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Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos more perfectly in the way of the Lord. (Acts 18:26)

Editorial

Aesop's "The Grasshopper and the Ant" takes an interesting turn in some of its retellings. In its earliest forms, the fable commended hard work. The ant toiled ceaselessly all summer to store up food for the winter while the grasshopper sang and danced the long bright days away. When autumn turned to winter, the grasshopper, shivering with cold and hunger, stood outside the ant's door begging for shelter and food. Work hard, the fable says. Plan for the future.

Just after Napoleon III (1808–1873) took France into a disastrous war with Prussia, and ended up a prisoner of war, Jules-Joseph Lefebvre (1836–1911) painted *The Grasshopper*, taking inspiration from the fable. His grasshopper is female—a nude, worriedly chewing on a fingernail while standing among autumn leaves gusting around her feet. This "grasshopper" is the painter's reference to a foolhardy emperor who acted without having thought through his action. Lefebvre's *The Grasshopper* was one of many paintings titled as such in late nineteenth-century France, in which the grasshopper was represented by the metaphor of the beautiful *bohème*, a woman, often holding a musical instrument. The woman typified the person who idles, without a care for the future.

Why a woman rather than a man? Is it that women portray idleness more readily than men, who in our patriarchal cultures are the proverbial bread winners?

In this issue, we feature women at work. Susy Flory introduces Enheduanna (2334–2279 BC), the royal daughter of Sargon the Great of Mesopotamia. She is now recognized as the earliest litterateur in human history. This poet priestess composed hymns, earning for herself the epithet of "the Sumerian Shakespeare." The implication for biblical studies is the plausibility of female authorship for texts and books in both Testaments. Rudolf Gaisie

compares the attributes of Proverbs' Lady Wisdom with the defining virtues of the queen mother of the Akan people of Ghana. Both are women at work, being productive for the good of family and community.

Julie Walsh tracks women theologians across three centuries (sixteenth through eighteenth) to showcase the various kinds of arguments they made for biblical egalitarianism. They put their minds to work, wrote, and published, establishing a firm foundation for the scholars who succeeded them, and for multiple Christian movements.

Alison Gerber's sermon profiles Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus, as a "minister" in her desire to serve Jesus. Maybe a rather distracted and anxious minister, running herself off her feet, but a minister nonetheless. Indeed, she makes one of the most stupendous declarations of Jesus's identity in the gospels: "I know that you are the Messiah, the Son of God" (Jn 11:27).

On another track, Dezerai Seitzer presents an obstacle for women in ministerial work: gender-exclusive (male) language for God as a possible reason why women do not readily enter church ministry. She posits such language as justifying, maintaining and perpetuating a patriarchal church culture.

Women, just as much as men, are capable of both industry and idleness. The women in this issue are women who took their work seriously. Their diligent labor and the example they set as "ants" continues their impact down to the present day.

I pray that this issue of *Priscilla Papers* inspires us to serve together, side by side, in God's world.

Havilah Dharamraj
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The First Named Writer in History: Enheduanna (2334–2279 BC)

Susy Flory

I first met Enheduanna in 2023 at the Morgan Library in New York at “She Who Wrote,” a major exhibition centered around her writing. I will never forget the moment I walked through the door into a gallery filled with beautiful objects representing Mesopotamian women who lived and breathed before most of the history I am familiar with. The Morgan Library and Museum’s notable collection of cuneiform seals and clay tablets from Mesopotamia formed the core of the exhibition, enhanced by exhibits loaned from museums worldwide. The principal writer featured in the exhibition was Enheduanna—a Mesopotamian princess, priestess, and author. I walked through the exhibit as if I were in a dream. Could this be true? The first named writer in human history was a *woman*? I felt unsteady, my views of ancient women breaking and reforming right there in the grand rooms of the Morgan. For me, in the annals of ancient history, the words “woman” and “writer” had never belonged together before.

The question of whether ancient women were writing and communicating within their cultures’ forms of publication and distribution is a high-stakes one, with implications for women’s written, spoken, and editorial contributions from the time of Enheduanna, through the writing of the books of the Bible, to the early church, and especially for contemporary Christian women who write, speak, or teach.

Enheduanna and Her Writing

The compiler of the tablet [is] Enheduanna.

My lord, that which has been created [here] no one has created
[before].¹

(concluding lines of *The Temple Hymns*)

Enheduanna (2334–2279 BC) was a Mesopotamian princess and high priestess, the daughter of Sargon of Akkad, also known as Sargon the Great. She lived, worshiped, and wrote over 4,200 years ago, well before other ancients such as Hammurabi, Pharaoh Tut, or the biblical Moses. She left behind a literary legacy of poetry, prayers, hymns, and a personal narrative that in places reads like a memoir. Enheduanna’s writing is emotional, engaging, and intense, rich with vivid imagery and metaphor. The quality of her work and the effect it had on me as I stood in the exhibition reading translated passages was unexpected, to say the least. At times I was moved to tears.

Enheduanna, whose name means “high priestess, ornament of heaven” in Sumerian, was in a long line of priestesses both before and after her tenure, and she served at the temple of the moon god Nanna in the powerful and prosperous southern Mesopotamian city of Ur, familiar to Christians as the home of Abram and Sarai, who lived much later, (about 300 years after the dynasty of King Sargon the Great, Enheduanna’s father). Before Sargon’s reign,

Mesopotamia was populated both by the Sumerians, who lived in independent settlements in southern Mesopotamia along the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and by the Akkadians in mountainous northern Mesopotamia. The land of the Sumerians eventually became known as Babylonia, while that of the Akkadians was later known as Assyria. Two of the most prominent Sumerian city-states were Ur, which was watched over by Nanna, god of the moon, and Uruk, watched over by Inanna, goddess of love and war. By contrast, the Akkadians “believed that gods and goddesses were as numerous as the stars, and that they could change which deity they worshipped at any time.”²

Enheduanna’s father Sargon united most of Mesopotamia under his authority and established the world’s first empire, ruling it for fifty-six years. He appointed his daughter to oversee the temples and cults in the web of sixty-five city-states under his rule. Enheduanna wielded significant religious, political, and economic power as her father’s representative in the newly minted empire.

Enheduanna composed and edited hymns and poems to the Sumerian Inanna and the Akkadian Ishtar. She merged the two goddesses and thereby assimilated the two religions into one, furthering the unity of the kingdom. As a result of her literary work and privileged status, “Sargon’s conquered cities echoed morning, noon, and night with the chanting of Enheduanna’s sacred songs.”³ Her “Hymn to Inanna” reads something like a biblical psalm, elevating Inanna over and above any other god: “Queen of vast heart, wild lady . . . Lady of glory, who reaps the powers of heaven and earth . . . It is she who rules the gods . . . She has seized the shepherd’s staff and become their great leader” (lines 1–10).⁴

Enheduanna portrays the goddess as active, powerful, emotional, and in charge of the elements:

She whirls chaos and confusion at those who disobey her,
hurrying havoc, hastening the flood, dressed in a dreadful
gleam . . . she splits the blazing, furious storm, the whirlwind
billows around her as if it were a dress . . . sitting on leashed
lions, Inana rips apart those who feel no fear of her . . . she is a
pit for the wayward, a trap for the wicked, a snare for the enemy.
(lines 15–22)⁵

She also holds Inanna up as wise, watchful, and the perfect ruler:

You rule to perfection in heaven and earth, holding all things
in your hand: Queen! You are mighty, no one can pass ahead of
you . . . is there any god like you? You reap the harvest of heaven
and earth. You are might, your name is sacred, you alone are
mighty. (lines 212–18)⁶

Significantly, in line 219 the poet claims authorship, which she does also in “The Exaltation of Inanna”: “I am Enheduanna, the high priestess.”

The Temple Hymns is the longest work we have from Enheduanna, a collection of forty-two hymns dedicated to the greatness of the temples of Sumer. The hymns are brief, invoking each temple by name as a holy site and describing the features of the temple in rich metaphorical language. *The Temple Hymns* feature deities and cities we know next to nothing about, so this work of literature serves as something of a time capsule. An example is Enheduanna’s hymn dedicated to the Temple of Nanna in Ur, where she served as high priestess:

Shrine, most sacred place in heaven and earth.
House of Nanna. Your front is a king, your rear is a throne, your
feast is a song, and your great holy halls are the sacred drums.
You shine with the light of righteous rule, of precious fates.
Home of high priestesses. Noble shrine of holy powers.
(lines 105–110)⁷

“The Exaltation of Inanna” is Enheduanna’s masterpiece. Translator Sophus Helle calls this poem her most complex. Of interest to us is that this is the composition in which Enheduanna tells her own story, starting halfway through the hymn. She tells how she served as high priestess faithfully, but after King Sargon died, violence increased. Sargon’s son Rimush took the throne and faced the same challenges as his father, with multiple insurrections challenging the legitimacy of his rule and destabilizing the empire.

One rebel named Lugal-Ane invaded and ransacked the temple, killing the attendants before threatening Enheduanna. She describes her emotions at being beaten, stripped of her titles as princess and priestess, and sent into exile:

I am Enheduanna, I
Am the high priestess.
I carried the basket of offerings, I sang
The hymns of joy . . .
Lugal-Ane⁸ stood in
Triumph, he stepped
Out from the temple.
I felt like a swallow
Swooping through a
Window—my life is
All spent . . .
He took the crown of the high priestess from me, giving me
A knife and dagger instead. “These suit
You better,” he said. (lines 67–108)⁹

As Enheduanna recounts the story in verse form, including what is perhaps a metaphorical account of her rape—“giving me a knife and dagger”—she presents the deadly conflict with her attacker like a court case, with the gods as judges deciding her fate. She prays to the moon god Nanna. Then she turns to Inanna herself, asking the goddess to rule in her favor, to take up her power and reclaim her greatness. And then she beseeches the other gods to recognize Inanna’s might. Enheduanna’s words eventually fail her: “My honey-mouth is full of froth, my soothing words are turned to dust” (lines 72–73).¹⁰

Figure 1. Tablet inscribed with “The Exaltation of Inanna.” Mesopotamia, possibly Larsa (modern Tell Senkereh). Old Babylonian period, ca. 1750 BC. Yale Babylonian Collection.

Photo by Susy Flory.



Lugal-Ane was eventually defeated by Enheduanna’s nephew Naram-Sin, who regained control over Ur. He restored his aunt to her position in the temple, and she served for a short time before she died. Enheduanna’s legacy grew with succeeding priestesses living and working in the same temple, singing her psalms and reciting her poems for well over a thousand years. Later, her work was used in schools to train scribes (1894–1525 BC) who left behind hundreds of clay practice tablets reproducing her words.¹¹ Eventually, Enheduanna disappeared from history—from schools and from literary memory.

Archeological Discovery and Historical Perspective

Scholars now call Enheduanna “the Sumerian Shakespeare” because of her monumental impact on the history of writing,¹² though she was not discovered until the British archeologist Leonard Wooley’s excavation of Ur in the 1920s. In 1927, archaeological work in Iraq uncovered figurines depicting her, along with her words and her name, on tablets, sacred objects, and cylinder seals.



Figure 2. Seated female figure with tablet on lap. Mesopotamia, Neo-Sumerian, Ur III period (ca. 2112–2004 BC). Alabaster. Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin.

Photo by Susy Flory.

The Morgan exhibition featured representations of Enheduanna and other Mesopotamian priestesses in the form of carved stone figurines and finely carved cylinder seals. Unique among them was an alabaster disk about the circumference of a dinner plate, bearing both her carved image and her name. One unforgettable figurine, thought to be Enheduanna herself, is of a woman sitting on what appears to be a throne. She is dressed and styled like a high priestess of that era, a circlet on her head, hands clasped in devotion, and on her lap a flat rectangular object with incised columns. This

representation of a columnar clay tablet used for cuneiform writing associates the priestess with educated status and with influence. As a votive, the object bears a written text as her offering.

Figure 2.
Front view.

Photo by Susy Flory.



There are four existing statues like this depicting enthroned women with tablets on their laps, all dating from the Akkadian period, late third and early second millennia BC.¹³ These figurines are part of a larger group from the same era and location in Iraq depicting high status women on thrones with ornate long dresses, featuring intricate hairstyles and wearing the circlets associated with high priestesses. At the time of their discovery, what little interest they garnered seemed to focus on particularities of clothing, posture, and facial expressions. The tablets in their laps were almost entirely ignored by those who uncovered them, along with the possibility that these women were holding an important symbol that might identify them as scribes, poets, administrators, or other categories of writers.

The prominent tablets on the laps of these carved figures must be interpreted in the context of persons occupying high-ranking public offices, running businesses, working as scribes, and “engaging in poetic and literary production, all of which either depended on or actively engaged with writing.”¹⁴ But since the lives and work of women in the ancient world have been conceptualized as almost wholly in the domestic sphere, these material examples of women communicators and influencers have been almost entirely overlooked.

Yet archeologists uncovered, and scholars have accepted, the fact that the largest known Sumerian administrative archive of 1,600 cuneiform tablets was run by two women named Dimtur and Baranamtara, wives of the rulers of Sumerian city-states, who were recorded as taking an active role in “running the institution,” which, as of the twenty-fourth century BC, included agriculture, bread and beer production, textiles and trade.¹⁵ These two women administrators and supervisors were among many educated and capable women who served prominent roles in Mesopotamian society, business, and religion.

Enheduanna, too, must have supervised hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people in her role as head priestess. What is more, she had her own scribes, Sagadu and [x]-kitus-du, identified on two cylinder seals belonging to Enheduanna’s estate supervisor, named Adda.¹⁶ Enheduanna and her contemporaries were professionals. They retained power as public influencers and communicators, and some of them as writers. Examples of female scribes include Princess Simatum in northern Mesopotamia, whose dowry included a female scribe, and a noblewoman and high priestess named

Princess Ninshatapada, who introduced herself in a document as a “woman-scribe.”¹⁷

In Enheduanna’s case, her identification as a writer is affirmed and authenticated by her historical identity as high priestess of the power center of her father King Sargon’s far-reaching empire; by her appointment to oversee all of the cultic centers and temples of the city-states; by the statues, cylinder seals, and other material evidence portraying Enheduanna in her role as priestess or holding a writing tablet; by the personal details and self-proclaimed authorship in her literary works; and by the use of her work to train an untold number of scribes in scribal schools over a period of centuries. The evidence is a form of testimony; Enheduanna could read, and she could write.

Her literary work was not translated into English until the 1960s, when William Hallo, assisted by J. J. A. van Dijk, made a detailed scholarly study of Enheduanna’s poem, “The Exaltation of Inanna.” Translation proved difficult, for the longer Sumerian works are often incomplete, although new or more complete manuscripts are still being discovered, “filling these holes one by one.”¹⁸ Each Sumerian work or fragment discovered furthers our knowledge and understanding of the Sumerian language and its literature. But what has been discovered so far of Enheduanna’s work displays notable style and substance, along with a personal and emotionally charged relationship with the deities she served. What is more, some scholars have argued for the possibility of her literary influence on “Old Testament psalms and lamentations, Homeric poetry, [and] the sacred oratorios.”¹⁹ Today Enheduanna is being called the first named writer in human history.

