

Inheriting Church Ministry: The Daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27:1–11

Jazmine Lawrence

Numbers 27:1–11, the brief story of the five daughters of Zelophehad, has been historically used as a proof text to address issues involving women and inheritance, usually in support of patriarchy.¹ In response, the passage is decried by modern feminists in the way it and its Numbers 36 epilogue appear to uphold abusive “patriarchal ideals” and “safeguard” patriarchy.² This alternate reading is worth paying attention to, especially when the daughters of Zelophehad have been used in present-day patriarchal Christianity to represent “bold women” who have “the same dominion mandate as men” but nevertheless fulfill the role differently by having a “gentle and quiet spirit” as “submissive learners and followers” of men.³ Can Zelophehad’s daughters offer more than this to men and women in the church?

To answer this question, we begin by examining the literary setting of the narrative in the book of Numbers, go on to study the narrative itself, and then draw implications for the present-day church.

Literary Context: Numbers 25–27

Some view the book of Numbers as an undiscerning mix of sources and genres,⁴ even accusing it of “ostensible disorganization” and “structural confusion.”⁵ However, the book’s structure can be shown to demonstrate purposeful order, elegantly serving the Torah’s theme of nation-formation.⁶ The narrative follows Israel as it emerges from the sacred time and space of Sinai to actively take ownership of the land God will give them.⁷ The book opens with a census (chs. 1–4), followed by instruction (chs. 5–10). Chapter 11 alerts the reader to the peoples’ negative attitudes: they are not ready to inherit Canaan, so the generation that came up from Egypt is to be wiped out. The last judgment on that generation is executed thirty-eight years later by Phinehas, the high priest’s son (ch. 25). Following this is a census of the new generation of fighting men (ch. 26).⁸ The following narratives, beginning with the story of the daughters of Zelophehad (27:1–11), noticeably lack the elements of sin and judgment that have marked the book thus far. In the book’s literary structure, this story marks a positive turning point in Israel’s attitude.

Zelophehad’s daughters have been previously identified by name in the male-dominated census in chapter 26—Mahlah, Noah,⁹ Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah—via seven descendants of Joseph through his son Manasseh (Num 26:29–34).¹⁰ This listing of seven ancestors is a matter of honor; the other tribes list only two to four ancestors, except for Levi which lists five.¹¹ The Levite, Phinehas, has heroically starred in chapter 25, so these five Manassite daughters become associated with him through narrative proximity and lengthy lineage.¹² Phinehas’s violent, God-affirmed activity pairs honorably with the daughters’ non-violent, God-affirmed activity. Phinehas has opposed the God-displeasing “daughters” of Moab (Num 25:1),¹³ for whom the God-favoured “daughters” of Zelophehad are narrative foils. Furthermore, Zelophehad’s daughters become a foil to every party that has previously challenged Moses throughout Numbers, being the first challengers to not experience judgment for doing so.¹⁴

The first half of Numbers 27 presents Zelophehad’s daughters contesting a blind spot in the census inheritance assignments that would leave them entirely unprovisioned, with the second half dedicated to the commissioning of Joshua to shepherd the generation that will possess Canaan.¹⁵ Together, the characters of Numbers 25–27 (Phinehas, the daughters of Zelophehad, and Joshua) either prove or catalyze national readiness to inherit God’s promises. With this as the literary context, we turn to examining the story of Zelophehad’s daughters.

The Narrative: Numbers 27:1–11

The story opens with the bold initiative the daughters of Zelophehad take to “draw near” (Num 27:1). Their names are recorded for posterity: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. The term “daughters” (*benōt*) is used here and three more times in the passage¹⁶ and can be read in resonance with Jacob’s Gen 49:22 blessing over Joseph which, rendered literally, reads: “Joseph a fruitful son, a fruitful son upon a fountain, the daughters mounting over a wall.”¹⁷ The daughters of Zelophehad, both as actual descendants and by word association, are Joseph’s promised daughters.

