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Editorial

A West African proverb urges men: “Beat your wife regularly. If you don’t know why, she will.” In this issue on women and risk, Rebekah Mui Pei Ern explores the issue of women and the risk of physical violence. Before Christianity became the religion of the Roman state, the cross symbolized those populations which came under imperial and patriarchal domination. These would be those placed under subjection in the social stratification of the empire and within the hierarchies of the household: slaves and women. Common to this population was its vulnerability to shame and violence, often, sexual violence. Penetrability marked slaves and women, as it did the crucified body of Christ. This symbolism took a surprising turn after Constantine, morphing the crucified Christ from one who endured a *shameful* sacrifice to one whose heroic masculinity made possible an applause-worthy *painful* sacrifice. Mui argues that the cross, instead of representing the dominated, that is, slaves and women, came to represent the dominator.

A traditional Indian view is that any investment into a girl child is as futile as “watering a neighbour’s garden,” because a daughter eventually leaves her birth family to benefit another. This kind of thinking could well underlie the legal restriction on inheritance passing to female descendants, a restriction that to this day exposes widows and the female fatherless to the risk of living precariously on the margins of society. Jazmine Lawrence’s article concludes that in successfully challenging ancient Israel’s inheritance laws, the daughters of Zelophehad proved that they had “bodies to meaningfully occupy space, voices to be meaningfully heard, and ideas to meaningfully influence the believing community.”

Anna Kasafi Perkins and Jill Richardson reflect on the story of the women in John 8 who were taken to Jesus on the charge of adultery by men of the religious institutions of his day. Here is a woman who runs the risk of death by stoning because a group of males use her as bait to bring down an opponent. The woman is eminently

expendable, as the Spanish proverb puts it: “Women are like buses; if one leaves, another will come.” Perkins reflects on a pair of poems on the narrative. One poem calls into question the motives of those who would throw stones; the other calls them agents of gender violence and urges resistance to stone-throwers. Meanwhile, Richardson’s sermon fleshes out a Jesus who “won’t stand for people using women or for meting out unequal justice between the sexes.”

Caylie Cox analyses articles from the *Foursquare Crusader* of the 1930s, the newsletter of the church that the charismatic leader Aimee McPherson founded and led. Contrary to the Anglo-American proverb which assures that “a whistling girl and a crowing hen always come to no good end,” McPherson’s followers treated her as a happy exception to the rule of male church leadership. She was a “crowing hen” that was to be admired. This allowed them to gain from her giftings while keeping the traditional paradigm of masculine, muscular ministers.

“The woman with long feet ends up alone in a room,” observes a Chinese maxim. “Long feet” stands for anything that might threaten the male/female *status quo* in a culture which gives the man the upper hand over his wife. Along these lines, Bethany Jantzi brings up a possibility of risk peculiar to Christian complementarian marriages. Complementarianism can create the opportunity for the husband to mimic the behaviour of a domestic abuser, deploying coercive control under the cover of biblical sanction.

The risks to women—whether at home or outside—are many. Distressingly so. I pray that this issue of *Priscilla Papers* increases our awareness and motivates our biblically-sound responses.

Together, side by side, in God’s world.

Havilah Dharamraj
Editor

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The Upside-Down Queendom: Aimee Semple McPherson and Gendered Rhetoric in the 1930s *Foursquare Crusader*

Caylie Cox

Aimee Semple McPherson was many things to many people, and she was always a sensation. Perhaps the most prominent evangelist of the 1930s, McPherson preached to thousands of people every week and trained hundreds of young men and women for ministry and missionary roles. She was also married three times, liberally enhanced her sermons with spectacle and drama, and disappeared for a week under circumstances that remain mysterious to this day. Apart from her importance to the development of North American Christianity, McPherson has much to teach women in ministry, if only they look close enough.

McPherson's ministry and the public's response to it illuminate how difficult it is for women in Christian ministry to truly change the culture of their organizations. Although McPherson was revered by her followers, she not only faced criticism from outsiders, but also a more subtle form of resistance: the gender role ideals of her followers. In order to gain a better understanding of the difficulties facing marginalized leaders, we must analyze the rhetoric not only of a leader's critics, but also of her supporters.

In this case, a rhetorical analysis of certain articles from the *Foursquare Crusader*—the newsletter of McPherson's church—reveals a congregation that embraces two mutually exclusive ideals: support of a strong woman pastor and adherence to traditional gender roles. Looking at these articles through the lens of rhetorician Kenneth Burke's theory of "piety" allows for an understanding of how a leader's supporters can adhere to ideas that contradict what that leader symbolizes. Burkean piety theorizes why it is so hard for people to speak or act against the norms of the culture around them: there is always pressure to conform—to be "pious" to cultural ideals and therefore blend into the crowd.