Writing in the Ancient World

Authorship is fairly clear in our world—all we have to do to determine authorship of a literary work is look at the name or names underneath the title. On occasion, a pseudonym or ghostwriter complicates the attribution, but with a little research the names of the author and collaborator are available. Authorship in the ancient world was not as clear, however. There are many reasons for this, including that there were no publishing companies and no copyright laws to define and confirm author names and identities. In addition, many ancient writings are in fragments today, with authors, dates, and complete tablets or manuscripts unavailable. Thus, even though there is material evidence for Enheduanna’s authorship, some dissenting voices have argued for her as an author in name only.

The word “writer” means something different today than in the ancient world. We would typically think of a writer as someone who composes and writes down a literary work and then finds some sort of publishing system to get that work into the hands of as many readers as possible.

In the ancient world, because writing and oration were so closely related, a writer would often speak their ideas or stories out loud, or perhaps gather up others’ spoken and remembered ideas and stories and retell those. Then, if they had the resources, they might have that content written down by a trained secretary (often called a scribe. Enheduanna had her own scribe, which increases the probability

that she was, in fact, the author of her works.) Lastly, these literary works were typically distributed on a limited basis to friends and family, and rarely beyond. While Enheduanna's elite literary talent might have been an exception, her literacy itself and her public influence on the affairs of the Mesopotamian city-states was not, for women contributed to public life in that era. To be sure, there was a high level of writing collaboration. Various people were involved in contributing source material and stories, along with brainstorming, shaping, writing, editing, and distributing. Collections of stories or other kinds of content (many the result of oral transmission) were sometimes gathered, "published," and attributed to a certain author though that person did not create all of the content. That could be the case here, with Enheduanna's associates, whether priests or priestesses, scribes or secretaries, collaborating at different levels on some of the work. This would not detract from her as the primary author, however, just as the contributions of one of Paul's associates as coauthor, amanuensis, or presenter would not detract from his primary authorship of his epistles.

It is difficult to know how widespread the ability to read or write was in the ancient world. Because no statistics were kept on literacy, no one knows the precise education levels and literacy rates for women in the ancient world. But only an elite percentage of the population was literate. A writer was more likely a person of status such as an orator or philosopher, a teacher or rabbi, a ruler or monarch, or some other wise or powerful person. It was much harder for an ordinary person to get the education and practice needed, along with opportunities to be "published."²⁰ This is somewhat like the challenge of publishing today, with publishing and distribution slots often going to the highly educated and well-connected writer, rather than a hobbyist. Enheduanna fits into this privileged category.

There is emerging evidence—both textual and archeological—of female orators, philosophers, teachers, and scribes from the Mesopotamian world up into the biblical world, the early church, and beyond. While Enheduanna did not serve the God of the Bible, her life and work do show that religious women in her era and part of the world could not only be literate, but could produce stunning works of literature. Later, in the Greco-Roman world and beyond, women increasingly became prolific producers and consumers of books, right up until today, when the majority of Christian books are purchased and read by women.²¹

**The thought of women in the ancient world
as storytellers, writers, and speakers is
beyond the realm of imagination for most.
The assumption is that men wrote but
women did not.**

The Mechanisms of Silence

The first eyes to alight upon Mesopotamian statues of women did not see the writing tablet on the lap, the throne chair, the clothing

and headdress for what they actually were—important clues to who these women were and what roles they inhabited. Women of this time period are often conceptualized as confined to domestic duties—cooking, cleaning, and raising babies—securely under the thumbs of fathers, husbands, or owners. Women are also thought of as uneducated and illiterate, capable perhaps of running a market stall. The thought of women in the ancient world as storytellers, writers, and speakers is beyond the realm of imagination for most. The assumption is that men wrote but women did not. Unfortunately, this construct has long endured. Today, however, scholars are finally beginning to see these figurines as evidence for women writers and communicators in the ancient world.

Because academia has been primarily made up of male scholars with their own biases and interests, women have been viewed through the lens of either the virtuous wife or the scheming temptress. Neither image makes space for a woman gifted with words, ideas, and stories, including inside the pages of the Bible. Is it possible the writings and communications of women in the ancient world have been in plain sight, but overlooked? What led to this lack of attention to the evidence for women who told their stories? How can we uncover these women and what they wrote? If women were writing and communicating during the Mesopotamian era, is it possible women later were talking and writing about what they saw and experienced in and around the time of Jesus and the early church? If so, where did their writings end up? Are some of them evident, but uncredited, in portions of the Bible?

Women authors are interested in and write about, among other things, the detailed thoughts, emotions, and experiences of women, or of a particular woman, as Enheduanna did. Compared to male authors, women typically treat women with more sympathy in their works.²² Thus, when looking at ancient literature, including biblical texts, paying attention to the depictions of women—especially when they include intimate details, thoughts, and emotions—can provide clues to authorship. Did women writers contribute to biblical texts?²³ Enheduanna was an established author millennia before the Bible was written and put together. Why could not women communicators and writers have contributed to the Bible?

A Modern Example

Women writers in the ancient world were active communicators who wrote, but the evidence has been overlooked, misinterpreted, and even discarded. Here is a quick case study: Hedy Lamarr (1914–2000), who appeared in dozens of movies and was known to some as "the most beautiful woman in the world" during Hollywood's Golden Age, was also a lifelong inventor. As a young girl, Lamarr repeatedly took apart and reassembled an intricate music box to understand the machine. Later, at the height of her stardom and concerned about the outcome of World War II, she developed a concept for radio waves, called "frequency hopping," to make Allied torpedoes untraceable by the Nazis. She shared the design with the U.S. Navy, filing for a patent with a co-inventor in 1941. Her brilliant and innovative work was summarily dismissed at the time, with no credit or remuneration. Much later, she found out the invention was used without her knowledge. Today, however, her work has finally been recognized, and she is often called "the mother of Wi-Fi," her invention and her brilliance acknowledged. Quite unexpectedly,

Lamarr's work has helped make possible global wireless communication technologies such as Wi-Fi, GPS, and Bluetooth.²⁴ But because her beauty and sex appeal was captured and amplified on the big screen, many people—even highly intelligent people—could not reconcile that a brilliant mind crackling with fiery energy, innovative problem-solving, and a passionate imagination resided inside the body of a woman who looked and performed like Lamarr.

Words written down have a way of traveling beyond our smaller circles of conversation and living beyond us. "Writing is the way the dead talk to the living," musician and artist Laurie Anderson said.²⁵ One of the psalmists expressed this: "Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the LORD" (Psalm 102:18 NIV). So why have we not heard much about Enheduanna? When it comes to ancient women's lived experience, all we have are fragments—scraps of letters, poetry, and songs. There is not as much existing evidence for ancient women who wrote as there is for men. But women did write, and read, and compose, and create, and we have Enheduanna's work as a key example. We have her own words. So, we must bring to the table our historical imagination to recover the stories of this woman, and of many others, who wrote long ago. The implications for biblical studies are exciting, and the newer scholarship around Enheduanna and her writing legacy challenges the narrative of widespread illiteracy among women of the later Greco-Roman world.

Conclusion

As a writer, speaker and teacher who grew up in churches that did not encourage women to lead, for most of my life I did not know that women have been speaking, teaching, and writing for thousands of years—since the church began and well before. For women gifted with words, for writers and speakers, for communicators and influencers who want to follow God, serve the church, and spread the gospel message, knowing that women did this before us is liberating. Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to the U. S. Congress, was famously quoted as saying: "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring in a folding chair."²⁶ For many thousands of years, uncredited storytelling, writing, and speaking have been for women a folding chair at the dinner table of ideas, religion, and influence. As far as we know, Enheduanna was the first.

Notes

1. Sidney Babcock, Erhan Tamur, and Pierpont Morgan Library, eds., *She Who Wrote: Enheduanna and Women of Mesopotamia, ca. 3400–2000 BC* (Morgan Library & Museum, 2022), 18.
2. Kate Ravilious, "Priestess, Poet, Politician," *Archaeology: A Publication of the Archaeological Institute of America* (Nov/Dec 2022).
3. Babcock and Tamur, *She Who Wrote*, 28.
4. Sophus Helle, *Enheduana: The Complete Poems of the World's First Author* (Yale University Press, 2023), 23. ("Enheduanna" is sometimes instead spelled with one "n.")
5. Helle, *Enheduana*, 24–25.
6. Helle, *Enheduana*, 46.
7. Helle, *Enheduana*, 64.
8. The attacker's name has also been translated as Lugalanne, a military general who led the cities of Ur and Uruk in an uprising.
9. Helle, *Enheduana*, 12–15.
10. Helle, *Enheduana*, 4.

11. Babcock and Tamur, *She Who Wrote*, 178.
12. Babcock and Tamur, *She Who Wrote*, 30.
13. Babcock and Tamur, *She Who Wrote*, 65. All four figures were at the exhibition, on loan from the Louvre, the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, the Istanbul Museum of the Ancient Orient, and the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin.
14. Babcock and Tamur, *She Who Wrote*, 77.
15. Babcock and Tamur, *She Who Wrote*, 77.
16. Babcock and Tamur, *She Who Wrote*, 77.
17. Babcock and Tamur, *She Who Wrote*, 78.
18. Helle, *Enheduana*, xviii.
19. Babcock and Tamur *She Who Wrote*, 30.
20. Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (Yale University Press, 1995) 82.
21. Nielsen Books and Consumers, "Onward and Upward: Christian Book Titles See Sales Rise Higher and Higher" (Aug, 2015). <https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2015/onward-and-upward-christian-book-titles-see-sales-rise-higher/>.
22. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 82.
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Historical Egalitarian Theology: Contributions from European and English Women in the Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries

Julie Walsh

Although specific women who promoted egalitarian theologies since the Reformation have been studied, scholarship has not adequately traced the origins of their egalitarian beliefs. It can be shown that from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, a steady stream of European and English women wrote texts offering biblical views for women's equal roles in the home, church, and world.

*The Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide*¹ makes clear that many contemporary lines of reasoning for women's equality have their earliest beginnings in these sixteenth- through eighteenth-century writings by women. Including a few from North America, the writings of these women are highlighted in this study: Domenica Narducci da Paradiso (1473–1533), Argula von Grumbach (1492–ca. 1563/68), Marie Dentièrre (1495–ca. 1561), Katharina Zell (ca. 1498–1562), Teresa of Ávila (1515–82), Moderata Fonte (1555–92), Justina Sengers (fl. 1585), Rachel Speght (ca. 1597–ca. 1661), Bathsua Makin (ca. 1600–after 1675), Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–52), Sarah Cheevers (ca. 1608–ca. 1664), Margaret Fell (1614–1702), Katherine Evans (ca. 1618–92), Mary Cary (b. 1620/21, fl. 1647–53), Anne Docwra (ca. 1624–1710), Hester Biddle (1629/30–97), Johanna Eleonora Petersen (1644–1724), Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–95), Mary Astell (1666–1731), Susanna Wesley (1669–1742), Elizabeth Bathurst (fl. 1678–85), Anne Dutton (ca. 1692–1765), Mary Bosanquet Fletcher (1739–1815), Dorothy Gott (1747/48–1812), Jarena Lee (1783–ca. 1849), Phoebe Palmer (1807–74), Catherine Booth (1829–90), Amanda Berry Smith (1837–1915), and Frances Elizabeth Willard (1839–1898). The foundational thoughts and works by these twenty-nine women enable contemporary authors to retain and build the ongoing tradition of egalitarian scholarship.

Categories of Egalitarian Arguments

Using a modification of Paul Chilcote's categories, the following categories of egalitarian biblical arguments are well established:²

1. *Questioned Prohibitionism*. Refuting interpretations of the prohibition of women in key biblical texts (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:12).
2. *Pauline Egalitarianism*. Egalitarian statements in Pauline texts (e.g., Gal 3:28).
3. *Apostolic Practice*. Women's leadership illustrates NT egalitarian practices (e.g., Rom 16:1–15).
4. *Messianic Witness*. Examples from Jesus's teachings and ministry (e.g., John 4:7–39; Matt 28:1–11).
5. *Biblical Exceptionalism*. Evidence of women used by God in the Bible.
6. *Prophetic Fulfillment*. OT prophecies referred to in the NT unveil a time when men and women will function as equals in God's realm (e.g., Joel 2:28–29/Acts 2:17–18).

7. *New Dispensation*. NT ideas that support women's equality in the new dispensation of Christ and the Spirit.
8. *Egalitarian Narrative*. These theories propose a new narrative theology about God's actions concerning women from the Bible's beginning to end.

We will see how these arguments can be identified in the publications of women who wrote in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Before that, we briefly review the sixteenth century for egalitarian arguments contributed by women. Throughout this article, these eight categories will be noted, in italics, when appropriate.

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Europe: Reformation Period (Sixteenth Century)

Books authored before the Reformation by women advocating Christian egalitarianism are scarce. As Mary Malone says,

Most Christian women throughout history had been forbidden access to the Christian scriptures, whether through almost universal illiteracy as a result of deliberate exclusion from education, or because of the intentional barring of women from study of the sacred texts.³

Further, before the Reformation and even afterwards, very few women's writings were preserved by the church. For instance, during the Inquisition in 1580, Teresa of Ávila's *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (1566–1571) was ordered to be destroyed. We have access to it today only because a few copies were hidden.⁴

Despite these circumstances and more, we have several extant contributions from women dating up to the seventeenth century in the categories cited above. Consider Domenica Narducci da Paradiso (1507) from Italy, who argued that since Paul does not limit the freedom of the Spirit (*New Dispensation*) he was writing about women who were making too much noise during their church services in 1 Cor 14:34–35 (*Questioned Prohibitionism*). She added that God enables women to speak, preach, and prophesy to

confound the proud (1 Cor 1:27–29).⁵ Teresa of Ávila, writing in Spain from 1562 to 1582, was described by a papal nuncio as one who “teaches theology as if she was a doctor of the Church.”⁶ In response to church officials citing Paul’s letters opposing her leadership, Teresa countered with a hermeneutical principle: “they shouldn’t follow just one part of Scripture, but . . . should look at other parts, and ask them if they can by chance tie my [God’s] hands.”⁷ She also taught that Mary Magdalene was an apostle to the disciples, and she herself often closely identified with Mary (*Messianic Witness*).⁸

Among the Reformers, women like Argula von Grumbach in Bavaria, Marie Dentière in Geneva, and Katharina Zell in France provided biblical and theological support for women’s leadership. Grumbach (1523) justified her own prolific teaching with her sense of having a prophetic role as did many women in the Bible (*Biblical Exceptionalism*).⁹ “I don’t intend to bury my talent, if the Lord gives me grace,” Grumbach said.¹⁰ Dentière (1539) defended women’s ability to interpret Scripture and teach other women by giving examples of OT women (*Biblical Exceptionalism*) and women preaching in the Gospels (*Messianic Witness*). Dentière also countered a false interpretation that women should be silent (1 Cor 14:34) with instances of the grace given to women to “speak, preach, and declare [Jesus’s resurrection] to others” and the Samaritan woman of John 4 (*Questioned Prohibitionism*): “What preacheress has done more than the Samaritan woman, who was not ashamed to preach Jesus and his word, confessing it openly before all the world, as soon as she heard from Jesus that one must adore God in spirit and in truth?”¹¹ Similarly, Dentière recognized that the “Queen of Sheba had such wisdom that she is not only named in the Old Testament, but Jesus also named her among other sages.”¹²

Writing from France between 1524 and 1553, Zell used *Pauline Egalitarianism* and *Prophetic Fulfillment* to counter the text of 1 Cor 14:34 (*Questioned Prohibitionism*). She said, “You remind me . . . that the Apostle Paul told women to be silent in Church. I would remind you of the word of this same apostle that in Christ there is no longer male nor female and of the prophecy of Joel: ‘I will pour forth my spirit upon all flesh and your sons and your daughters will prophesy.’” Then, wittily, she compared her critique of those men to the words of Balaam’s ass: “I do not pretend to be John the Baptist rebuking the Pharisees. I do not claim to be Nathan upbraiding David. I aspire only to be Balaam’s ass, castigating his master.”¹³ Furthermore, Zell identified herself in her writings with the prophet Anna.¹⁴ Justitia Sengers (1586), a woman born blind, defended herself as a theological author by referencing Miriam, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Monica—women who praised God and wrote songs (*Biblical Exceptionalism*).¹⁵

With the exceptions of *Apostolic Practice* and *Egalitarian Narrative*, sixteenth-century European women used largely the same arguments writers rely on today,

England: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Women continued to minister and publish biblical and theological defenses for their leadership in early modern Britain. Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld explain: “The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provided women with more opportunities for ministry

than they had previously enjoyed, but only if they were willing to defy male leadership in the institutionalized churches or be associated with sectarian movements and endure the scorn of respectable society.”¹⁶ They continue: “But even when women such as Margaret Fell Fox sought to open the door for women through carefully reasoned scriptural arguments, there was no room for debate in theological circles. Women were admonished to keep silent in the churches, and the vast majority did.”¹⁷ In most denominations, arguments in favor of egalitarianism made by women were not supported by male theologians and pastors. We will treat these arguments using the eight categories listed earlier.