The daughters stand before all the levels of government—Moses, Eleazar the priest (Phinehas’s father), the chiefs, and the congregation¹⁸—at the entrance to the place of meeting with Yahweh (27:2), the place of “ongoing dialogue between God and God’s people.”¹⁹ The phrase, “before Eleazar the priest . . . and before all the congregation,” occurs twice of Joshua in the narrative following (27:19, 22), literarily strengthening the connection between Joshua and these women²⁰ beyond the fact that Joshua is an Ephraimite, a fellow descendant in Joseph’s legacy.²¹ In contrast to these five women, Korah, a Levite, has challenged Moses (Num 16) with four other named men from the tribe of Reuben. Whereas these five men have belligerently confronted Moses, Zelophehad’s daughters approach with no belligerence. While Korah’s group has 250 sympathizing leaders from among “well-known” “sons” of Israel, the daughters of Zelophehad have not a single sympathizer. Though Israel may have finally learned that challenging God through Moses is not to be undertaken lightly, they persist in being unable to perceive the right time for it.

The daughters frame their request in the context of justice for their father (27:3).²² His reputation is in a predicament relatable to the men listening. Yes, it is a patriarchal concern, but it is different from Korah’s confrontational accusation. In fact, the daughters clear their father’s reputation of connection to Korah to distance themselves from rebellion. They invoke the name of Yahweh, something not to be done lightly given the Decalogue’s prohibition.²³ Also as per the Decalogue, they honor their father’s reputation by appealing: “Why should the name of our father be taken away . . . ?” (27:4).²⁴ They are wisely navigating cultural and theological systems to confront injustice.

The women justify their question based on a communal value, that their father's "name" should be given opportunity to endure.²⁵ The disappearance of a family name through male descendants is "associated with divine judgment leading to societal abandonment."²⁶ So the daughters propose a solution. Their request demonstrates courageous willingness to take ownership of their own survival in the absence of male protector-providers.²⁷ Not only this, but where the men of Israel are positioned to inherit passively and by default, these women demonstrate readiness to take ownership of and responsibility for the promised land.

Without comment, Moses brings the case to Yahweh (27:5), inviting Yahweh's character into better view for all his people, in "ongoing dialogue."²⁸ Will Yahweh uphold a cultural norm that leaves these women without means of survival?

Yahweh speaks Zelophehad's name (27:7)²⁹ and affirms the daughters' proposal as "right,"³⁰ instructing Moses to "give" to the daughters. Daughters inheriting property was not new in the ancient Near East, and Israel likely encountered precedents in other cultures.³¹ Thus, the daughters potentially propose a foreign culture's sense of justice that reflects Yahweh's own character. Yahweh directs Moses to teach the "sons" of Israel this expanded view of justice, transferring responsibility for this communal justice to future generations, so that no Israelites—living or dead—lose their place in Yahweh's promised inheritance by lacking male inheritors or male protector-providers.³²

Numbers 27:11 concludes the episode by calling what God has just ordained an "ordinance" (*mishpat*, often translated "justice"). The term is conspicuously repeated in the next story where Eleazar is to inquire before Yahweh on Joshua's behalf for *mishpat* (27:21).³³ The *mishpat* these five women receive is a paradigm of the responsibility of the spiritual and political leaders to remain in active dialogue with Yahweh about future issues of *mishpat*. The community can expect Yahweh's answers to transform culture in order to accommodate humanly attainable but constantly improving forms of *mishpat*. Thus, the daughters' proposal has unintentional but extraordinarily lasting influence on their community in exposing positive results of ongoing dialogue with Yahweh. This is no small feat given their lack of positional power.³⁴ Moses enacts Yahweh's ruling by recording it for Joshua to enforce later.³⁵

The story could easily be eclipsed by the flurry of divine instruction following, starting with the momentous act of Joshua's commissioning.³⁶ But the strategic positioning of the story of Zelophehad's daughters is telling: it follows and precedes accounts of Israel's civil and religious leadership, functioning as a narrative prompt integral to these surrounding stories.

Implications for the Church

The daughters have vision for something beyond what the law would give them—a greater justice—and willingness to undertake a culturally male responsibility for land. And God calls it "right," reshaping culture through additional legislation, not to "regulate external behaviour," but to "form human character" in his likeness.³⁷ In taking initiative to propose action that God later endorses, the

daughters demonstrate godly character that is paradigmatic for all Israel. They set a precedent for other vulnerable people, to actively seek not just provision but meaningful participation in God's work. Readers are to take note of their struggle and strategy in order to pursue a greater manifestation of God's character in their midst by making just, peaceable proposals and inviting ongoing dialogue with each other and with God.³⁸

Yahweh speaks Zelophehad's name (27:7) and affirms the daughters' proposal as "right," instructing Moses to "give" to the daughters.