Seen through the lens of Burkean piety, McPherson's supporters are caught between a rock and a hard place: They must remain "pious" with regard to gender roles while still supporting the woman they revere. According to Burke, such a contradiction should result in "perspective by incongruity," in which someone realizes the gap between their beliefs and their actions or words, leading them to change. However, gender role stereotypes persisted in the *Foursquare Crusader* and after McPherson's death, the Foursquare Church reverted to male leadership for decades. I argue that perspective by incongruity can be canceled out by a strong enough belief that someone or something is the exception to the (pious) rule—in other words, by adherence to a greater piety. In McPherson's case, her continual emphasis on her calling by God allowed her supporters (and even herself) to rationalize her leadership while still adhering to their culture's limiting beliefs about gender.

McPherson, therefore, can serve as an example for those studying women (or other marginalized people) in ministry from any time period. Although analyzing the rhetoric of critics is important, it is just

as important to analyze the rhetoric of the leader's supporters. Do they successfully resist any cultural pieties? Or do they view the leader as the exception to the rule? In this essay, I begin by introducing McPherson and giving a brief rhetorical history surrounding her ministry and the contemporary views of women in church leadership. I will briefly summarize the rhetoric of her detractors, then jump into analysis of the *Foursquare Crusader* and point out the rhetorical contradictions of her supporters. I will use Burkean piety to illuminate why and how McPherson's supporters did not significantly change their attitudes toward women in leadership even with such a strong woman at the helm of their church. I will end with a few suggestions for how to apply the principles from this case study to further rhetorical analysis of the supporters of other women in ministry.

Early Years of Ministry

At the time Aimee Semple McPherson began her ministry in the 1920s, the American church was grappling with several different movements and ideals competing for power. Women, newly empowered during the first World War, had taken positions of leadership in the church as well as in industry and public life. They had successfully campaigned for the right to vote in 1920. Many women were active in the new church denominations that were founded at this time, especially Pentecostal denominations. However, to no one's surprise, many men viewed the new level of freedom women achieved as a threat. One of the biggest struggles in the church at the time was the tension between these newly empowered women leaders and a reactionary movement toward "muscular Christianity" that emphasized "masculine" virtues such as patriotism, physical strength, bravery, and especially athleticism.

Interestingly, many male church leaders did not see female ordination as the most significant threat, but instead, the "feminization" of Christianity which emphasized emotional expression, especially during worship, the kindness and gentleness of Jesus, and an individualized intimate relationship with God.¹ This so-called "feminization" corresponded to some extent with the revival preaching style popular at the time since, "in their efforts to appeal to the masses, revival preachers popularized a new preaching style known more for its emotionalism and its emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ."² However, "with a new preaching style, new doctrines, and a diverse cadre of leaders, evangelicalism also undermined the mainline Protestant denominations" on these points, inviting backlash.³ In fact, as McPherson herself wrote, "Orthodox ministers . . . disapproved . . . of a woman who invaded the fields, not alone of orthodoxy, but of men. Still more they disapproved when the woman evangelist carried evangelism still further by making her services not a sepulcher of ritual . . . but a paean of joy and fervor."⁴

Male leaders of established denominations believed that emotionalism and the feminization of Christianity were driving

men away from the church. Thus, “muscular Christianity” was born. Muscular Christianity focused on traditionally “masculine” virtues and physical fitness, especially on the part of preachers and pastors. Within this movement, physical fitness and manliness were seen as Christian virtues and integral parts of the church. As male leaders sought to bring men back to their churches, “in reasserting the masculinity of the church, some leaders also attempted to curtail women’s leadership.”⁵ In fact, as new denominations became more mainstream and organized, women’s leadership became more and more restricted: “from the time that the loose sects began to organize into denominations, various degrees of restrictions on the leadership and ministry of women grew more severe.”⁶ Even in the Pentecostal movement,

by 1923, two years before Aimee Semple McPherson started building Angeles Temple, within the Assemblies of God in which she had held credentials for five years, the restrictions on women’s ministry had begun in earnest. . . . Though most of these were reinstated later, the ethos of male dominance did not die easily and continues to some degree until the present.⁷

McPherson entered ministry during a time when increasing numbers of male leaders were actively working against feminine “influence” in the church. Instead of going along with this trend, she decided to put her emotion, her female self, and feminine imagery at the center of her ministry.

From the beginning, McPherson’s ministry centered around one image—the bride of Christ:

Unlike masculine preachers in the mainline denominations who mimicked Jesus and his apostles, and unlike the evangelical preachers who performed as sports heroes, McPherson developed alternative personae in keeping with the feminized evangelical tradition. Of her many personae, two of the most consistent were the servant and the bride.⁸

Over and over again in her sermons, McPherson emphasized the ideal of the bride of Christ. For her, the bride of Christ was the “central metaphor for the church and for her theology.”⁹ In the Bible, the church is sometimes depicted as the bride of Christ, awaiting the unity and wedding feast of the new creation. McPherson, as the head of her church, viewed herself as a persona of the church, and therefore as the bride of Christ herself. Of course, some of this persona played into the stereotypes of the time, as “her most popular illustrated sermons depicted McPherson as an ideal 1920s woman: a companionate wife . . . to Jesus.”¹⁰ Still, McPherson claimed power through this persona:

She was the ultimate of what [churchgoers] all aspired to be as the bride of Christ, and that status gave her power over her fellow brides. McPherson provided her congregation with living, breathing displays of a biblical bride of Christ as well as an authoritative minister.¹¹

In order to emphasize this persona, McPherson sometimes wore white gowns to preach, even going so far as to reenact some of the marriage parables of the Bible on stage. In doing so, she—perhaps intentionally, perhaps not—set herself up as a threat to the

growing muscular Christianity movement and the established male preachers of the day. That opposition would haunt her throughout her controversial life and career.

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Marriages

A brief overview of McPherson’s romantic life will give some context for her ministry and the rest of this article. Born Aimee Kennedy in 1890, she grew up in the Canadian countryside in a devoutly religious home. In 1907, a Pentecostal revivalist came to town, and at one of their meetings, Aimee met Robert Semple, an evangelist who became her first husband. Theirs was a happy marriage, and they eventually moved to China as missionaries.¹² Sadly, within months of their move, Robert died. Aimee was devastated, writing, “oh, that death had never loosed those beloved arms [of Robert Semple]! . . . Had a man’s cool and determined logic been available in years to come, what grief and misfortune might have been spared the helpless, inexperienced little mother-evangelist!”¹³ McPherson’s emphasis on “a man’s cool and determined logic” shows that she herself subscribed to some of the gender stereotypes of the day. Robert Semple had asked McPherson to be his “helpmate” in his evangelism, and she had gladly accepted that role.¹⁴

After mourning Robert for some time, she met her second husband, Harold McPherson. Harold was a businessman who had strict ideas about a “woman’s place.” When marrying Harold, Aimee told him that her heart and soul were in evangelism,¹⁵ but he insisted on her occupying a traditional wife’s role in the home. As she tried to adjust to this new reality, she became ill and depressed.¹⁶ Things became so dire that she actually left her husband and began preaching again. She wrote to him saying, “I have tried to walk your way and have failed. Won’t you come now and walk my way? I am sure we will be happy.”¹⁷ Harold (and his mother) responded: “Why don’t you be like other young women and be content to stay at home and attend to the housework?”¹⁸ They asked her to “return immediately, ‘wash the dishes,’ ‘take care of the house,’ and ‘act like other women.’”¹⁹ Needless to say, McPherson refused, and the couple soon divorced. McPherson officially left the life of a 1920s housewife behind: She “never again adhered to traditional gender norms or returned to domesticity.”²⁰ Reflecting on her second marriage, McPherson wrote:

Oh, don’t you ever tell me that a woman can not be called to preach the Gospel! If any man ever went through one hundredth part of the hell on earth that I lived in, those months when out of God’s will and work, they would never say that again.²¹

The call to preach and evangelize guided McPherson's whole life, and she would never again lose sight of it. She founded the Foursquare Church in Los Angeles and traveled around the country evangelizing. After many years of preaching and many years of controversy, including a still-unexplained disappearance, McPherson eventually married a third time, to Robert Hutton, but the marriage did not last long and once again ended in divorce. McPherson died in 1944, leaving behind two children (one with Semple and one with McPherson), a church with tens of thousands of congregants, and a complicated legacy.²²

As mentioned above, critics of McPherson and her church abounded. The center of their critique was McPherson's feminized style and "movie star" personality. McPherson was labeled a "hypersexualized actress who played upon the emotions of her followers."²³ For her critics, "McPherson's popularity could not be explained by compelling theology or persuasive sermons; instead, McPherson's physical appearance and sexual attractiveness brought Los Angeles's 'morons' back to her temple week after week."²⁴ Not only her preaching style but also her personal life came under fire constantly:

New York journalist Stanley Walker wrote of McPherson's appeal in these suspicious, modernist terms: "By putting some sex appeal in the old-fashioned revival brand of salvation, embellishing it all with colored lights, brass bands and the Hollywood tone, she keeps her flock in a constant state of excited admiration. She has sex appeal. . . . Much of the woman's life, as well as her religion, has been directed by sex impulses."²⁵

Constant publicity and controversy took a toll on McPherson, and she struggled with her mental health at times. She was never free from the spotlight, and eighty years after her death she remains a controversial figure.

There has already been much scholarly analysis of McPherson's critics and the rhetorical moves they made to try to discredit such a powerful woman in the church. However, less attention has been paid to her supporters, many of whom were devoted to her. Although her congregants loved her and often defended her, many of them still maintained contradictory ideas of women's proper place in society and the church. Rhetorical analysis of certain articles from the *Foursquare Crusader*, the newsletter of the Foursquare Church, shows a congregation with conflicting values.