1. *Questioned Prohibitionism*

Questioned Prohibitionism counters interpretations of the prohibition of women in certain biblical texts. Over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many women such as Rachel Speght,¹⁸ Margaret Fell Fox,¹⁹ Anne Docwra, Johanna Eleonora Petersen, Juana Inés de la Cruz, Mary Astell,²⁰ and Mary Bosanquet Fletcher contributed arguments supporting the *Questioned Prohibitionism* category, usually appealing to a canonical interpretation such as Teresa of Ávila had used previously.²¹ Speght (1617), however, carefully exegeted 1 Tim 2:14, 1 Cor 7:1, and Eccl 7:28.²²

Fell Fox (1666), called the “Mother of Quakerism,” wrote from prison her most famous pamphlet supporting women.²³ Concerning 1 Cor 14:26–35, Fell Fox noted that “here the Man is commanded to keep silence as well as the woman, when they are in confusion and out of order.”²⁴ Moreover, she saw the women commanded to keep silent (1 Cor 14:34–35) as women still under the Law who had not come to Christ or the “Spirit of Prophesie” (1 Cor 11:4–5, Rom 10:4), for “he is the end of the Law for Righteousness to all them that believe.”²⁵ Additionally, Fell Fox recognized that Paul cannot be addressing all women since not all women have husbands (to consult with), and because Paul did not forbid Philip’s daughters from prophesying.²⁶ As for Paul’s injunction that a woman should not “usurp authority over” her husband (1 Tim 2:12), Fell Fox took the position that this says nothing about whether a woman can preach or speak in church.²⁷ She also suggested that the women addressed in 1 Tim 2:9–15 are the same as those mentioned in 1 Tim 5:11–15 who “grew wanton, and were busie-bodies, and tatlers, and kicked against Christ.”²⁸

There were other women of this period who interpreted the passages related to *Questioned Prohibitionism*. Though an English Quaker, Docwra (1683) used the hermeneutic of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England to dispute some views of 1 Tim 2:11–12. She said: “The Protestant-Religion forbids the expounding one place of Scripture to make it repugnant to another.” In support, she offered biblical examples of women preaching, Peter’s sermon using Joel (Joel 2:28–29/Acts 2:17–18), and Paul’s teaching in Galatians 3:28.²⁹ In Mexico, de la Cruz (1691) questioned the prohibition on women’s teaching by referring to the Roman Catholic Church’s recognition of the teachings of Bridget (c. 451–525), Gertrude (1256–1302), Teresa (1515–82), Maria of Agreda (1602–1665), and others.³⁰ As a Pietist, Petersen (1696) believed that 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:12 did not apply to her because “just as in Christ Jesus according to the giving of grace and the Spirit, neither man nor woman count (Gal. 3:28), so also grace and the gift of God are not to be dampened or

suppressed in a female person, according to the admonition of Paul (1 Thess. 5:19)” and 1 Cor 12:7.³¹

Astell (1706) asserted that Paul in 1 Cor 14:34–35 “argues only for decency and Order, according to the present Custom and State of things” with the proper standards of dress so that no inequality can be inferred (1 Cor 11:8) since “Praying and Prophecy in the Church are allow’d the Women.”³² Astell acknowledged that there is “no natural Inferiority among the Divine Persons, but that they are in all things Coequal”; therefore, the two genders must be “on a Level” in 1 Cor 11:8. Moreover, in 1 Cor 11:12 “the Relation between the two Sexes is mutual, and the Dependence Reciprocal, both of them Depending entirely upon GOD, and upon Him only.”³³

In the same vein as others before her, Bosanquet Fletcher (1771) wrote to John Wesley about the so-called prohibitive passages, declaring that 1 Tim 2:12 conveys only that a wife should not take authority over her husband or teach by usurping authority and that 1 Cor 14:34–35 deals with women disrupting, who should not meddle in church government.³⁴ If 1 Cor 14:34–35 is not interpreted in this way and is seen more generally as forbidding women to speak in church, Bosanquet Fletcher points to the internal contradictions that would conflict with Paul’s declarations in other passages, alluding to 1 Cor 11:5.³⁵ Chilcote views Fletcher’s letter as a significant turning point in Wesley’s life, as Wesley then not only *permitted* women’s activities if they had received an “extraordinary call” from God but also began to *encourage* women who felt compelled to the vocation of preaching.³⁶ Without access to the original Greek texts or to present-day knowledge of Greco-Roman culture, these women generally interacted only with translated texts.

Speght (1617) asserted the “good”-ness of women because of the promise of salvation in Gal 3:28—“male and female are all one in Christ Jesus”—countering centuries of enumeration of women’s flaws.³⁹

2. *Pauline Egalitarianism*

Pauline Egalitarianism foregrounds egalitarian statements in Pauline texts. This approach was employed by Rachel Speght, Margaret Fell Fox, Anne Docwra, Johanna Eleonora Petersen, Mary Astell,³⁷ and Anne Dutton.³⁸

Speght (1617) asserted the “good”-ness of women because of the promise of salvation in Gal 3:28—“male and female are all one in Christ Jesus”—countering centuries of enumeration of women’s flaws.³⁹ Fell Fox referred to Paul’s ideas that if women are weak, God’s strength is manifest in weakness (2 Cor 12:9), and that God chooses weak and despised things to bring to naught the things

that are (1 Cor 1:28).⁴⁰ Docwra (1683) and Petersen (1696) likewise pointed to the idea of equality in Paul’s Gal 3:28,⁴¹ and Astell (1700) used many biblical examples of women to further substantiate the Gal 3:28 message.⁴² Dutton (1750) responded to those who would silence her female voice by saying that all believers are gifted and commanded to be useful (1 Cor 12:1–31) and to share how Christ has impacted their lives.⁴³

3. *Apostolic Practice*

Apostolic Practice takes into consideration statements about female coworkers that illustrate NT egalitarian practices. Prominent among those who took this approach were Hester Biddle,⁴⁴ Margaret Fell Fox, and Mary Astell.

When Biddle (1662), a Quaker, was arrested for preaching to two to three hundred people, she justified herself to the court saying, “*Phoebe was a Prophetesse* [Rom. 16:1] and *Philip had four Daughters that prophesied* [Acts 21:9], and *Paul* wrote to his Brethren that they should take care of *the women that were fellow labourers with him in the Gospel* [Phil. 4:3].”⁴⁵ Following Biddle, fellow Quaker Fell Fox (1667) argued, “If the Apostle would have had Womens speaking stopt, and did not allow of them, why did he entreat his true Yoak-fellow to help those Women who laboured with him in the Gospel? Phil. 4.3.”⁴⁶ Also, “we do not read that he [Apollos] despised what Priscilla said because she was a Woman, as many now do.”⁴⁷ Fell Fox asked: “And why did the Apostles joyn together in Prayer and Supplication with the Women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his Brethren, Acts 1:14 if they had not allowed, and had union and fellowship with the Spirit of God, wherever it was revealed in Women as well as others?”⁴⁸ Later Astell continued with the idea that Priscilla as well as Aquila catechized Apollos, yet Paul found no fault with this. Rather, he referred to the two as “my helpers in Christ Jesus” (Rom 16:3).⁴⁹

4. *Messianic Witness*

In the category of *Messianic Witness*, evidence is offered from Jesus’s teachings and ministry supporting the ministry of women. Contributing in this area were Arcangela Tarabotti, Margaret Fell Fox, Anne Dutton, and Jarena Lee, among others.⁵⁰

From Venice, Tarabotti (*Paternal Tyranny*, 1654) observed that Jesus treated women as equals with men.⁵¹ Fell Fox acknowledged that Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman of John 4:1–30 more than with any other woman or man, and that because of their exceptional devotion to him women were rewarded by being the first to declare Jesus’s resurrection: “Mark this, ye despisers of the weakness of Women, and look upon your selves to be so wise: but Christ Jesus doth not so for he makes use of the weak.”⁵² Understanding Jesus’s revelations to the woman of Samaria, to the sisters Martha and Mary, and to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, Fell Fox stated: “And thus the Lord Jesus hath manifested himself and his Power, without respect of Persons, and so let all mouths be stopt that would limit him . . .”⁵³ Moreover, Fell Fox pointed to the Magnificat as Mary’s “sermon.”⁵⁴ Dutton (1750) compared men who resist women in church ministry with the disciples grumbling over the woman who anointed Christ (Matt 26:8).⁵⁵

Writing just after the period we are reviewing, in the early 1800s in the United States, Lee asked her minister and founder of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination, the Rev. Richard Allen (1760–1831), for permission to preach. Allen denied Lee permission in 1811, but he affirmed her impromptu preaching eight years later.⁵⁶ Her spiritual narrative, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1836), marks the second known publication by an African-American woman.⁵⁷ In supporting a woman's right to preach, Lee pointed to Mary Magdalene: "Did not Mary *first* preach the risen Saviour, and is not the doctrine of the resurrection the very climax of Christianity – hangs not all our hope on this, as argued by St. Paul? Then did not Mary, a woman, preach the gospel?"⁵⁸ Therefore, emulating Jesus is used to back equal opportunities for women to preach in churches.

5. Biblical Exceptionalism

Biblical Exceptionalism highlights female biblical leaders elevated by God. Those who commented on this in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries included Margaret Fell Fox, Bathsua Makin, Juana Inés de la Cruz, Mary Astell, and Elizabeth Bathurst.⁵⁹

Fell Fox pointed to the fact that men in Scripture frequently praise the speech of women, and Isaiah, who "went to the Prophetess, did not forbid her Speaking or Prophesying. Isa. 8."⁶⁰ Notably, Makin (1673) argued for female education by observing the many exceptional, intelligent, and gifted women in Scripture who were "eminently employed in the great transactions of the church."⁶¹ De la Cruz highlighted the governing of Deborah, the learning of the Queen of Sheba, the prophesying of Abigail, the persuasion of Esther, the piety of Rahab, and the perseverance of Hannah.⁶² Praised as an effective Quaker preacher before being jailed, Bathurst defended the writing of her book *The Sayings of Women, which were spoken upon sundry Occasions, in several Places of the Scriptures* (1691) by saying, "Women receive an Office in the Truth as well as Men, and they have a Stewardship, and must give an Account of their Stewardship to their Lord, as well as the Men."⁶³ Finally, Astell notes that Deborah and other biblical examples of prophetic women contradict the idea of women's natural inferiority;⁶⁴ the Bible portrays women as having a responsibility to the Lord. The biblical women are not exceptions to the norm, as some still view them today.

6. Prophetic Fulfillment

The *Prophetic Fulfillment* approach concerns OT prophecies unveiling a time when men and women function as equals in God's realm. The oracle of Joel cited in Acts 2:17—"your daughters will prophesy"—was specifically used as support for women's equality by many women including Katherine Evans, Margaret Fell Fox,⁶⁵ and Mary Bosanquet Fletcher.⁶⁶

For example, Evans, an early Quaker (1663) who wrote while imprisoned in Malta with Sarah Cheevers for evangelizing, responded to 1 Cor 14:34–35 by saying, "He that is born of God, whether in Male or in Female, Let him speak freely as his Father giveth him Utterance."⁶⁷ Fell Fox (1666) concluded that opposition to women's preaching is from "the opposing Spirit that would limit

New Dispensation interpretations make the case for women's equality in the new era ushered in through Christ and the Spirit.

the Power and Spirit of the Lord Jesus, whose Spirit is poured upon all flesh, both Sons and Daughters, now in his Resurrection."⁶⁸ Similarly, one hundred years later in response to some who claimed women should only speak under peculiar impulse from the Holy Spirit, Fletcher wrote to John Wesley: "But how often is she to feel this impulse? Perhaps you will say, two or three times in her life; perhaps *God* will say, two or three times in a week, or day."⁶⁹ The Holy Spirit should not be quenched or stifled when speaking through a woman.

7. New Dispensation

New Dispensation interpretations make the case for women's equality in the new era ushered in through Christ and the Spirit. Two women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who employed this method are Margaret Fell Fox and Anne Docwra.