Where the Law of Moses reflects a "progressive and protective attitude toward women,"³⁹ the people are still to fulfill the law through active relationship with God. Moses later pleads with the daughters' generation to circumcise their hearts and reflect the character of God who is not partial and "executes justice for those" to whom he "gives" provision, as God has done for the daughters of Zelophehad (Deut 10:15–18). God later laments through Jeremiah over the broken covenant, longing to "set you [feminine] among my children [lit. 'sons']" and "give you [feminine] a pleasant land" as a "heritage" (*nahala*) (Jer 3:19), the same as the daughters of Zelophehad: "let them possess an inheritance [*nahala*] among their father's brothers" (Num 27:7).⁴⁰ Putting this pair of texts into conversation, a possible reading that emerges is: God likens his people to daughters—culturally and legally disadvantaged—for whom he longs to transcend cultural norms to make daughters equal inheritors alongside sons.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah are certainly models of boldness, hope, advocacy, and faithfulness,⁴¹ but Scripture offers more than human models to mimic. God intends his people to be transformed into the image of his Son, not the image of characters in biblical stories.⁴² Also, to look only for legal models in this pericope, as has been done historically, is contrary to the sense of Moses's law as *torah*—guiding instruction—written "in order to persuade,"⁴³ not to create slaves to unyielding law. Static application of law nullifies ongoing dialogue with the community and with God. And that ongoing dialogue can subvert injustice enacted in the name of law. Applying the narrative of the daughters of Zelophehad in the present day, application can be made to women "inheriting office" in the church.

Conclusion

Jesus's "code of ethics" mediates application of OT law⁴⁴ by contrasting static applications of law with God's character of grace and truth.⁴⁵ The religious leaders of the time, lacking transformative dialogue with God, have Jesus put to death because he publicly exposes unjust applications of law, applications that benefit them.⁴⁶ The daughters of Zelophehad are vindicated as "right" by God. They are allowed names that endure, not only in Scripture but possibly in Israelite history as geographical markers.⁴⁷ Similarly, Jesus has been

vindicated by God by being raised from the dead and given the most enduring name.⁴⁸ Thus, the daughters can be said to typify Christ.

Women with vision for the church must often “leap over the wall” to do what they do. The daughters of Zelophehad overcome social conditioning, resist the legal structures of their day, and resist the fear that their petition would not be granted. They act with what power they possess: bodies to meaningfully occupy space, voices to be meaningfully heard, and ideas to meaningfully influence the believing community.

Many able women are asking: How can we honor our Father’s name according to our willingness to inherit responsibility in the church? This bold request challenges the limits the church places on the stewardship of God’s kingdom, as did the request of the daughters of Zelophehad, and demands ongoing dialogue in the Church and with God.

Notes

1. Some theologians of the past justified women inheriting monarchy based on this passage for the benefit of their male heirs, while others used it to distinguish inheriting an “office” (such as authority as a monarch) from inheriting property to deny women office. To summarize Robert Bartlett, *Blood Royal: Dynastic Politics in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge University, 2020) 151–153: In the twelfth century, the Franciscan François de Meyronnes justified women to inherit property as per Augustine condemning the contrary in *City of God*, but then he authoritatively stated that women “are not entitled to office as they are to an inheritance.” The Dominican Thomas Waleys agreed, saying that it would be unjust for a woman to not inherit property, citing the daughters of Zelophehad, but that it was “reasonable” for a woman to receive “private” inheritance but not “public.” De Meyronnes and Waleys established philosophical arguments later used by naysayers to exclude women from public office. The daughters of Zelophehad were used to argue the rights of Edward III and Henry VII to the throne of England, where their female ancestors, though never themselves granted the throne, needed to be proven legitimate heirs to the throne to make the claim.
2. Sonia Kwok Wong, “Zelophehad’s Daughters as Lienü (Exemplary Women): Reading Num. 27:1–11 and 36:1–12 in the Discursive Context of Confucianism,” in *Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang (T&T Clark, 2019) 232.
3. Robert Sagers, “Taking Dominion” (Aug 5, 2011) www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/taking-dominion.
4. Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers, JPS Torah Commentary* (Jewish Publication Society, 1990) xiii.
5. Kent L. Sparks, “Numbers, Book of,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Baker, 2005) 540.
6. Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers, TOTC* (IVP, 1981) 39.
7. T. Desmond Alexander and Desi Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Baker, 2012) 268.
8. Dates are mentioned in 1:1, 1:18, 10:11, and 33:38, the first three occurring in the second year and the last in the fortieth year since the exodus.
9. The patriarch Noah’s name (*No’ach*) means “rest,” but the feminine name here, *No’ah*, is thought to mean “movement.”
10. Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers, IBC* (John Knox Press, 1996) 162. There would have been more than seven generations from Joseph to these women over the nearly 500 years since Joseph, so the

number of named individuals is deliberate and symbolic.