One of the most interesting articles from the *Foursquare Crusader* is the announcement of the marriage between McPherson and Hutton. In the (unattributed) article, the author writes, "we are sure he [Hutton] will be a real helpmate for our own dear Sister."²⁶ "Helpmate" is a loaded term in the debate over women's leadership in the church, as God uses it to refer to Eve's relationship to Adam in Genesis 2:18–20. While modern translation scholars point out that the Hebrew word denotes "help from a place of power" or even "ally in battle," it has traditionally been used to justify mandating a subordinate role for women in Christian marriages. The fact that this article uses the term "helpmate" to describe Hutton is, therefore, quite surprising and speaks to McPherson's role as a true leader in the church. In another reference to Genesis, McPherson is quoted as saying, "I want to serve the Lord more and more, and He has said, 'It is not good for man to be alone,' and surely He does not intend

for woman to be alone."²⁷ McPherson continues, saying, "I want to go forward with my work and a companion will aid and strengthen me."²⁸ Both of these quotes show reversal of the companionate wife ideal—and even a reversal of the Adam/Eve relationship. Hutton, the article records, comments, "I want to be a help in God's work and do my share in assisting my wife in her great religious movement."²⁹ This *Foursquare Crusader* article presents a marriage that reverses traditional gender roles, with McPherson in a position of power and leadership and Hutton as a helper and companion.

Some articles in the *Foursquare Crusader* appear to promote similar views on gender roles. In one, McPherson writes that "the love of a mother is akin to that of God," deviating from the "fatherly love" that provides the standard metaphor for God's love.³⁰ In another, a reverend enumerates the many times women preach in the Bible and suggests that the disciples on the road to Emmaus were Cleopas and his wife, a very progressive interpretation at the time.³¹ Yet another article lauds McPherson for overcoming "the old moss-back belief that 'women should be seen and not heard,' when it came to preaching the Word of God" and praises her for establishing a "new precedent for the ministry of women."³² These and other *Foursquare Crusader* articles acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of women to the church and to ministry within it.

Unfortunately, the *Foursquare Crusader* does not maintain this viewpoint consistently. Some articles in the *Crusader*, especially in its later years, present a traditional view of gender roles within marriage. One particularly traditional article—a multi-page piece about marriage—includes many exhortations for women to submit to their husbands and remain contentedly at home. "In a truly Christian home," the author writes, "the husband loves the wife [and] the wife submits to the husband and respects him."³³ Not only should the wife submit to her husband, but she should also avoid a career and instead focus on having children: "When both Father and Mother work and at different shifts at that, where is even the semblance of spiritual union and piety to be found? If home life is to be strong, much time needs to be spent there. The absence of children promotes discord."³⁴ The Christian ideal, the author writes, "emphasizes that the husband is recognized morally and legally as the provider for the family."³⁵

Other articles, although not quite as explicit with pronouncements about traditional gender roles, fall into similar stereotypes. One article, written by McPherson herself and titled "Men Wanted," tries to recruit young people to the missionary field. Although the newspaper placed this article next to an image of McPherson literally shaping disciples out of clay, and although the article mentions women and calls them to the field, it repeats "MEN WANTED" throughout.³⁶ McPherson even quotes a female reverend who emphasizes the need for "real 'he' men" as missionaries.³⁷ McPherson also wrote an article for Mother's Day in which she fondly remembers the domestic pursuits of her own mother and reflects on the importance of "mother" and "home" to husbands who come home "after the busy, bustling toil, when the long day is done."³⁸ The gender stereotypes and beliefs in these articles directly contradict other writings within the *Foursquare Crusader*. How can one group of people—and even one publication—hold such a contradiction? Of course, members of a congregation can have differing opinions about certain issues, but for the *Foursquare*

congregation and McPherson herself, the question of women in leadership was at the very heart of their church and McPherson's ministry. How could they maintain such contradictory rhetoric?

Burkean Piety

The answer can be found by looking through the lens of Kenneth Burke's theory of "piety."

In his book *Permanence and Change*, Burke—one of the foremost rhetoricians of the twentieth century and a contemporary of McPherson—introduces a concept he calls "piety," which he defines as "the sense of what properly goes with what."³⁹ Piety, for Burke,

captures the often inexplicable or unarticulated ("It just isn't done!") intensity with which people bind themselves to, and are bound by, beliefs or behaviors. . . . Such devotion is a matter not of goodness but of completeness or thoroughness, taking an idea or role to the nth degree.⁴⁰

In other words, piety describes the nearly religious intensity with which people adhere to certain cultural norms. Burkean piety involves "a scrupulous sense of the appropriate" in a given situation.⁴¹ Piety has both a communal and an individual aspect: "Although people in the same society share some pieties—gender roles, loyalty to a local sports team, professional behavior—piety is composed, felt, and enacted by individuals through the choices, both conscious and unconscious, they make."⁴² Piety can be policed through one's own conscience as well as through others' comments, ostracism, or punishment.⁴³ In sum, from a rhetorical perspective, piety explains why people resist change. Deviations from the "norms" that individuals or their communities have accepted result in both internal unease and external repercussions.