For Fell Fox, Christ and the Spirit bring a new age for women. She asked: "And what is all this to Women's Speaking? That have the Everlasting Gospel to preach, and upon whom the Promise of the Lord is fulfilled and his Spirit poured upon them according to his work" (Acts 2:16–18).⁷⁰ Moreover, Fell Fox elaborated on the church as metaphorically portrayed as a woman in Scripture: "Christ, who is the head of the Church, the True Woman which is his Wife, in it do Daughters Prophesie . . . And here Christ is the Head of the Male and Female, who may speak; and the Church is called 'a Royal Priesthood'; so the Woman must offer as well as the Man, Rev. 22.17. 'The Spirit saith, Come, and the Bride saith, Come': and so is not the Bride the Church? . . . Doth not the Woman speak then?"⁷¹ That is, given that the church is represented as a speaking woman and a royal priesthood, women should be able to speak in it. Docwra (1683) additionally emphasized that the "Light, Power and Spirit of the Lord God is tendered to all mankind, as well Women as Men."⁷²

8. Egalitarian Narrative

The hermeneutical approach of recognizing an *Egalitarian Narrative* in the Bible was employed by Rachel Speght, Margaret Fell Fox,⁷³ Dorothy Gott, and Anne Docwra.⁷⁴ For instance, Docwra (1706), using the inspiration of Scripture, cited Isa 54:13—"thy Children shall be taught of the Lord"—and thus considered that in the New Covenant (Jer 31:31–34) women would also be taught by the Holy Spirit and should not be silenced.⁷⁵

Speght (1617) considered Eve and Adam as holding equal authority, co-partnership, and "mutuall participation" as a couple, with the living creatures subject to both of them.⁷⁶ Fell Fox (1666) recognized

an egalitarian hermeneutical trajectory when she stated: “So Abraham [did] obey the voice of Sarah, as you may read in Genesis 21 and so he did not quench the good that was in his wife for that which he spoke to Abraham was concerning the Church.”⁷⁷ Here Fell Fox was pointing out how God spoke his directions to Abraham through Sarah. Fell Fox noted that “the Husband must learn of the Woman” because their offspring Isaac was chosen by God and would be the ancestor of Jesus. Like Speght, Fell Fox also found no differences between men and women in Genesis and elsewhere in the way some men do.⁷⁸ Both sexes are joined together in his image, both are weak but he is strong, and Christ’s strength is made manifest in their weakness (2 Cor 12:9). God has chosen both of them as the weak things of the world (1 Cor 1:26–29). Moreover, Fell Fox indirectly acknowledged the important connection between God making no such difference between the sexes in their

Astell noted that in the creation order in Gen 1 there is an increasing value in what is created. ... On that basis, woman, being created after man, should not be made subservient to men for the reason that they were created after men (Gen 2:22).

creation and Jesus arguing from Gen 1:27 and 2:24, which is before the fall, in Matt 19:4–6.⁷⁹ Jesus Christ’s statements concerning marriage repeat these Genesis statements that emphasize men and women’s equality.

Furthermore, Fell Fox pointed to the intertextual theme of Gen 3:15—God puts enmity between the Serpent and the woman, and between his seed and her seed, yet the seed of the woman will bruise the Serpent’s head—as running through the whole Bible, tying it to Jer 31:22, Gal 4:4–5, and Rev 12, and she uses it to support women’s speech and influence:

Thus much may prove that the Church of Christ is a woman, and those that speak against the woman’s speaking, speak against the Church of Christ, and the Seed of the woman, which Seed is Christ; that is to say, Those that speak against the Power of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord speaking in a woman, simply, by reason of her Sex, or because she is a Woman, not regarding the Seed, and Spirit, and Power that speaks in her, such speak against Christ, and his Church, and are of the Seed of the Serpent, wherein lodgeth the enmity.⁸⁰

It is possible that Gott built upon this idea from Fell Fox since Gott (1811) suggests that Mary is the mother of the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15) and therefore God has given women a responsibility in his redemption of humanity.⁸¹

Astell noted that in the creation order in Gen 1 there is an increasing value in what is created. Thus, humankind is not subjected to the creatures created before them. On that basis, woman, being created

after man, should not be made subservient to men for the reason that they were created after men (Gen 2:22). Astell also viewed Gen 3:16 as a prediction instead of a command, comparing it to Esau serving his younger brother (Gen 27:40).⁸² She found it irrational that “one Text shou’d be a Command any more than the other, and not both of them be Predictions only . . . foretelling what wou’d be; but, neither of them determining what ought to be.”⁸³ Consequently, these four women theologians constructed early theological, anthropological, biblical arguments that reveal mutuality between the sexes and women’s equality with men based upon the story of God in the Scriptures and their inspiration.⁸⁴

Influence on Later Theology

Several of these women theologians directly influenced later theologians. Margaret Fell Fox’s 1666 work, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, had a significant impact on the Quakers and succeeding generations of scholars, including Mary Bosanquet Fletcher.⁸⁵ Bosanquet Fletcher subsequently influenced John Wesley and later, Phoebe Palmer.⁸⁶ In her 1771 letter to John Wesley, Bosanquet Fletcher exegeted the “prohibitionary texts,” Paul’s teachings, and Jesus’s actions toward women in the Gospels—presenting “the first defense of women’s ministry in Methodism, closely following the template provided by Fell Fox.”⁸⁷

Later, Palmer argued from every argument type that Bosanquet Fletcher did while also adding the categories *Apostolic Practice* and *New Dispensation*. Chilcote declares, “Phoebe Palmer stands out, not only as ‘the mother of the holiness movement,’ but as one of the greatest female apologists in the history of Methodism. Her *The Promise of the Father* (1859) is the largest and most fully developed argument for women’s ministry in any tradition. Its formative influence cannot be overestimated.”⁸⁸ Palmer’s work influenced many, including Catherine Booth, who then penned a powerful defense of women’s ministry defending Palmer’s ministry.⁸⁹ Booth’s pamphlet was republished in 1870 and “has remained the definitive Salvation Army authorization for women’s ministry.”⁹⁰ Palmer also spoke at Frances Willard’s church, and Willard claimed she received “entire sanctification” or the “second blessing.”⁹¹ Furthermore, after attending Palmer’s weekly meetings, Amanda Berry Smith began preaching in AME churches.⁹²

Conclusion

Biblical egalitarianism is often understood as a new phenomenon.⁹³ For this reason, egalitarian arguments since the 1990s are often rejected as novel stances. Research discloses, however, a consistent chronology from the time of the Reformation onward of the thoughts and writings of women who have held a biblical view of women’s equal roles with men in the home, church, and world, or some combination of the three. These egalitarian publications by women theologians contributed to the foundations of Quakerism, Methodism, AME churches, the Holiness Movement, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (a sister AME denomination), and the Salvation Army’s churches and social justice ministries.

Notes

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 3. Mary T. Malone, *Volume III: Women & Christianity: From the Reformation to the 21st Century* (Orbis, 2003), 215.
 4. Carole Slade, “Teresa of Avila (1515–82),” in Taylor and Choi, 493–98, esp. 494.
 5. Adriana Valerio, “Narducci da Paradiso, Domenica (1473–1533),” in Taylor and Choi, 383–86, esp. 385.
 6. Ruth A. Tucker and Walter L. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Zondervan, 1987), 203.
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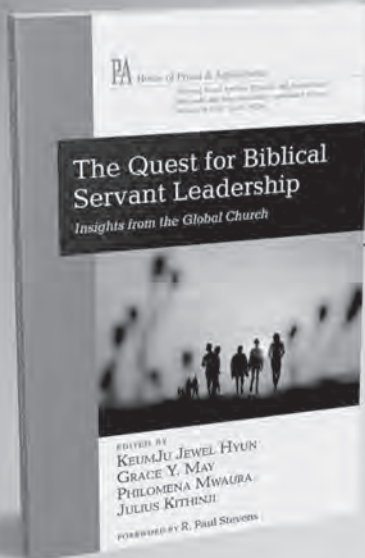
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59. Also in this category, Mary Bosanquet Fletcher mentions the woman of 2 Sam 20:22 and Deborah in “Bosanquet to Wesley,” 27.
60. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 122. Fell Fox also mentions Miriam, the wise woman from the city of Abel in 2 Sam 20, Huldah, the Queen of Sheba, Esther, the prophetess who was the wife of Isaiah, Judith, and the women in Ruth. Thickstun, “Fell Fox,” 200–201.
61. Makin refers to Miriam, the Queen of Sheba, the company of women greeting David with victory songs (1 Sam 18:7), Huldah, Deborah, Jael, Judith, Esther, the Virgin Mary, Anna, Phoebe, Priscilla, Lois, Eunice, and the elect lady (2 John 1:5) in Bathsua Makin, *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673); Joy A. Schroeder, “Makin, Bathsua (ca. 1600–after 1675),” in Taylor and Choi, 342–44, esp. 343.
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80. Fell Fox, *Women’s Speaking Justified*, 116. For the many historical men who have taught the “Seed of the Woman” concept see John L. Ronning, “The Curse on the Serpent (Genesis 3:15) in Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997).
81. Dorothy Gott, *Christ the standard of truth set up* . . . (The author, 1796/98?), and Dorothy Gott, *The Noon-day sun; A revelation from Christ* . . . (1811); Nancy Jiwon Cho, “Gott, Dorothy Newberry (1747/48–1812),” in Taylor and Choi, 216–18, esp. 217.
82. Michelson, “Astell,” 47.
83. Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage*, 19, 20, quoted in Michelson, “Astell,” 47.
84. Other significant arguments include: (i) God calls both men and women—felt as a personal and spiritual calling—toward a vocation in ministry (Justitia Sengers, Sarah Cheevers and Katharine Evans, Susanna Wesley, and Anne Dutton); and (ii) the Godhead does not discriminate when choosing who would speak for him (Hester Biddle, Mary Astell, and Margaret Fell Fox).
85. Chilcote, *Methodist Defense*, 19.
86. Renee Kwan Monkman, “Palmer, Phoebe (1807–74),” in Taylor and Choi, 390–93, esp. 390.
87. Chilcote, *Methodist Defense*, 19, 24–28, referring to Bosanquet, “Bosanquet to Wesley.” Chilcote states: “John Wesley, who had been such a strong protagonist for the ministry of women and of women preachers in particular, died in 1791. In the final decade of the eighteenth century, the expansion of the public ministry of women seems to have approached its zenith. On the threshold of a new era, increasing numbers of women openly exercised their gifts in the ministry of preaching.” *Methodist Defense*, 37.
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89. Monkman, “Palmer,” 392; MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 199; Catherine Booth, *Female Teaching* . . . (G. J. Stevenson, 1859).
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91. Nancy A. Hardesty, “Willard, Frances Elizabeth (1839–98),” in Taylor and Choi, 533–37, esp. 533.
92. Eric Brandt, “Smith, Amanda Berry (1837–1915),” in Taylor and Choi, 450–52, esp. 451.
93. For instance, even though he is a champion of women’s biblical equality and supports this view historically, William G. Witt believes the theological positions of evangelical and Catholic egalitarians to be a new theological development in response to cultural changes in the last couple centuries. *Icons of Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Theology for Women’s Ordination* (Baylor University, 2020), 5.



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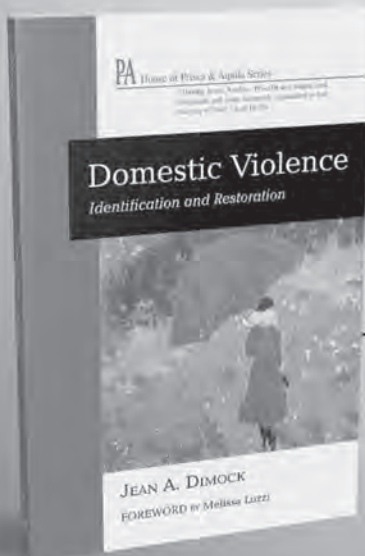
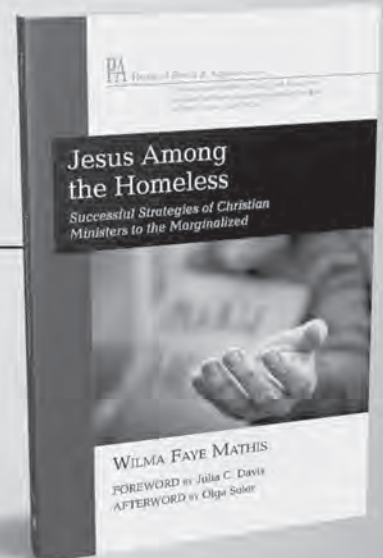
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Lady Wisdom and the Akan Queen Mother: Models for the Akan Christian Woman

Rudolf K. Gaisie

Nyansa (“wisdom”) among the Akan people of Ghana is a virtue that one is expected to possess for the good of the family and community. Akan proverbs or sayings do not personify *nyansa*, but the effects of its presence or absence are evident.

The Akan community functions along matrilineal lines attesting to the implied power of women, even though leadership roles are dominated by males. The highest office is that of the king (*ohene*), but he rules largely under the auspices of women, from his right to the throne, his nomination to it, and his presentation to the community. The wisdom of women has a large stake in determining who becomes king and therefore has implications for the peace and harmony of the community.

How may an Akan respond to the feminine personification of *nyansa* in the book of Proverbs? This essay attempts an Akan reading of the personification of wisdom in Proverbs, first using selected positive indigenous proverbs, followed by the role and function of the Akan queen mother.

Proverbs, Wisdom, and the Queen (Mother) in Akan Traditional Thought

The Akan language, Twi, is widely spoken in Ghana, even among non-ethnic Akan. It is one of the first to have a grammar book through the labours of Christian missionary activities and, consequently, the earliest to have a Bible translation. Traditional Akan institutions and practices are conspicuous components of Ghanaian culture, predominantly within the Asante tribe.¹ The Akan culture is rich in proverbs and in symbols such as the Adinkra and Kente textile weave patterns. The Akan proverbs used in this article are primarily in Asante Twi.

Akan proverbs are reflective of life experiences. Social stratification among communities means that proverbs are not devoid of biases. However, when concisely captured as reflective of a shared experience of reality, a proverb is accepted by all. Proverbs are usually attributed to the elders of a society, who are largely men, and represent the “accumulated wisdom and experiences of past generations.”² Among the Akan, for example, stating a proverb is usually prefixed with the phrase, “the ancestors/elders say” (*nananom/mpanyinfo se*). Sometimes a proverb is attributed to an author.³ Some are attributed to animals (“The fowl says, ‘If it had not gotten dark, would I not have eaten my fill?’” [*Akoko se, “Ade ansa a, anka memee”*])).⁴ The source or author notwithstanding, proverbs are usually linked to the elders or ancestors, rarely female.

The Akan word for “proverb” is *ɛbɛ*, which the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye found from his field research to be

linked to the word for the palm (tree), *abɛ*. Gyekye deduced that all the useful products from the palm, such as oil, wine, and soap, “lie deep in the palm tree” and require a distillation process. This is similar to the meaning of a proverb which may not be immediately obvious but needs to be distilled.⁵

If proverbs are wisdom distilled, what is wisdom? Among the Akan, *nyansa* is practical application of “knowledge” (*nimdee*). The proverb “wisdom is not gold for you to bundle up [to store]” (*nyansa nye sika na woakyekyere asie*),⁶ points to the desirability of the application of wisdom. The traditional Akan sense of *nyansa* is not merely abstract but leads to practical results. Indeed, it is from these results that *nyansa* is discerned. A person is deemed wise more because of their actions rather than their words. *Nyansa* is a shared reality for members of the community—men, women, and children. As for the source of *nyansa*, it is assumed to be part of the creation of God (*Nyame, Onyame*). Hence the axiom: “All wisdom is from God” (*nsem nyinaa ne Nyame*).⁷

Proverbial wisdom operates within the traditional Akan family. The family (*abusua*) is of vital importance. The traditional community is one big family comprising a network of families connected through matrilineal blood relations. A person derives his or her blood from the mother,⁸ and it is believed that “blood is what matters” (*bogya [mogya] ne asem*).⁹ An Akan traces their bloodline through the mother and her maternal ancestry. The family has obligation to a common ancestor, a *nana*,¹⁰ who could be either a female or a male. Usually, especially at the wider community level, a *nana* is a male figure. The word *nana*, according to J. B. Danquah, “appears to have derived from *e-na*, mother [*e-na na* (mother of mother = grandmother)],” and the family head or elder (*opanyin*) who becomes a *nana* “derives his [or her] blood by right of female descent.”¹¹

Traditionally, the queen mother is the model whom women emulate.¹³ Eva Meyerowitz, from her field findings a century ago, explains that in her sacredness the queen mother was “regarded as the daughter of the Moon.”