11. Olson, *Numbers*, 162. The census not only honors Manasseh’s tribe with the most generations named but also numbers Manasseh’s tribe as the most fruitful during the wilderness years. Manasseh’s tribe grows by 20,500 battle-ready males, which outstrips any other tribe between the first and second censuses by a rough factor of two (Dennis R. Cole, *Numbers: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC [B&H, 2000] 447).
12. Levi and Manasseh’s descendants are honored in Deuteronomy (John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* [Zondervan, 1992] 477). When David writes his psalms, Manasseh is still honored alongside his brother, Ephraim, and the royal tribe of Judah: e.g., Pss 60:7, 80:2, 108:8.
13. Num 25:1, as per the Hebrew, translated “women” in CEB, NIV, NRSV, NRSVue, etc.
14. Num 11 (the “whole congregation”); 12 (Hazereth, Miriam and Aaron); 13 (the congregation); 14 (the congregation); 16 (Korah, and then the congregation); 20 (the congregation), 21 (the congregation).
15. Num 27:1–11, then 27:12–23.
16. “Daughters” stands out among ten concurrent uses of “son” (*ben*, including “children [*ben*] of Israel”) as well as the frequently mentioned “brothers” and “father.”
17. Translation by Julia E. Smith (1792–1886).
18. They may have approached “lower courts” in accordance with the recommendations Moses’s father-in-law gave for government (Exod 18:24–26), but no one had sympathized with or advocated for them.
19. Olson, *Numbers*, 176.
20. They may have been quite young, being unmarried, but I refer to them as women.
21. Num 13:8, 16.
22. Yael Shemesh, “A Gender Perspective on the Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible, Talmudic Midrash, and Modern Feminist Midrash,” *BibInt* 15/1 (2007) 83.
23. Exod 20:7: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain. . . .”
24. Exod 20:12: “Honor your father and your mother. . . .” “Why . . . ?” had been recently demanded by the donkey upon her abuse by Balaam in Num 22:28, and by other characters throughout the books of Exodus and Numbers to confront real or perceived injustice. Yahweh shapes his people—including today’s reader—by the way he answers. This is the question Jesus cries from the cross, quoting Ps 22: “Why have you forsaken . . . ?”
25. Olson, *Numbers*, 177. Also Kelly L. Schmidt, “Strategic Leadership as Modeled by the Daughters of Zelophehad,” in *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 10/1 (Fall 2020) 109. Cf. Ps 127:3 n7, NET Bible: “Daughters are certainly wonderful additions to a family, but in ancient Israelite culture sons were the ‘arrows’ that gave a man security in his old age, for they could defend the family interests at the city gate, where the legal and economic issues of the community were settled.” The psalm goes on to say that sons will prevent the father being “put to shame” when confronted with legal matters (“at the city gate”), which is exactly the activity of these daughters hundreds of years earlier.
26. Roy Gane and R. Dennis Cole, *Leviticus and Numbers, ZIBBC* (Harper Collins, 2016) 194.
27. Cf. Wong, “Zelophehad’s Daughters as Lienü,” 235, regarding their father not having arranged dowries.
28. As per Moses’s father-in-law’s advice in Exod 18:19, “bring their cases to God.” Olson, *Numbers*, 176.
29. Some use a “hermeneutic of suspicion” as grounds of offense that God does not name the women (e.g., Seung Ai Yan, “Feminist Critical Theory and Asian American Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” ch. 12 in *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian-American Biblical Hermeneutics* [2019] 162). But a high view of the women