So how can piety help explain the *Foursquare Crusader's* contradictions? Although the congregants of the Foursquare Church supported and loved their pastor, they could not overcome the piety surrounding gender roles that was baked into their culture. The messages about women's "proper place" pervaded their lives, and these ideas were reinforced by those around them. They internalized this piety and could not overcome it entirely, even with McPherson at the head of their church.

This conclusion, however, raises another question. From a Burkean perspective, the example of McPherson could have been enough to break the piety of gender roles that her followers believed. According to Burke, overcoming a piety requires "perspective by incongruity." Perspective by incongruity refers to someone experiencing or doing something that fundamentally violates their sense of piety, thus exposing their previous beliefs and actions for analysis. It "forces 'inappropriate' connections between elements and destroys those connections that have already been forged through a sense of appropriateness."⁴⁴ Perspective by incongruity works by "wrenching apart" words that one believes are inextricable⁴⁵—words, in this case, like "woman" and "follower." Once someone has the self-awareness to see their own pieties, change is possible. So, why did McPherson's example not change the pieties of her followers?

Some argue that perspective by incongruity "will be ineffective if it cannot be incorporated into one's existing piety" and the roots

of one's character.⁴⁶ While it can be conceded that someone will not take action or change their mind without believing that choice accords with their character, the very definition of perspective by incongruity is something that does not fit into one's existing piety, so this explanation falls short. It can be argued, instead, that the true reason behind a failure of perspective by incongruity like this one is the power of an exception to the rule.

What does an exception to the rule mean? It means that one discards a lesser rule in favor of following a greater one. When a person decides to choose mercy instead of punishment, gives someone ill or weak more support than another, or argues that a choice they made is "above the law," that person is going against one piety (justice, fairness, lawfulness) in favor of a piety they view as more important or more binding (forgiveness, kindness, righteousness). Sometimes, pieties contradict. When this happens, people must choose between them and justify their choice through believing in an exception to the lesser piety. Crucially, such a choice keeps both pieties intact.

This sort of choice and justification allowed McPherson's followers—and even herself—to believe in her as a minister without changing their views on women in ministry at large. In fact, McPherson also became the exception to the rule when it came to divorce and marrying divorcees with ex-spouses still alive. The *Foursquare Crusader* condemned such things while also celebrating their pastor's third marriage—which would also end in divorce.⁴⁷ What was the greater piety that allowed such exceptions? In this case, it was literal piety: their belief in McPherson's calling from God.

Believing that McPherson had been called by God to preach created a conflict of pieties within her supporters and her congregation. However, as other scholars have argued, ultimately, the congregants' piety to God won out: McPherson "drew God's power, which gave her absolution when going against social or religious conservatism."⁴⁸ For her followers, "the abdication of the accepted female role was permissible if it came as a result of God's calling."⁴⁹ God's sanction of McPherson was enough for her followers to create an exception to their lesser pieties surrounding gender roles and divorce.

In fact, McPherson herself seems to have held this same contradictory view and the same justification for it. Although she cited Deborah, the woman at the well, and other women leaders and preachers in the Bible,⁵⁰ she also reiterated "the belief that women brought sin into the world and the sins and shortcomings of the male could be traced to the female."⁵¹ In the Foursquare Church, although women could be ordained, they could not be elders⁵² and were prevented from occupying certain other roles at the church. In fact, after her third marriage ended in her second divorce, "McPherson amended the doctrinal statement of the Foursquare Church to include a clause against the remarriage of persons with a living ex-spouse."⁵³ McPherson's own writings point to herself as an exception to the rule because of her calling from God: "Her writings do not indicate a strong conflict between her role as preacher and wife. When she chose the former over the latter, she makes it quite clear to her readers that the choice was God's, not hers."⁵⁴ McPherson had the authority of God behind her choice, and she reminded the public of her calling frequently. "If the Lord chose a woman to attract to Himself those who otherwise might not have come," she wrote, "who shall question the wisdom of the Lord?"⁵⁵ Certainly, her followers did not

wish to question the wisdom of the Lord, so they would be unlikely to question McPherson as the exception to their beliefs. Though, to my knowledge, McPherson is not explicitly defined as an exception to the rule within the *Crusaders*—the clear conflict between pieties seems to have gone largely unaddressed—it can be argued that her supporters agreed with McPherson’s own arguments about her exceptionalism. This triumph of a greater piety over a lesser meant McPherson could mitigate her appearance as a “threat” to the gender roles and even male preachers of the day: after all, it was not her own choice to become a preacher—she had yielded to the inflexible will of God and, therefore, managed to uphold traditional gender roles while living in contradiction to them.