This brings us to the topic of the highest female office—that of the queen mother (ɔbaahema or ɔhemmaa).¹² The queen mother is not the widow or mother of the king as is usually understood. Typically, the natural mother of an Akan king is of royal lineage but may not necessarily be the queen mother. A ruling king nominates a (new) queen mother from a royal family and this person is essentially the “queen” of the state or nation.

Traditionally, the queen mother is the model whom women emulate.¹³ Eva Meyerowitz, from her field findings a century ago, explains that in her sacredness the queen mother was “regarded as the daughter of the Moon (the mother aspect of Nyame, the Supreme Being), [who] is desired by her people to be as calm and peaceful as the moon, and her body, as well as those of all women, as delicate and beautiful as the moon.” Her colour is silver “representing moonlight.”¹⁴ Meyerowitz takes the position that the queen mother is the “owner of the [Akan] state” who gives her son [ɔhene or ɔmanhene], the king, to rule the state and take care of related affairs including war. Meanwhile, her primary duty is to care for the women, their welfare, and “everything connected with birth, marriage and family life.”

In contemporary Asante society, for example, the Asantehemaa (Asante queen mother) nominates a male from the royal clan as king, subject to the approval of the Gyaase (the Kumasi Traditional Council) and the Asanteman Traditional Council. The approved candidate is presented to the Pampasohemaa (Pampaso queen mother) who is his “foster mother.” She eventually “delivers him over to Asanteman to be their king” and it is the Asantehemaa who “officially receives the king-elect in state” during his enstoolment.¹⁵

With this as background we put into conversation the queen mother—especially in her role as the ideal Akan woman—with Lady Wisdom from the book of Proverbs.

Lady Wisdom, the Queen Mother, and the Akan Ideal Woman

Wisdom (Hebrew *hokmah*) is personified as a female figure in the book of Proverbs, especially in the first nine chapters. The Hebrew word *hokmah* is grammatically feminine. In the book of Proverbs, *hokmah* is the application of knowledge which stems from the fear of the LORD (1:7, 29). With wisdom by his side, the LORD established the earth and the heavens (8:22–31). Accordingly, to function as one should in God’s creation one needs wisdom (4:7).

In what follows, I highlight the connections an Akan Christian can make between selections from the book of Proverbs and Akan proverbs on the commendable attributes of a woman. While Akan proverbs on *nyansa* (“wisdom”) may inform the reading of Lady Wisdom, or even vice versa, all such readings would be made through the interpretive lens of the teaching(s) of Jesus Christ and what he means to the Akan Christian.

The Righteous, Just, and Faithful Woman

A reward for seeking—that is, “making your ear attentive to”—Lady Wisdom is that one “will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God” (2:5 NIV). Possessing the wisdom that the LORD gives is a guarantee for understanding “righteousness and

justice” (2:9). These are virtues to be secured through wisdom in the heart of a person (2:10–15). In such a state, there is deliverance from the man of perverted speech (2:12) and the adulterous woman (2:16). In the context of the covenant relationship with the LORD, any disobedience is a breach of trust or fidelity. Being led astray by a perverted man or an adulterous woman are metaphors for forsaking the LORD. It is wisdom that keeps one from breaking the sacred trust with the LORD and hence the close association of wisdom with faithfulness (3:3).

The Akan queen mother has multiple functions that showcase her as righteous, just, and faithful to time-honoured custom.

First, as a key community leader, the queen mother has judicial responsibilities. People can appeal to her with their petitions. Typically, under her jurisdiction are marital, family, and general women’s issues within the community or state.¹⁶ The queen mother’s court proceedings and rulings are pursued within “the boundaries of custom.”¹⁷ She is assisted by both female and male leaders, sub chiefs, and court linguists (*akyeame*). However, as the final authority of the court, she is expected to be righteous, just, and faithful to custom in her final judgements. This makes her an example to follow, especially for women.¹⁸

Second, and uniquely, the queen mother has the right to rebuke the king and his close officials in public, that is, in open court. The queen mother is a counsellor or legal advisor to the king, usually in private but possibly also in public.¹⁹ Such a constitutional duty was and is paramount, and failure in this counselling work has had its repercussions.²⁰ The queen mother is able to do this as an indirect political leader, through her considerable knowledge as a custodian of tradition and history. Her commitment to custom also implies her keeping of the history of her predecessors or departed female elders (*nananom*), who are symbolically associated with their respective stools or thrones. She performs scheduled rites for their remembrance. Agnes K. Aidoo well sums up the function of this high office from her study of some nineteenth century Asante queen mothers as “very dynamic women who skilfully blended a sense of history, politics, and responsibility towards the preservation of their society.”²¹

Third, historically, since Akan women usually did not partake in war, the queen mother took responsibility of the community whenever the king led his army to war.²² There is a story in recent Asante history of Yaa Asantewaa, a queen mother of Edweso, one of the Asante confederate states. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, she mobilised and encouraged the men in the absence of the paramount chief to protect the Golden Stool from British colonial forces.²³ Another way the queen mother acted in protection of the community was to attend to the welfare of the state deities through the necessary rituals—usually the responsibility of the king. She also organized the rites of wailing and of prayers to augment the war effort.²⁴

Fourth, with traditional Akan leadership in priesthood being open to both men and women, the queen mother serves as a priestess in leading the rites and rituals for communal wellbeing. The services of a priestess (*ɔkomfo*), apart from serving as an intermediary between a deity and the community, include the provision of

herbal medicine, counselling, and midwifery.²⁵ The queen mother, in her execution of such responsibilities, is expected to be fair, just, and right with respect to ancestral tradition.

The Fruitful or Productive Woman

Unlike biblical Hebrew, the Akan language is devoid of grammatical gender. The Hebrew feminine *hokmah* (“wisdom”) in Prov 3:13–19 does not enjoy the same gender association as *nyansa* (“wisdom”) in the New Revised Asante Twi translation. For the Akan reader, this leaves *nyansa* impersonal. Nevertheless, if *nyansa* is thought of as “profitable,” with “long life . . . in her right hand,” and figured as a “tree of life to those who take hold of her,” she parallels the ideal Akan woman, whose fruitfulness is likened to the plantain tree which keeps sprouting (BMB91).

The resourcefulness of Lady Wisdom is not only expressed in the imagery of a princess or a queen preparing a banquet of “good things” with her servant girls at the service of her guests (9:1–12) but also in the ideal wife who fears the LORD (31:10–31). Lady Folly, on the other hand, whose primary goal is to lure people away from the fear of the LORD, is loud, arrogant, knows nothing, and in her treachery gives false promises that leads to death (9:13–18). A wise woman fosters life through her industry and innovation and is therefore admired by her husband and children (31:10–28). In effect she is a queen in her household.

As the mother of the community or nation, the queen mother is concerned with the “welfare of her women, their status, their protection in marriage, and the protection of their property.” She oversees the *beragoro* rite of passage for “young girls who have reached the age of puberty,” meant to usher them into readiness for marriage and motherhood.²⁶ The training or education of children, especially of young girls and princesses, as well as the oversight of royal women and wives are the jurisdiction of the queen mother.²⁷

The queen mother affirms the importance of the role of the mother. Children are encouraged to honour mothers: “Even if your mother is not good, she remains your mother” (*wo na nye a, na wo na ara nen*, CN2069). Another saying is: “You cannot substitute your mother for another mother because of her poverty” (*wo na di hia a, wunnyae no nkofa obi nye na*, CN2063). Underlying the importance of the mother is the understanding that “The death of your mother ‘disconnects’ you from the matrilineal kinship” (*wo na awu a, wo abusua asa*, CN2068). In the same way, the sure way to enter or join an Akan family is by courtesy of a woman: “If all efforts fail, marry one of their women” (*wope abusua bi abɔ na woannya a, na woware mu yere*, CN2654). In sum, it is wise to treat a woman well among the Akan, starting with one’s mother.

With respect to motherhood, proverbial wisdom reminds that “it is a woman that gives birth to a man” (*ɔbaa na ɔwo ɔbarima*).²⁸ Motherhood, especially in a matrilineal society, is valuable. Thus, marriage comes with the expectation of childbearing. Beyond giving birth, mothers are instrumental in the nurturing of children, especially in their formative periods. A mother’s empathetic love for her children is acknowledged thus: “When it comes, it affects your mother” (*ɛba a, ɛka oni*, CN1). A woman who neglects her

children, for whatever reason, is not celebrated. Thus, “It is the hardworking woman who, when her child is carried on her back, [still] carries things [on her head]” (*ɔbaa mmɔdemmofoɔ / ɔbaa sima na ne ba hye n’akyiri a, ɔsoa nnoɔma*).²⁹ The imagery of this proverb is that of female farmer or trader who in her industry combines work with caring for her child. It is thought that “when a hardworking/industrious woman goes into marriage, she brings good things home [to the family]” (*ɔbaa brefoɔ kɔ awaree a, ɔde ade pa ba fie*).³⁰

Outside of nurturing children, Akan women have traditionally been active players in the economic activities of the community. The queen mother as “patron of agriculture” leads “prayers to Nyame (God)” in a “rain making” ritual in times of drought.³¹ Such efforts ensure the production of food for her community. There are also stories of how innovations and introduction of kitchen utensils and other household utilities have been made by queen mothers.³² The Akan queen mother traditionally leads in the beautification and decency of women in her community. Accordingly, “If a new thing is not beautiful, would the queen mother wear beads?” (*adeɛfoforo nye fe a, ankara ohemnea bo abia?* CN795). Beadmaking, pottery, the making of soap, and other crafts are usually under the auspices of queen mothers.³³

In all these ways, both within the home and outside it, the queen mother models the ideal fruitful/productive Akan woman.

The Precious, Priceless Woman

Lady Wisdom calls out, from various vantage points, to all who will hear and welcome her as she proclaims instructions for a worthy life (Prov 8:1–7). It is in her character to reciprocate any goodness done to her: “Embrace her, and she will honour you. She will give you a garland to grace your head and present you with a glorious crown” (4:8–9 NIV). This resonates with the Akan proverb cited earlier, “The beauty of a wife largely depends on the treatment she receives from her husband” (*ɔbaa ho ye fe a, efi ne kunu*, CN19). Lady Wisdom does good to the one who finds her and treats her well.

The wellbeing and status of the queen mother reflects the condition and treatment of women in the community. The king ensures that his “mother” is well taken care of. A nineteenth-century observer noted how the queen mother was regarded “as one of the greatest persons of the kingdom . . . has her own court and is surrounded by the greatest luxury imaginable . . . [possessing] precious jewelry, rich clothes, silver vessels,” and “everything the king possesses she has in abundance.”³⁴ A responsible Akan man is, therefore, expected to honour his mother and wife and, by extension, treat women with respect.

This is because, as in Prov 31:10, “A good wife is worth more than money” (*ɔye[re]-pa sen sika*, CN3645). In fact, she is a treasure: “a good wife is personal health” to her husband and family (*ɔye[re]-pa ye ahode*, CN3646). That is why, “When you pay [a bride price] for a young woman, pay a big amount, for there is a town in her stomach [womb]” (*wotɔ ɔbaabasiasa a, tɔ no aboɔden, na kuro da ne yam*, CN3290).³⁵ She is innovative, especially in her cooking, and even ants enjoy her tasty food (BMB79).³⁶ A wife is not a commodity to be traded: “A wife is not meat for you to be sharing

The absence of grammatical gender in the Akan language makes the word *nyansa* (“wisdom”) gender-neutral. The reader of the biblical text will, therefore, most likely miss the personification of wisdom as a woman.

with others” (*ɔyere nye nam na wɔakyekye amana*, CN3653). In the end, when women are treated well, men and children in the family, community, and nation gain from their priceless value.

On the part of the woman, the matrilineal social structure means that a woman’s loyalty to the matriline is key. It is wise for the woman, therefore, to subject important, usually marital, decisions to her maternal *abusua* (“family”): “A wise woman says: ‘I look forward to what my matriline [family] will say’” (*ɔbaa nyansafo na ɔse: “Mehwe dee abusua beka”*, BMB75). To put family interest above personal sentiment is prudent in the communal sense. Yet, a wife should balance her fidelity to the husband with her loyalty to the family, for it is also said that “a good woman [wife] listens to her husband’s word” (*ɔbaa pa ne dee ɔtie ne kunu asem*, BMB80). The ideal Akan woman endeavours to keep her marriage secure. Multiple divorces are undesirable: “No matter who a woman is, when you divorce severally, your face does not glow [you lose your glory]” (*ɔbaa biara te se deeben’ ara, na wugyae aware gyae aware a, wo anim mma onyam*, CN18).

Contrary to the proverbs that extol the worth of the woman, there are some thought to “describe women as subservient to men” or as being “unproductive and parasitic.”³⁷ An example is: “If a woman is beautiful, it is from her husband” (*ɔbaa ho ye fɛ a, efi ne kunu*, CN19). But, since—as indicated earlier—the hardworking woman is celebrated, proverbs that relativize the role of women should be seen as demanding that the husband fulfils his socially assigned responsibilities. On the whole, the sentiment is that the Akan husband should consider his wife precious. Her care and protection should be his delight.

Given the high view of wives expressed above, polygamy has its challenges for the Akan male. It is said that if you want “talk-talk” (quarrels) then you can have many wives (CN2657). The integrity of the man with many wives is at stake: “If your wives are five, your tongue is five” (*wo yerenom anum a, wo tekrema anum*, CN3650). Because of the growing demands of multiple wives, “Having many wives is nothing but poverty” (*ayere-dodow ye ohia na enye hwee*, CN3655). Worse, “A sick husband of many wives dies of hunger” (*mmaa-dodow kunu yare a, okom na ekum no*, CN26). Proverbial wisdom suggests that one good wife is enough for a man. To pursue extra women does not necessarily result in the good of the man. It is not that women are a problem to men, but the responsibility of living with even one woman should not be taken lightly.

Conclusion: The Akan Christian Woman

So far, we have highlighted selected virtues of Lady Wisdom in comparison to the role of the queen mother, both of whom model the ideal woman. How could the typical Akan Christian woman engage with these written and oral prescriptions?