- should not encourage a low view of God or of the men they interact with. Suspicion could also create a low view of the women, who only “acquiesce” and submit to the “maintenance of patriarchal order” (Wong, “Zelophehad’s Daughters as Lienü,” 232).
30. Hebrew *ken*, “right,” here implies being correct, honest, righteous, and veritable. *HALOT* s.v.
 31. For example, Hammurabi’s Code 168–94, ca. 1728–1686 BC, from Old Babylon, hundreds of years before the exodus (*ANETP* 173–75). The historical practices are far more complex and varied, contrary to the straightforward statement the ESV Study Bible notes on Num 27:1–11 regarding “traditional rules.” Israel would have been well exposed to other cultures in Egypt and throughout their wilderness journey. Contrary to the accusation that this passage is a “ruse” cooked up during the post-exilic period “to undermine the common custom of antiquity” (David H. Aaron, “The Ruse of Zelophehad’s Daughters,” *HUCA* 80 [2009] 1–38), cultures in the post-exilic period had been allowing daughters to inherit according to circumstances, varying justice systems, and a father’s discretion for at least a thousand years by that point (as per Hammurabi’s Code). It was perfectly reasonable for nomadic Israel to take clues from common ANE orderliness as God transformed it from a nomadic nation to a landed nation, remaining anchored in bearing Yahweh’s image.
 32. In vv. 8–11, Yahweh provides legal precedent for other women to inherit but names primary male heirs and thus does not eradicate patriarchy. However, the reader should acknowledge the role of this judgment in strengthening social order (Sailhamer, *Pentateuch*, 5, 29, 370, 381), contrasting a prior image of the people “running wild” in the account of the golden calf, proving that ongoing dialogue with Yahweh and the community is fruitful.
 33. Translated in the NRSV as “decision.”
 34. Schmidt, “Strategic Leadership,” 109. Schmidt goes on to laud the daughters as examples of “strategic leadership operating from a marginalized position in society” who overcome “cultural and legal challenges” to rightfully claim a share in God’s blessing (102).
 35. Josh 17:1–6.
 36. Num 27:12–23.
 37. Waldermar Jansen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Westminster John Knox, 1994) 62.
 38. Olson, *Numbers*, 169.
 39. Ronald W. Pierce and Mary L. Conway, “The Treatment of Women Under the Mosaic Law,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. Kirkland, 3rd ed. (IVP Academic, 2021) 68.
 40. Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Eisenbrauns, 2009) 235n20. The gender in the Jeremiah passage then switches and God says, “I thought you [plural masculine] would call me, My Father,” and expresses grief over sons who would not honor his fatherhood.
 41. Boda, *A Severe Mercy*, 235n20.
 42. Col 1:15. Christ is “the image of the invisible God.” To view these women as models, or to simply act the way God instructs Israel to act in response (as per Num 36 and John 17:1–6) is to add another law to follow: “be like them,” which is inferior to God’s command to be like him: “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7, 26).
 43. Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch* (IVP Academic, 2015) 4.
 44. Cf. William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Zondervan, 2017) 445.
 45. John 1:17: “the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”
 46. For example, doing good and saving life on the Sabbath (Mark 3:4–5), or letting a sinful woman touch him (Luke 7:39). Note how Moses is a foil to the religious leaders of Jesus’s day because Moses sought dialogue with God when the law he was responsible for enforcing was challenged.
 47. Milgrom (224) notes that three of the five daughters appear to have been geographically honored in Manasseh’s territory with a city named Tirzah and two districts named Noah (fem. *No’ah*) and Hogleh. These names are attested in ostraca dated roughly 800 BC, by which Milgrom concludes that “the Manassite clan divisions maintained themselves well into the monarchy.”
 48. Phil 2:9–10.



Jazmine Lawrence lives in Nova Scotia, Canada, with her husband and son and attends Acadia Divinity College as an MA (Theology) student. She hails from Vancouver, British Columbia, growing up as one of five girls before spending fourteen years in the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Making Kingdom Impact Through Your Retirement Assets



If you are 70 ½ or older, you can give to CBE from your IRA and receive significant tax benefits in return.

Benefits of giving from your IRA

- **Convenient.** An easy way to give to your favorite ministry.
- **Tax-wise.** Charitable distributions reduce your taxable income. This benefits you even if you don’t itemize deductions on your tax returns!
- **Impactful.** Gifts are tax-free to the charity. The entirety of your gift will go toward ministry!
- Give up to \$108,000 per year* without any federal tax liability, as long as the gifts are qualified charitable distributions (QCDs).
- Distributions may be made from IRAs including a traditional IRA, inherited IRA, SEP IRA (inactive), or simple IRA (inactive).