By looking at the legacy of McPherson’s ministry, it becomes easy to tell that, as an exception to the rule, she did not dismantle traditional gender roles—even in her own church. Although the Foursquare church continued to ordain women,

in the early years, nearly forty percent of pastors within the Foursquare denomination were women. . . . However, the actual participation of women in the ministry and leadership of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel continued to decline throughout McPherson’s lifetime so that by the time of her death only sixteen percent of pastors were female.⁵⁶

After McPherson’s death, her son took over the ministry, and the church would be under male leadership for decades. Culture at large has also struggled with McPherson’s legacy: “both religiously conservative evangelical women and secular feminists have found inspiration in McPherson”;⁵⁷ some viewing her as a devout woman of God and others as a sexually liberated woman leader. The contradiction of pieties at the heart of her ministry left a legacy that is interpreted in a myriad of ways.

Implications for Women in Church Leadership

What does this mean for scholars studying women and other marginalized leaders in the church? In the first place, the case study of McPherson and the *Foursquare Crusader* indicates how important it is to analyze supporters’ rhetoric, not just critics’ rhetoric, in order to fully understand the reception and legacy of marginalized church leaders. Under the intense pressure of piety, supporters may hold conflicting beliefs that they reconcile through (externally or internally) assigning their leader the label of “exception to the rule.” When they make this rhetorical move, it becomes very difficult to promote substantive change, even through perspective by incongruity. After all, if the leader is only an exception to the rule—a unique member of a group that usually has no business leading—then no structural or cultural change will occur once that person loses power. In fact, leaders themselves may compound the problem by holding those same conflicting pieties. In order to effect change, we must understand the reasoning behind the beliefs that dictate people’s actions. Rhetorical analysis and rhetorical history, combined with the lens of Burkean piety, can help us understand how and why marginalized church leaders create change—or not.

Conclusion

Aimee Semple McPherson’s life and ministry left a complex legacy. Through rhetorical analysis of the *Foursquare Crusader*, I

After McPherson’s death, her son took over the ministry, and the church would be under male leadership for decades. Culture at large has also struggled with McPherson’s legacy: “both religiously conservative evangelical women and secular feminists have found inspiration in McPherson.”

have shown how her followers, although devoted to McPherson, sidestepped perspective by incongruity and maintained their piety surrounding gender roles by believing that she was an exception to the rule. Believing that they were staying true to a greater piety—their belief in God—allowed them to keep both pieties intact. McPherson herself explicitly claimed her own exceptionalism to partially avoid confronting the strict gender roles of her day. Her rhetoric and that of her supporters provide a fascinating case study that illustrates just how hard marginalized church leaders must work to change the hearts and minds of their followers if they hope to effect lasting change.

Still, all is not lost. An understanding of why people hold contradictory beliefs is the first step toward understanding how to bring to light those contradictions and work toward changing damaging pieties, not merely creating exceptions to those pieties. Once someone understands why they believe what they believe, they can begin to question and even change those beliefs. Although we cannot change people’s minds for them, scholars can at least illuminate the cultural pieties at work and give others the information they need to make clear and conscious choices. Once someone knows where they are, it is easier to decide where they are going.

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The *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7:53–8:11): Two Poetic Renderings in *Sunsong Tide Rising*

Anna Kasafi Perkins

Remember, poetry begins in the world's great Holy Books which are all books of poetry. Truly poems are a part of God's great conversation with his children. . . . We wish His blessing on the schooling of your spirit through poetry.¹

There is a popular Caribbean poetry series for high school students who are preparing for external regional examinations in the Commonwealth Caribbean. It is entitled *Sunsong*, perhaps recalling African American poet Langston Hughes's short poem, "Sun Song," or Jamaican Dennis Scott's "Son Song."² Composed of four books of graduated difficulty, the collection's last book is *Sunsong Tide Rising*,³ which expands on the three previous books while including a variety of poems from the Caribbean and the rest of the world.

Curated by two experienced teachers of English who are themselves poets,⁴ *Sunsong Tide Rising* is divided into eleven themes intended to show students that "poems are easy to understand and can help [them] deal with the whole complex business and circumstance of [their] life: the beauty and ugliness of the world; the wealth and poverty of the human situation; the kindness and cruelty of our interaction with one another."⁵ As with the previous three books, the editors draw from a variety of sources, including the Bible (and poetry inspired by the Bible), the Shakespearean canon, limericks, and popular songs:

These poems come from all over the world and are of many different kinds: some are from the Bible, some are ballads (songs that tell a story), some are work songs, some are humorous, some are sad, some are dialect poems—we could go on and on.⁶

In *Sunsong Tide Rising*, I came across two poems that drew me in immediately and called to mind the taken-for-granted presence of the Bible in everyday life in the Caribbean. The poems are: "A Stone's Throw"⁷ by Scottish librarian, journalist, and broadcaster Elma Mitchell (1919–2000); and "John viii, 2–11, First Person Account" by Jamaican A. L. (Arthur Lemaire) Hendriks (1922–1992). Hendriks—a poet and writer, known as "Micky" Hendriks in his broadcasting career—was the son of a Jamaican father and a French mother. Both poems treat the *pericope adulterae* (PA), the story of a woman caught in adultery and taken before Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees (Jn 7:53–8:11). In several translations of the NT, it is bracketed or footnoted since many scholars consider it to be a later addition to John's Gospel.