As noted earlier, the absence of grammatical gender in the Akan language makes the word *nyansa* (“wisdom”) gender-neutral. The reader of the biblical text will, therefore, most likely miss the personification of wisdom as a woman. Furthermore, there is no evidence from the Akan proverbs surveyed that *nyansa* is figured as a woman. The average Akan Christian woman reading the texts on Lady Wisdom in the book of Proverbs (in her mother tongue) connects more with the functions of wisdom than with its personification. To read *nyansa* portrayed as a woman may be new, but she would readily correlate the functions of Lady Wisdom to the expectations of the ideal Akan woman as exemplified by the queen mother. Furthermore, fresh insights from reading Lady Wisdom as such can help the reader review traditional Akan views on women. A Christian reading of the selected Akan proverbs on the ideal woman would rely on the Bible as the authority for (re) interpretation. More specifically, an Akan Christian woman would typically interpret Akan proverbs through her experience and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Such, for example, was the experience of a noteworthy Akan Christian woman, Madam Afua Kuma. She insightfully employed Akan ancestral oral praise poetry to express her reflections on Jesus Christ. She also lived in her community as a respected and wise woman elder. A community sub-chief and a local Catholic priest occasionally consulted her on legal and pastoral cases.³⁸ In these consultations, she would draw from her rich knowledge of Akan proverbs, employing them from a Christian, biblical perspective.

Whether married or not, the Akan Christian woman can find her identity in the bigger family of God in Christ,³⁹ and this identity could inform her role and function in the family and community in keeping with the values of her ancestors. In so doing she remains a wise woman—reflecting the idealized virtues of both Lady Wisdom and the queen mother.

Notes

1. Asante culture has been able to preserve traditions that predates the ascendancy the Asante as a prominent Akan group. Kofi Darkwah, “Antecedents of Asante Culture.” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, New Series 3 (1999), 57–79.
2. Kofi A. Opoku, *Hearing and Keeping: Akan Proverbs* (Asempa, 1997), xviii.
3. Kwesi Yankah, *The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric* (Diasporic African Press, 2012), 234–35.
4. Robert S. Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs (The Primitive Ethics of a Savage People)*, *Translated from the Original with Grammatical and Anthropological Notes* (Oxford University Press, 1916), 79 n.203.
5. Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, rev. ed. (Temple University Press, 1995), 16–17.
6. CN2554; Proverbs from the collection of Johannes G. Christaller which were later arranged with translations by Lange are referenced as CN (Christaller Number) followed by the number in the collection. Johann Gottlieb Christaller, *Three Thousand Six Hundred Ghanaian Proverbs (From the Asante and Fante*

Language) with English translations, trans. Kofi Ron Lange, *African Studies* 17 (Mellen, 2000). Proverbs from this collection will be referenced by this number.

7. C. A. Akrofi, *Twi Mmbusem: Twi Proverbs with English Translations and Comments* (Macmillan, 1958), 169.
8. The other constituents of the human being are the *ɔkra* (usually “soul”) [from Onyame], *sunsum* (“spirit”), *ntorɔ* (“fatherhood-deity”) [from the father], *nipadua* [*honam*] (“body”), *honhom* (“breath of life”). The *ɔkra* and *sunsum* are variously paired with the rest of the constituents by commentators. J. B. Danquah, “The Culture of Akan,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 22/4 (Oct, 1952): 360–66 (363); Ernestina Afriyie, *A Comparative Study of Akan and Biblical Concepts of a Human Being: A Study to Illustrate a Method of Cross-Cultural Evangelism* (MTh diss., University of Natal, June 2000), 15–16.
9. CN594.
10. J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, 2nd ed. (Frank Cass, 1968, xxviii).
11. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God*, 51.
12. Christaller defines the term in its broader usage as “a woman who is the sovereign of a kingdom, a female monarch; the consort of a king, wife of a chief . . . a princess whose son will succeed to the throne; - a rich woman.” Christaller, *Dictionary*, 170.
13. For further information on the identity and role of the *ɔhemmaa*, see Michelle Gilbert, “The Cimmerian Darkness of Intrigue: Queen Mothers, Christianity and Truth in Akuapem History,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 23/1 (1993), 2–42.
14. Eva Lewin-Richter Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan* (Faber & Faber, 1951), 37.
15. Enstoolment is the cultural equivalent of enthronement; in Asante and Fante culture in Ghana, chiefs and kings have elaborately carved stools that represent their authority. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, 37–38. George P. Hagan, “The Ascent to the Golden Stool: Women Make the King,” in *The King Returns: Enstoolment of Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II and the Eyikese (Great Funeral) of Otumfuo Opoku Ware II*, ed. Irene K. Odotei and George P. Hagan (University of Ghana – Institute of African Studies, 2003), 33–42.
16. Samuel Obeng and Beverly J. Stoeltje, “Women’s Voices in Akan Juridical Discourse,” *Africa Today* 49/1 (Spring, 2002): 21–41.
17. Beverly J. Stoeltje, “At the Queen Mother’s Court: Ethnography in Kumasi, Ghana,” *Counterpoints* 354 (2013), 370–87 (384).
18. Stoeltje, for example, notes that, despite some modern day concerns about the relevance of the queen mother’s court, such “courts provide a site at which an individual, including an ordinary woman, can tell her story, whatever it may be, and receive a hearing,” adding that they “provide the authority that maintains the boundaries and defines the categories of correct behavior for those who believe in the social system known as custom, and they provide the opportunity for individuals to resolve disputes that are inevitable in any society.” Stoeltje, “At the Queen Mother’s Court,” 385.
19. Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions: Perspectives of Akan Leadership Formation on Christian Leadership Development* (SonLife, 2012), 40–41.
20. Agnes Akosua Aidoo, “Asante Queen Mothers in Government and Politics in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 9/1 (1977): 1–13 (2).
21. Aidoo, “Asante Queen Mothers in Government and Politics in the Nineteenth Century,” 5.
22. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, 42.
23. Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng, “Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28/3 (1995): 481–508 (504–6).
24. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, 42–43.
25. John D. K. Ekem, *Priesthood in Context: A Study of Priesthood in Some Christian and Primal Communities of Ghana and its Relevance for Mother-Tongue Biblical Interpretation* (SonLife, 2009), 52–56.
26. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, 44–45.
27. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, 45. Opuni-Frimpong, *Indigenous Knowledge and Christian Missions*, 193–95.
28. BMB67. Proverbs from the collection Peggy Appiah, Kwame A. Appiah, Ivor Agyeman-Duah, *Bu Me Be - Proverbs of the Akans* (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke, 2007), are designated BMB with the proverb number.
29. BMB77.
30. BMB44.
31. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, 44–45.
32. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, 48–49.
33. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, 49–51.
34. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan*, 52–53.
35. The proverb is not merely about “selling” the woman as if money could buy all the investment a family put into the nurturing of the young woman. Moreover, the woman is invaluable in a matrilineal society. The proverb points to the high value a man places on the woman he intends to marry.
36. “She can make a tasty soup with fish while a bad (*bɔne*) woman fails even with mutton,” (*ɔbaa pa de apatere betem ye nkwan ma eye de, nanso ɔbaa bɔne de dwannam beye nkwan a, erenye de*, BMB78).
37. Charles Gyan, Eunice Abbey, Michael Baffoe, “Proverbs and Patriarchy: Analysis of Linguistic Prejudice and Representation of Women in Traditional Akan Communities of Ghana,” *Social Sciences* 9/22 (2020): 1–10 (4).
38. See Sara J. Fretheim, “Jesus! Say It Once and the Matter is Settled’: The Life and Legacy of Oral Theologian Madam Afua Kuma of Ghana (1908–1987),” *Journal of African Christian Biography* 5/3 (July 2020): 18–38; Afua Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma*, trans. Jon P. Kirby (Asempa, 1981); Afua Kuma, *The Surprising African Jesus: The Lost Prayers and Praises of Afua Kuma*, trans. Jon P. Kirby, transcribed by Joseph Kwakye (Wipf and Stock, 2022).
39. Which certainly will mean the church being deliberate in building to “heal, strengthen, nourish, and treat with dignity all of its members.” Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman,” *CrossCurrents* 47/4 (Winter 1997/1998): 493–504 (503).



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Martha the Minister: A Sermon on Luke 10:38–42

Alison Gerber

I was sixteen years old when I heard the second most influential sermon of my life. Truthfully, I'm not even sure it was a sermon. For whatever reason, my pastor had failed to prepare anything that Sunday. Instead, he waltzed into the pulpit and said, "Tonight I'm just going to tell you what I do from week to week. About what I do as a minister."

That thoroughly unplanned message was very much planned, I think, for me. I had heard a call to ministry before, but this time, with a new clarity, it was all I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I wanted his week to be my week. I wanted his life to be my life. I wanted to be a minister too.

Do you have a story like mine? Of the day you knew you wanted to become a minister?

Serve Jesus

Did you know *Martha* wanted to be a minister? Not an ordained, seminary-trained kind of minister, but she did want to minister to Jesus.

Did you know that the word "minister" also means, "to attend to the needs of someone"? It comes from an old Latin word that means "servant." And this is what Martha did—she wanted to attend to the needs of Jesus. She wanted to serve Jesus.

That's something we don't say enough about Martha. Too many sermons paint her in a wholly negative light: Martha the failure, Martha the bad one, Martha who wouldn't sit down. Martha who did everything wrong. "Martha, Martha, Martha." But there was one thing Martha *did* get right. Martha wanted to serve Jesus.

She wanted to minister to Jesus, just like us.

When Martha first heard that Jesus was coming to her house, imagine what must have happened next. She had to get ready. She would've picked up her basket, and picked up her pouch of copper coins, and run down to the market to buy fixings for a feast. That's Martha, wanting to minister to Jesus.

While she's at the market, I can picture her, dreaming up the dishes she might make. Maybe her special herb bread with fennel and cumin? Maybe that baked fish with field peas and roasted onions? Perhaps those red lentil sesame seed pancakes her brother has always liked,

Did you know *Martha* wanted to be a minister? Not an ordained, seminary-trained kind of minister, but she did want to minister to Jesus.

the ones you dipped in date honey? Oh yes, nothing less than the best for Jesus. That's Martha, wanting to minister to Jesus.

And when Jesus arrives at her house, she throws open the front door, and in verse 38, Luke tells us she "welcomes him into her home." For Luke to legitimately say that Martha "welcomed him," she must have kissed Jesus, and

brought water to Jesus, and crouched down on the ground before Jesus, and washed away the dust and dirt from his feet. This was Martha, ministering to Jesus.

Just like a lot of people I know in the local church. Like Peg. She was the first to our church every Sunday, turning the heat up, setting up tables, making the coffee. Martha is like Hannah; she was always ready to help me with my kids. Martha is like Gail, who came and scrubbed my shower when I was moving out. Gail hardly even knew me. Martha is a minister just like all of them.

Martha is also a minister like those of you reading this sermon who are employed as ministers. Planning youth group games on Wednesday. Up late with a committee on Thursday. Talking with a couple in crisis on Friday. Writing a sermon on Saturday that will get you no glory or fame, that you will preach to around forty people on Sunday for a little money and a few appreciative smiles. Martha's ministry is just like your ministry in the best ways: enthusiastic, excited, dreaming, planning, giving, working hard, welcoming Jesus. Martha really did serve Jesus, just like you serve Jesus. Martha is a minister just like you.

Distracted, Anxious, Worried

But if Martha's story is about ministry, there's a warning in this story for ministers, isn't there? Martha's mixed-up visit with Jesus shows us how ministry can be very hard at times—very hard indeed. Luke says in verse 40 that Martha's service is causing her to be "distracted." And Jesus tells Martha in verse 41 that her ministry is causing her to be "anxious and worried about many things."

Distracted. Anxious. Worried. Do any of these words resonate with you?

This word "distracted" is particularly interesting to me. The Greek word here (*perispaomai*) means "to be pulled away from a reference point."

Can you see Martha? Surely her reference point should have been Jesus. But where is she now? She's finally brought all the food home, and lit the fire, and set out the bowls. Yet now, after washing Jesus's feet, she's out in the courtyard running from steaming baskets on the stove to bread dough that must be kneaded, back to a pot that's boiling over, grabbing the kettle that's bubbled almost dry, back to the oven to check on the fish. This is Martha distracted by much ministry—she's pulled away from Jesus. Pulled about every which way.

I'm not much of a domestic goddess, but I do know a little of what it is to be in the kitchen of the church. To have steaming baskets full of pastoral care to attend to, and the pastry of a program that must be kneaded into action, and a pot of that one committee that's about to boil over, and that parishioner who's whistling like a kettle with endless complaints, and a sermon you're hoping will somehow magically bake in the oven of the week. From pastoral care, to programs, to personnel, to preaching—our ministry really can pull us away from *our* reference point, away from Jesus. It can pull us in every direction.

It makes me think of when I take my kids to the county fair. One wants to go this way and one wants to go that. One pulls on this arm, and one pulls on that. Eventually I feel like I'm about to be split right down the middle. Like they're about to tear me apart.

You know the statistics: 75% of pastors report being highly or extremely stressed. 90% of pastors report feeling fatigued every week. Pastors are depressed at two times the national rate. 80% of pastors don't make it to ten years. We want to be ministers. But sometimes ministry pulls in so many directions, it can threaten to tear us apart.

Necessary

There are plenty of books, and studies, and guides on health and longevity in ministry. There are consultants, and coaches, and spiritual directors that will tell you how to get through. But Jesus at Martha's house seems to have his own ideas.

He's sitting in the living room with Martha's family—probably with his disciples too. He looks through the doorway to the courtyard and sees Martha hurrying from table to stove. He sees the pinched look on her face, her flushed cheeks, her anxious, trembling hands, the sweat gathering on the collar of her dress.

Have you ever been to a party, when you came just for that one person, but the whole night they're too busy fixing drinks to talk? Then you know the crest-fallen look on Jesus's face, when he considers the fact that he didn't come to Peter's house or James's house or Judas's house—he came to *Martha's* house. But now she's pulled in every direction, in every direction *away from him*, by her ministry work.

So, Jesus calls out to her—of course he does. “Martha, Martha you are anxious and worried about many things, but there's just one thing necessary for you.” He points down at Martha's sister, Mary, who is sitting at his feet.

Isn't it a wonderful thing, to sit at someone's feet? Do you remember kindergarten? My kindergarten teacher, Miss Shaw, had breath that

smelled like caramel candies and skin that smelled like lavender soap. I remember at the start of every day, Miss Shaw sat on the big chair, and we sat on the classroom rug at her feet. Her sitting on the big chair, and us at her feet, was a sign that she was our teacher, and we were her students. It was the same for Mary sitting at Jesus's feet: this was a sign that Jesus was the teacher, and Mary was his disciple.

This is why, when Jesus points at Mary sitting at his feet, and he says to Martha, “You're anxious and worried about many things, but you've forgotten one necessary thing,” he's telling her, “Martha, if you want to serve me, you must also be my student.” He's telling her, “Martha, if you want to be my minister, you must also be my disciple.”

I know it's not popular to use the word “must” in a twenty-first-century sermon, but I'm not sure how to put it any other way. Because in this text, Jesus doesn't tell Martha this is a good idea or a suggestion or an option she might want to consider. No, Jesus says, “This is the necessary thing.” If you want to be a minister, he tells Martha, you must also be a disciple.

