Gupta, 31.
10. Gupta, 33.
11. Gupta, 39.
12. Gupta, 49.
13. Gupta, 54.
14. Gupta, 59.
15. Gupta, 71.
16. Gupta, 76.
17. Gupta, 76.
18. Gupta, 77.
19. Gupta, 78.
20. Gupta, 175.
21. Gupta, 102.
22. Gupta, 116.
23. Gupta, 120–21.
24. Gupta, 128–131.
25. Gupta, 175.

Brianna Cortez works for CBE International as the Educational Engagement Associate. She holds an MA in Intercultural Studies from Lincoln Christian University and has worked for churches, schools, and nonprofits in the United States and abroad. She is passionate about understanding how God calls women and men to imitate Christ and helping organizations create inclusive, Christ-centered, and sustainable ministries. Brianna currently lives with her husband, Cristian, in Wisconsin and enjoys reading lots of books.