Perhaps influenced by the popularity of this story, the imagery of throwing stones has entered the vernacular of Caribbean people. It is possible to call this story to mind simply by mentioning "adultery" or "adulteress" along with "stones," or "rock stones" as Caribbean people say. Of course, this popularity, along with its well-known title of "The Woman Caught in Adultery," "establishes the unlawful sexuality⁸ of the woman as the heart of the text. Such a narrowing of the text is not a neutral act but a decisive reshaping of the text."⁹

This discussion briefly introduces the PA before placing it in conversation with the Mitchell and Hendriks poems to show how the poems speak to the often-unjust, violence-prone circumstance of living together in the Caribbean today. This is an exercise in inter(con)textual reading, as defined by African American Womanist biblical scholar Mitzi J. Smith, for it places ancient (con)texts in conversation with contemporary experiences, traditions, and voices.¹⁰ The poems serve both mediating and creating roles, as they broaden and deepen the texts through which the sacred is made present.

Both poems treat the *pericope adulterae* (PA), the story of a woman caught in adultery and taken before Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees (Jn 7:53–8:11).

Introducing the *Pericope Adulterae*

Contemporary Christians faced with modern translations of the Bible often do not appreciate the complex history of the biblical texts, particularly the fact that texts, even sacred texts, are never fixed. Likewise, meaning and interpretation of sacred texts are never fixed, but shift and continue to shift according to the concerns of those reading them.¹¹ Jennifer W. Knust argues that this is readily demonstrated in the complex history of the PA.¹² The PA is missing from early Greek manuscripts of the NT. In manuscripts where it does appear, its primary location is John 7:53–8:11, although it was also placed after John 8:36 or 8:44 or at the end of the Gospel. In addition, some scholars argue that the language used is not consistent with that of John.¹³ Others argue for a Lukan origin,¹⁴ and it has been located in some manuscripts after Luke 21:38.¹⁵ "These factors have led some scholars to describe the passage as a pericope seeking a resting place."¹⁶ Scholarly consensus is that the PA was not originally part of the Gospel of John.¹⁷

The PA also exhibits an unusually high number of textual variants, which Gail O'Day maintains "are the first evidences of interpretive reshaping."¹⁸ Indeed, O'Day argues that the PA is particularly vulnerable to interpretation and has been read contrary to its rhetorical shape, as demonstrated throughout its history of interpretation.¹⁹ Furthermore, Knust maintains that "the presumed meaning of the *pericope adulterae* has been as fluid as its text. Multiple meanings have been imputed into this story from the moment it first appeared until today."²⁰

The instability of the PA was recognised and acknowledged by Christians in late antiquity.²¹ This, however, did not lead to its

exclusion from the Christian tradition, where it was recognised as gospel (teaching by and about Jesus). It was, therefore, in some instances, included in the manuscripts of the Gospels. Indeed, the *PA* demonstrates the continued fluidity of Gospel texts well into the fourth and fifth centuries. However, it was not until the twentieth century that concerns with getting back to the primitive text using modern principles of textual reconstruction led to the *PA* being bracketed or otherwise marked to indicate that it was not original to John's Gospel.

Chris Keith maintains that the *PA* is a specific example of the academic preoccupation with "an original text."²² Believers in the existence of one, single authoritative text generally ignore this academic preoccupation. Given the process by which the Gospel of John was compiled, the modern preoccupation with a definitive primitive original misses the earlier comfort with the fluidity of gospel (message about/of Jesus) and Gospel (written texts).²³ Nonetheless, for many pastors today, questions often revolve around how to introduce the *PA* to their congregations. Should it be preached or skipped over? Does the congregation need a lesson in textual criticism explaining the formation of the scriptural text? How can believers be assured of the veracity of the Word of God when the translation being used brackets the text or relegates it to a footnote?²⁴

Responding to the dilemma faced by preachers when dealing with the *PA*, Steven Grabiner reminds that it is important to recognise the historical nature of the *PA*, its impact on the life of the church, and its transformative power in the lives of many Christians.²⁵ For that reason, the pastor should "proclaim the truth that the story unfolds. [For,] '[n]either do I condemn you, go and sin no more' is a message that needs to be continually repeated, despite the fact that all of the issues related to the account are not fully resolved."²⁶

Furthermore, NT scholar Peter J. Gurry notes that no Christian doctrine or ethical practice whether major or minor has been based on a textually difficult passage such as John 7:53–8:11.²⁷ The reason for this is that Christian theology is built on a web of biblical evidence. So, for example, the story of the woman caught in adultery is not the only place in the Gospels where Jesus is shown being merciful. This is not to say that the *PA* has had no effect on theology or Christian living. It certainly has influenced what we think about the truth, how we apply it and how we teach it.²⁸ This is demonstrated in the two poems being analysed.