Let me ask you the question, then. Are you a disciple? Because if you want to be any kind of minister, you must also be a disciple.

If you want to be an effective minister, you must also be a disciple.

If you want to be a purpose-driven minister, you must also be a disciple.

If you want to be a joyful minister, you must also be a disciple.

If you want to be a life-long minister, you must also be a disciple.

If you want to be a breathing minister, you must also be a disciple.

If you want to know what to even *do* as a minister. We all know that person who tries to put together furniture without the instructions. Please don't be that person in the church.

If you want to be an honest minister, you must also be a disciple. I know a pastor in Australia who thought he didn't have to be one. He secretly decided Jesus was not part of the Trinity, was not “Emmanuel God with us,” that Jesus was not Lord. But he kept this decision to himself and continued to pastor for ten more years. Is this the kind of minister you really want to be?

“You are the Messiah.”

Or do you want to be a minister like Martha was a minister? Because I believe that somewhere between Luke chapter 10 and John chapter 11, she figured it out. How else can you explain the events surrounding her brother's death?

In John 11, Jesus shows up at the grave of Lazarus four days late, her sister Mary is weeping and wailing on the sofa in the living room, and Martha gets up and marches right out of that house, straight to Jesus, to tell him what a disappointment he has been. I don't know about you, but that sounds to me like the brazen behavior of a minister who is also a disciple—and that is the kind of minister I want to be.

While most of Jesus's male disciples tried to find reasons why Jesus shouldn't go to Lazarus' aid, Martha, who presumably saw her brother's last breath, who saw him embalmed, who saw him laid and sealed in a tomb, Martha—of all people—was *still* able to say to Jesus, "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." Wouldn't you love to be this kind of minister? The minister who can say, "I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask"? That is the faith of a minister who is also a disciple.

And in that encounter, Jesus takes that moment to whisper into Martha's ear, "I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?"

That's when Martha makes one of the greatest declarations of Jesus's identity in the Christian gospels. She says, "I know that you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Don't you want to be a minister like that? Who writes sermons like that, who preaches messages like that? But here's the thing: you can't know those kinds of things, you can't believe those kinds of things, you can't shout those kinds of things, unless you are also a disciple.

Isn't it something, to think that Jesus was telling Martha to sit down in her living room so that one gospel and one chapter later, she had heard him enough that she could preach to all of human history that he was the Messiah, the Son of God?

I wonder what Jesus is just dying to tell you, if only you'll sit down for a moment and listen?

Jesus Wants to Love You

I already told you the story of the second most influential sermon of my life. Here's the story of the first. When I was thirteen years old, I went to this big Christian youth rally with my best friend Liz. I didn't really care for the youth rally so much; I only went because Liz was cool. At that youth rally, someone preached to me for the

very first time, the words, "Jesus wants to love you." There I was, this lonely, weird, thirteen-year-old kid, and was hearing someone preach, "Jesus wants to love you. Jesus wants to love you."

"Jesus wants to love you," he said. He gave up his life for you. "Jesus wants to love you." He's inviting you to come back to him. "Jesus wants to love you." Will you let him teach you? "Jesus wants to love you." Will you sit by him? Will you come, sit? Jesus wants to love you, yes, Jesus wants to love you.

What a sermon! I said yes to following Jesus that night, and I became his disciple. That was my first calling.

Don't forget, that was your first calling, too.

You couldn't be a minister without it.



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The Exclusive Use of Male Language for God: An Invisible Barrier to Women Pursuing Ministry Leadership

Dezerai Seitzer

According to Pew Research, 55% of American evangelical congregants are female.¹ However, only 3% of American evangelical head clergy—including within egalitarian denominations—are women.²

Studies have been conducted on the barriers women face in pursuing ministry leadership and while serving as head clergy. These studies reveal that women ministers suffer from—among other things—lack of mentorship, lack of support from male pastoral staff, lower salaries than male colleagues, and challenges related to sexuality/purity traditions. One of the most common barriers identified across multiple studies is that both church staff and congregants pervasively subscribe to a patriarchal church hierarchy. Even women who serve in denominations that readily ordain female ministers experience this barrier.³

In July 2020, the Church of Sweden announced that for the first time, they had more female priests than male priests: 50.1%. Relevant here is the Church of Sweden's decision in 2017 to use gender-neutral language for God in church services. While we cannot say definitively that this decision is what brought about this increase in female head clergy, it is an important question to ask.

In a fascinating study on the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland—Finland's largest religious body—Hannele Ottshofski offers supportive evidence linking gender-neutral God language to a higher percentage of female clergy. She shares that the Finnish language has no gendered pronouns for “he” and “she.” It uses the gender-neutral term *hän* for all persons. Additionally, the Finnish language does not apply gender to occupational titles. This has minimized preconceived ideas on which jobs belong to a man (such as judge, doctor, or pastor) and which jobs belong to a woman. She believes this inclusive language is why, as of 2019, 49% of pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland were women.⁴

While no official studies link a rise in female clergy to non-gendered terminology for God, Finland's statistics open the door to valid questions concerning the American evangelical church's exclusive use of masculine language for God and its correlation to the low percentage of female head clergy.

Is God Gendered?

If we are going to examine the question of whether or not the exclusive use of male gendered terms for God is an appropriate biblical practice, we must first ask the obvious question: Does the Bible claim that God is male?

Grammar can often confuse this issue, because the ways gender is identified in English and in the biblical languages are different.

Take for instance the example shared by Joshua Robert Barron of the term “Spirit” in the biblical languages. In Hebrew, the term for God's Spirit is *ruakh*, which is grammatically feminine, so a literal translation from Hebrew would use the pronoun “she” when referring to the Spirit. In Greek, the term for Holy Spirit is *pneuma hagion*, which is grammatically neuter, so a literal translation from Greek would use the pronoun “it” when referring to the Spirit. Moving beyond the biblical languages to the Latin Vulgate, in Latin, the term for the Holy Spirit is *spiritus sanctus*, which is grammatically masculine; therefore a literal translation from Latin would refer to the Spirit as “he.”

Barron explains that whether the pronoun is masculine, feminine, or neuter is solely a “linguistic accident” based on the rules of that language.⁵ Therefore, the biblical gendered terms for God should not be assumed to be reflective of God's sex, because God is not human. Arguing for the exclusive use of masculine pronouns for God based on an English Bible translation is without merit.

What about God as father? By self-revealing as father, did God intend for us to see “him” as male?

First, we must understand that *all* the ways God self-reveals in Scripture are symbolic. The Scriptures are clear that God is Spirit—not human, not object, not animal (John 4:24, Num 23:19). Yet the Bible pictures God as a rock, a hen, a fortress, a lion, a shepherd, a mother, a father, and with many other images.

In their *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, John Walton and Craig Keener explain that during biblical times the name of a deity was of importance because the name was reflective of part of the essence of that deity. For example, the nature God refers to by self-naming as “I Am” is that of being or existing.⁶ When God reveals Godself in Scripture using human images (such as those of mother and father), God is not revealing Godself as gendered in some way but is helping us to further understand some of God's divine characteristics in language we can comprehend.

But what about Jesus calling God father?

Most prominently when we think about God as father, we think about Jesus calling God his father, which gives us good reason to ask why he chose that term. Theologian Spencer Miles Boersma dives into questions about God as father with some simple questions of his own. He asks whether Jesus ever explicitly instituted Father as a proper name, and whether or not Father language was a part of the Hebrew culture before Jesus. He affirms it is well established that Father language (including the Aramaic *Abba*) is not unique to Jesus. The Old Testament as well as intertestamental passages refer to God

using the Hebrew and Greek terms for Father. In the Old Testament, Father is a symbol used to communicate God's love to a wayward Israel. It does not replace the name Yahweh but is used alongside it as a title (Father God or God the Father). Adding the title of Father to God became a practice in many traditional Jewish prayers. Therefore, Boersma concludes that in the New Testament, when Jesus called God Father, he did not uniquely name God, but was utilizing known prayer conventions of the time.⁷

Mimi Haddad, president of CBE International, explains that during Jesus's time, one of the roles of the father was to impart inheritance. By using the relational term of Father and teaching us to do the same, Jesus established the heavenly principle that we (as children of God) are coheirs with Christ, and the inheritance we receive is God's kingdom.⁸

While the scope and depth of this article does not allow for a thorough exploration of the theological importance of Jesus calling God father, it is extraordinarily significant to this topic. In order to fulfill the prophecies laid out in Scripture, Jesus's mother had to be a human female. Mary's role as mother is what made Jesus human, and God's role as a non-human, non-gendered "father" was imperative to his deity. Amy Peeler's book *Women and the Gender of God* is an excellent resource for further examinations on the theological impact of this issue.⁹

The term Father is a relational, symbolic image, not a statement on God's gender. Nowhere does Scripture suggest that the Israelites determined God to be male and therefore decided to call God "Father." While Jesus continued the Jewish tradition of calling God Father, he also used mothering and female imagery to help us more fully understand the characteristics of God. Is calling God Father wrong? No, but according to Scripture, neither is referring to God as Mother.

In spite of the current Western church's focus on masculine imagery for God, the Bible does in fact frequently use feminine metaphors and imagery to describe God. Consider the following examples: God as a mother bird (Ps 17:8b; Ruth 2:12), as a midwife (Ps 22:9), as a she-bear (Hosea 13:8a), as a mother hen (Matt 23:37b), as a woman looking for her lost coin (Luke 15:8–10), or as a woman baking bread (Luke 13:20–21). There are also several maternal images for God in the Bible—birthing (e.g., Deut 32:18, Isa 42:14, or James 1:18) and nursing (e.g., Isa 49:15).

We must pause to ask how often we have heard the church refer to one of these Scriptures when talking about God, and how often we have heard one of these metaphors used in reference to God. Unfortunately, the exclusivity of male terms and imagery for God is reaffirmed in our churches over and over again. The Bible provides us with a myriad of beautiful descriptors and imagery with which we can express ourselves to God, yet we have chosen to limit our God language to the masculine.

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God is inclusive in "her" own language about Godself, and we must find ways to reconcile the femaleness and maleness of God in our language to appropriately reflect who God says God is—a Spirit that created both females and males as an equal reflection of Godself.

Although it may seem as if inclusive language for God is a modern idea, history says otherwise. Research shows that from the earliest

Christian Jews, whose language and portrayal of the Holy Spirit was always female,¹⁰ to the Reformers such as Calvin and Luther, the church has upheld the biblical practice of referring to God with both masculine and feminine terminology.¹¹

It was not until the modern era that church leaders, theologians, and philosophers phased out the use of the feminine, in favor of the overuse of the masculine, to meet their own agendas rather than meet the fullness of Scripture. The use of feminine terminology and imagery for God is not a modern concept. In fact, the opposite is true. The exclusive use of masculine imagery and terminology for God is the modern concept.

Understanding the Power of a Label

As expressed at the start of this article, there are many reasons for the comparative lack of women in ministry leadership in the United States. However, there is one area that is often overlooked in that research. It is overlooked because, as we will discover here, language has the power to create norms—and when something becomes a norm, we often fail to question it, or even notice it.

Because this may be an unexplored area for many readers, we will start by examining the power of verbal labels, so that we may deduce why the decision to use exclusively male pronouns for God creates an environment in which male power/hierarchy has become the norm.

In 2007, the Center for the Neural Basis of Cognition in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the departments of psychology at Carnegie Mellon University and Stanford University came together to explore whether verbal labels affect category learning. In their study, participants were shown silhouettes of two different alien type images. One set had a more pointed head and the other set had a more rounded head. These two types of aliens were then assigned a nonsense label—either "leebish" or "grecious." The participants were then told to imagine they were on another planet to learn about alien life forms. They had to determine which aliens were okay to approach and which ones they should move away from. As each image was shown, the participants had to select an arrow moving them toward the image or away from it. If they got it correct, a bell would sound. If they got it incorrect, a buzzer would sound. One of the test groups was also provided with the labels for the image (leebish/grecious), while the other test group was not.

The group supplied with labels was significantly more accurate in determining whether it was an alien to approach or not, and

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they categorized the aliens more quickly. As a result, the research concluded that the labels facilitated category learning because they allowed the subject to more easily perceive a distinction between the categories (that is, a rounded head versus a pointy head). Naming a category causes items within that category to cohere, because the name is a reliable cue to classification. What is more, perception is affected by categorization. The human brain perceives differently labelled items as dissimilar. If two objects have different labels—no matter how similar the objects are—our brain assigns them to different categories.¹²

A similar study did several experiments to determine whether labeling (that is, naming something) has an impact on its conceptual structure. They tested both verbal and nonverbal cues by allowing the participants to hear either a word (such as “cow”) or a sound characteristic of that word (such as a “mooring” sound). Participants were then shown either a matching or mismatching picture and had to say whether or not the image matched the word or non-verbal sound. The results of these series of tests showed that hearing a word provided a much more accurate and faster identification of the picture than did the nonverbal sound. It was further determined that verbal labels not only activate conceptual representations faster, but that they are different in some way from representations activated by nonverbal cues. Over a series of seven different experiments, it was concluded that the dominant function of language is to activate a concept simply by hearing the appropriate word. Gary Lupyan calls these findings the “label feedback hypothesis.” This framework suggests that once a verbal label is activated, it will modulate ongoing perceptual processing.¹³

As a result, we see that not only does labeling something categorize it in our brains, but it also conceptualizes it and will continue to determine our perception of that thing.

The Impact of Categorizing God

Studies such as these help us understand how our brains work when we label something “male” or “female.” Something labeled male is automatically categorized in our brain as similar to the other male-like items within that category. More importantly, the brain excludes “male” items from the category of “female.” Therefore, labeling God “he” categorizes God in our minds with all things male, and most damagingly excludes God from anything female. In other words, when thinking of the term “female,” our brains tell us: “God doesn’t fit here.” That label then continues to define and drive our perception of God.

With a better understanding of how giving God a male-gendered label affects our brains, we can turn to the question: Is the exclusive use of male-gendered terminology for God a hidden barrier to women pursuing ministry leadership?

Male-Gendered Language for God: A Hidden Barrier?

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson contends that how a group names its god has a direct impact on how that community organizes every aspect of its religious system. It shapes the faith community’s identity and behavior, both corporately and individually. As such, the patriarchal labeling of God in the likeness and image of a powerful ruling male affects the legitimization of male authority in our social, political, and religious structures.¹⁴ As Mary Daly famously posits: If God is male, then the male is God.¹⁵

As reviewed in the aforementioned studies, our labels of “he,” “him,” and “father” categorize God as male. This conceptualizes our understanding and expectations of how God functions. This, in turn, excludes God from functioning within other (most particularly, female) categories.

Theologian Tanya Van Wyk has also researched the role of language in gender ideology, specifically in reference to gendered language for God. She asserts that language is used to both empower and strengthen identity. It also creates and shapes the beliefs we have regarding gender.

Most impactfully, she argues that our gender-exclusive language about God has become so normalized that it is invisible. Because of this, females internalize the messages that exclude them and even end up defending that exclusion and defending the masculine ways of speaking about God. Thus, the norm promoted by linguistic invisibility becomes recognized as legitimate. Wyk explains that this pattern of non-recognition has been passed through so many generations that it is just seen as “the way things are,” and continues to be maintained without any overt coercive activity on anyone’s part. This is how gender-exclusive language continues to justify, maintain, and perpetuate a patriarchal church culture.¹⁶

Could this linguistic invisibility and non-recognition be contributing to the ongoing beliefs about the correctness of male hierarchy within our churches?

Power Distortion

Many scholars posit that there is a power distortion created when the church holds tightly to a God-as-male image. This image directly translates into the earthly interactions of men and women. We recognize that humanity is inferior to God; therefore, this image of God as male suggests that women are inferior to men. The Bible is clear that humankind (both men and women) are to be submissive to God (e.g., James 4:7, Job 22:21, 1 Pet 5:6). However, with the view of God as male, a false hierarchy is created which now suggests that the inferior being (women), should always be submissive to men. If we can recognize and acknowledge the truth about God as being displayed in both the feminine and the masculine, the gender hierarchy between men and women cannot be sustained.¹⁷

Philosopher Luce Irigaray contends that women should not define themselves in relation to men. Rather, both men and women should define themselves in relation to Christ.¹⁸ While we do not lose our sex in Christ, we do redefine what sexuality means, under Christ.

In Gal 3:23–28, Paul is responding to questions about whether circumcision is necessary for Gentile believers. He says:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (NRSV)

Paul's argument shows that salvation is no longer male-centric and women are no longer the "other" who must seek salvation via their husbands. The physical restriction of circumcision, which allowed only men to be "set apart," is replaced by the ability both men and women have to respond to the Spirit and choose obedience to Christ.

When we assign a male gender to God, we create a false hierarchy that suggests male is more important and authoritative than female. Humankind is to be submissive to God, but when we make God male, we suggest that the female "other" must always be submissive to the male.

Carol Christ speaks to the power of symbolism, specifically within religion. She notes that the power of symbolism—such as the image of God as father—is not dependent on rational thought, because symbols function on a much deeper level of our psyche. Symbols directly impact the deeply held attitudes that lead us to feeling comfortable with systems—social, political, and religious. Religious symbolic systems that focus exclusively on male images of God delegitimize female power and deny women the ability to fully see themselves within the divine. A woman may understand herself as being created in the image of God, but it is only by denying her sexual identity. Meanwhile, the males in her culture are free to see themselves in the image of God in the context of their full sexual identity.¹⁹

Feminist theologian Mary Daly lays out the psychological consequences of viewing God exclusively as male: If we see God as a

Language has power. Labels such as "he" and "she" affect our perception. Eventually, those labels become invisible. Once we have internalized God as "he," we buy into the idea of male spiritual hierarchy ...

father in "his" heaven, ruling over "his" people, it then becomes the "nature" of things—as divinely planned—that our society, including our churches, be male-dominated. This ideal spills over into the home, where it is seen as acceptable for a husband to dominate his wife as the representative of God "himself."²⁰ While Daly does not lay out the specific effects that embracing this ideal has on churches, it is easy to follow this line of understanding to a place where men *must* be the heads and leaders of church communities.

Haddad contends that when we oppose inclusive language for God, oppose gender-accurate Bible translations, and refuse to complement masculine language with biblical feminine images of God, we are promoting the idea that God is male and that, therefore, males are preeminent. She asserts that we must look to the Bible as a whole and acknowledge that the Bible does not imply that God is male, nor does it sanction patriarchy. The issues arise when our church communities only hear masculine language and male metaphors for God and are then driven to ask if there is something fundamentally inferior with being female. She poignantly states that our careless use of language continues to promote an unbiblical subordination of women, and, more importantly, it obscures the character of God.²¹

Hope for the Future

In summary: while exclusive male-gendered terms and imagery for God have become the norm of our day, the Bible uses both male and female terms and imagery for God. Additionally, the church has historically upheld the use of both masculine and feminine terms for God. It is only within our modern era that the practice has become virtually non-existent.

Language has power. Labels such as "he" and "she" affect our perception. Eventually, those labels become invisible. Once we have internalized God as "he," we buy into the idea of male spiritual hierarchy—an idea which is then reflected in our church structures and practices.

We can conclude that our perception of God as male influences a woman's choice to go into ministry leadership. Her brain has already genderized religious authority as "male." That label will prompt hesitation about whether "she" has any right to step into religious authority.

However, hope is not lost. The rising statistics of female clergy in Finland and Sweden give us hope that returning to the biblical and historical practice of using both masculine and feminine imagery for God—or choosing gender-neutral terms—could have a positive impact on the number of women pursuing leadership in Christian ministry.

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Growing an Egalitarian Footprint in South America

Latin America is "a portrayal of negative effects of high levels of patriarchy".¹ "As successful as religious actors have been in pushing Latin America towards democracy, justice, human rights, and issues of gender inequality seems to have been left behind."

1. <https://digitalworks.union.edu/theses/123/>

CBE's 2023 international conference in São Paulo, Brazil, helped us begin a movement in South America to set the record straight on what the Bible teaches about women's biblical equality. We plan to continue that momentum with CBE's 2025 international conference in South America. Brazilian egalitarians are eager to attend the conference to build alliances and help with egalitarian momentum in South America.

It is crucial that we provide scholarships so more people can attend the conference in South America. The scholarships will be used to bring in students, pastors, and others who cannot afford to pay the registration fee. Understanding women's biblical value and equality is essential to empowering their life, work, and studies.



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 **CBE**
INTERNATIONAL

Book Review:

Silenced: The Forgotten Story of Progressive Era Free Methodist Women

By Christy Mesaros-Winckles (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023)

Reviewed by Kimberly Dickson

Christy Mesaros-Winckles's book, *Silenced: The Forgotten Story of Progressive Era Free Methodist Women*, carefully charts the changes in the American religious landscape that led to the silencing of women in the Free Methodist Church in the United States. Through painstaking research in denominational magazine articles and women's field reports, Mesaros-Winckles has traced how a church founded on equality and social reform in the 1860s became a church that silenced and sidelined women's ministry from 1890 until 1974. Using the voices of those who fought on both sides, Mesaros-Winckles reveals an untold story of church history.

Founded in 1860 by Benjamin Titus Roberts in reaction against the Episcopal Methodist Church, the Free Methodists "embodied the ideals of equality and the value of every person to God" (5). They purposefully sought to bring equality to slaves, women, and the poor because they believed the Episcopal Methodists favored the wealthy against the poor, marginalized, and oppressed. As Roberts saw it, the Free Methodists were returning to "Old School Methodism," which was founded upon John Wesley's understanding of spirituality and sanctification.

Mesaros-Winckles does not cover Wesley's study of the ancient beliefs still practiced in Eastern Orthodoxy that led to his novel (in Protestantism) understanding of sanctification, but she does explain its impact on the Free Methodist Church. Namely, Wesley's theology of sanctification is that, over one's lifetime, one could become free of intentional sin. Importantly, this means that truly following God's law leads to radical love of God and neighbor. Practically, this means believers "would seek social and religious reform and devote much of their time to these efforts" (6). As Mesaros-Winckles states: "Radical social reform was at the heart of an individual's quest for Christian perfection" (6). As this merged with the Holiness Movement of the 1860s, the Free Methodist Church grew rapidly. Mesaros-Winckles's thorough explanation of the Free Methodist Church's founding principles and theology proves essential to understanding the conflict that emerged in the church around women's ministry.



Contrary to the belief that women were weaker than men, women were in fact doing the same work as men but without the pay or transportation help that the denomination afforded to men.

Though Roberts stridently promoted the equality of women, other influential founding members of his denomination did not. A battle of beliefs ensued, wherein Roberts strategically used his position as editor of the leading denominational magazine to promote gender and racial equality. As editor, he published the work of women and men who favored women's ordination and often highlighted women's reports of their work as evangelists and church planters (18). These stories demonstrated that, contrary to the belief that women were weaker than men, women were in fact doing the same work as men but without the pay or transportation help that the denomination afforded to men.

Mesaros-Winckles highlights three women evangelists from this era: Clara Wetherford (1849–1921), Dr. Sarah Anne Grant (1845–1916), and Ida Gage (1861–1915). Their stories, gathered from their own ministry reports, magazine articles, sermons, speeches, and newspaper clippings, illustrate how these women adapted to the pressures of their era. Early on they code-switched, knowing that they needed to present their ministry work like the men, distinctly separating their evangelistic and church planting work from other relational responsibilities. However, when the cult of

domesticity grew in influence, they wrote about their dual "spiritual calling and commitment to family" as a means of validating their ministry (69). Though trusted and empowered by their church to spread Free Methodism across the country, their leadership voice had waned by the late 1800s and early 1900s. As Roberts and his allyship died and others left the denomination for churches that ordained women (like the Congregational Church), the voices opposing women's leadership became dominant (17).

Finally, in 1911, the conference created a deaconess role, which sidelined women into ministry beneath and separate from men. They also denied pay to women leaders who were married to men in church leadership. This remained the reality until 1974, when the culture shifted enough to allow a vote for the equality of women in all aspects of leadership. However, the church had absorbed the then-new complementarian theology, significantly slowing the momentum for female leadership.

Mesaros-Winckles particularly excels in her description of the era's historical realities that worked against women's leadership. This was the time of the suffragette movement, which, she notes, Protestants largely opposed.

Mesaros-Winckles particularly excels in her description of the era's historical realities that worked against women's leadership. This was the time of the suffragette movement, which, she notes, Protestants largely opposed. Fundamental to this opposition was the belief that women were naturally inferior to men (8, 83). Simultaneously, the cult of domesticity was on the rise, which argued that women were morally superior to men but weaker when facing the harsh realities of the world. Thus, women should remain at home and raise the next generation of children, leaving church ordination and leadership to men (8).

Furthermore, Mesaros-Winckles's description of the changing theology is eye-opening. She explains that the new theology of premillennialism propelled the growth of Protestant Fundamentalism. According to Mesaros-Winckles, premillennialism promoted a "literal" interpretation of the Bible that eschewed study of the Greek and Hebrew texts as well as their historical contexts and thus obscured the intent of difficult biblical passages. Regarding gender roles of women and men, premillennialism promoted a straightforward biblical interpretation that deemed women's

ordination as a slide toward secularism and sin (97-99). Moreover, this move toward premillennialism turned Free Methodists away from Wesley's founding beliefs about sanctification. This, in turn, caused skepticism, though not outright rejection of their focus on social reform work. Pulling together and making sense of several historical threads, Mesaros-Winckles connects premillennialism and the fundamentalist shift away from social outreach with the limiting of women in church leadership.

Though academic in its rigorous research and writing style, *Silenced* adds to our understanding of women's history in the American church. Not only does it fill in missing history, but it also provides a case study for what was happening more broadly in nineteenth-century Protestantism regarding women's leadership. The Free Methodist Church is not alone in abandoning its founding egalitarian principles as it absorbed prevailing cultural shifts, ultimately restricting leadership in the church to white men. Were we to look, we would find many more examples.



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CBE International (CBE) is a nonprofit organization of Christian men and women who believe that the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of men and women of all ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all age groups, based on the teachings of Scriptures such as Galatians 3:28.

Priscilla Papers is the academic voice of CBE International, providing peer reviewed, interdisciplinary, scholarship on topics related to a biblical view of women and men in the home, church, and world. "...when Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately," (Acts 18:26b, NRSV).

MISSION STATEMENT

CBE exists to promote the biblical message that God calls women and men of all cultures, races, and classes to share authority equally in service and leadership in the home, church, and world. CBE's mission is to eliminate the power imbalance between men and women resulting from theological patriarchy.

STATEMENT OF FAITH

- We *believe* in one God, creator and sustainer of the universe, eternally existing as three persons equal in power and glory.
- We *believe* in the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ.
- We *believe* that eternal salvation and restored relationships are only possible through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose from the dead, and is coming again. This salvation is offered to all people.
- We *believe* the Holy Spirit equips us for service and sanctifies us from sin.
- We *believe* the Bible is the inspired word of God, is reliable, and is the final authority for faith and practice.
- We *believe* that women and men are equally created in God's image and given equal authority and stewardship of God's creation.
- We *believe* that women and men are equally responsible for and distorted by sin, resulting in shattered relationships with God, self, and others.
- Therefore, we *lament* that the sins of sexism and racism have been used to historically oppress and silence women throughout the life of the church.
- We *resolve* to value and listen to the voices and lived experiences of women throughout the world who have been impacted by the sins of sexism and racism.

CORE VALUES

- Scripture is our authoritative guide for faith, life, and practice.
- Patriarchy (male dominance) is not a biblical ideal but a result of sin that manifests itself personally, relationally, and structurally.
- Patriarchy is an abuse of power, taking from women and girls what God has given them: their dignity, freedom, and leadership, and often their very lives.
- While the Bible reflects a patriarchal culture, the Bible does not teach patriarchy as God's standard for human relationships.
- Christ's redemptive work frees all people from patriarchy, calling women and men to share authority equally in service and leadership.
- God's design for relationships includes faithful marriage between a woman and a man, celibate singleness, and mutual submission in Christian community.
- The unrestricted use of women's gifts is integral to the work of the Holy Spirit and essential for the advancement of the gospel worldwide.
- Followers of Christ are to advance human flourishing by opposing injustice and patriarchal teachings and practices that demean, diminish, marginalize, dominate, abuse, enslave, or exploit women, or restrict women's access to leadership in the home, church, and world.

ENVISIONED FUTURE

CBE envisions a future where all believers are freed to exercise their gifts for God's glory and purposes, with the full support of their Christian communities.

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Silenced: The Forgotten Story of Progressive Era Free Methodist Women

Christy Mesaros-Winckles

In *Silenced: The Forgotten Story of Progressive Era Free Methodist Women*, Christy Mesaros-Winckles delves into the gender debates within the Free Methodist Church of North America during the Progressive Era (1890–1920). This interdisciplinary work draws on narrative research and gender studies to reconstruct the lives of forgotten women who served as Free Methodist evangelists and deacons, examining their writings and speeches to illustrate how they promoted and defended their ministries. Mesaros-Winckles argues that the history of Free Methodist women is a microcosm of the struggle for recognition and acceptance faced by women across numerous evangelical traditions, especially amidst rising fundamentalism at the turn of the twentieth century. This book provides an important contribution to the fields of American history, theology, media studies, and gender studies, and will also be of interest to rhetorical history and communication theory scholars.



“Silence” in Translation: 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 in Myanmar and the Development of a Critical Contextual Hermeneutic

Anna Sui Hluan

In this groundbreaking study, Dr. Anna Sui Hluan critically examines the understanding of “silence” within the Myanmar context, specifically as it impacts the church’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35. She offers a comparative study of the Judson Burmese Bible alongside versions of the Greek text, exploring the role of translation in reinforcing cultural assumptions and codifying the translator’s interpretive viewpoint. Analyzing the verses in question through the lens of three contemporary schools of interpretation—literal traditional, feminist, and egalitarian—she demonstrates the need for developing a satisfactory contextual hermeneutic for interpreting passages that concern women in Myanmar today.