Elma Mitchell's "A Stone's Throw"

*We shouted out
"We've got her! Here she is!
It's her alright."
We caught her.
There she was—*

*A decent-looking woman you'd have said,
(They often are)
Beautiful, but dead scared,
Tousled—we roughed her up
A little, nothing much*

And not the first time

*By any means
She'd felt men's hands
Greedy over her body—
But ours were virtuous,
Of course.*

*And if our fingers
Bruised her shuddering skin,
These were love-bites, compared
To the hail of kisses of stone,
The last assault
And battery, frigid rape,
To come
Of right.*

*For justice must be done
Specially when
It tastes so good.*

*And then—this guru,
Preacher, God-merchant, God-knows-what—
Spoilt the whole thing,
Speaking to her
(Should never speak to them)
Squatting on the ground—her level,
Writing in the dust
Something we couldn't read.
And saw in her
Something we couldn't see
At least until
He turned his eyes on us,
Her eyes on us,
Our eyes upon ourselves.*

*We walked away
Still holding stones
That we may throw
Another day
Given the urge.*

The section of *Sunsong Tide Rising* that features "A Stone's Throw" is titled "Life's Ironies," and its starting page displays a black and white drawing of a dreadlocked Jesus protectively resting his hands on the shoulders of a woman who has fallen. The ground before them is littered with stones as the all-male crowd looks on. One man gesticulates, perhaps angrily, as another appears to let a stone fall from his hand. Indecipherable letters are traced on the ground in front of "Rasta Jesus," a popular image in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean, where the Rastafari movement was birthed. This unnamed artist's rendering of the *PA* adds depth to the interpretation of *PA* presented by Mitchell in her poem, "A Stone's Throw." The artist suggests that Jesus stops a stoning, mid-way, unlike Mitchell and Hendrik, who stick more closely to the *PA* in modern translations, where Jesus short-circuits the stoning.

Mitchell's naming of the poem is instructive. As the editors, Mordecai and Gordon Walker, remind students in their introduction to *Sunsong Tide Rising*, a poem's title does not necessarily define its content or subject matter. They give the example of "A Stone's

Throw,” saying it is not about a stone thrown “but about hypocrisy, forgiveness, compassion, self-delusion, self-knowledge, the capacity for violence in human nature, *inter alia*.”²⁹ In addition, the title of the poem functions on two levels. It indicates both a short distance and refers to the stoning being aborted. In the latter instance, the woman’s execution is interrupted at the point when it had come within a literal stone’s throw.

“A Stone’s Throw” focuses on verses 8:3–11 in the *PA* and speaks from the perspective of one of the nameless woman’s male accusers who appears to have chased and caught her, declaring triumphantly: “We’ve got her! Here she is!” (line 2). The focus on the woman

naturally raises important interpretive questions, most obviously, where is the man? Adultery requires at least two people, but the woman is alone, why? As a follow up to this obvious question, readers have wondered if the absence of a guilty man is significant to the story’s interpretation. While most readers have interpreted the story as an illustration of Jesus’ profoundly merciful nature, others have read the story as the account of Jesus standing up to the unjust victimization of a vulnerable woman.³⁰

In “A Stone’s Throw,” the male accuser relates the tale of the “almost-stoning” with irony and sarcasm; he lacks awareness of how much of himself and his co-accusers is revealed by justifying their actions in terms “Of right./For justice must be done/Specially when/it tastes so good” (lines 24–27). They are interrupted in their “virtuous” quest of “assault/And battery, frigid rape” (lines 21–22) by “this guru,/Preacher, God-merchant, God-knows-what” (lines 28–29). The male accuser unintentionally reveals the perverse and lascivious pleasure he and his companions take in roughing up the hapless woman; in so doing, they demonstrate their morally disengaged stance in how they reframe their wrongdoing as “a little, nothing much/And not the first time/By any means/she’d felt men’s hands/Greedy over her body—/But ours were virtuous/of course” (lines 10–16).³¹

Intertextual and Contextual Connections

The unnamed woman’s accusers clearly constitute a “moral force” within the community, having the duty to preside over and arbitrate on legal and moral matters.³² Yet, their motives are entangled with exploitative sexual desire disguised as righteous pursuit of the law. The poet’s description of the immoral motives of the unnamed woman’s accusers recalls the deuterocanonical story of Susannah in the book of Daniel. Susannah is likewise accused of adultery by powerful men within her community, who had tried to force themselves on her. Her refusal leads to a public accusation of adultery, shaming her husband, and apparent certain death for Susannah. She is rescued by the wise Daniel in a similar fashion to Jesus’s intervention on behalf of the woman in *PA*.

In “A Stone’s Throw,” the unnamed Preacher (Jesus), who interrupted their violent sport of manhandling the woman, saw something in the accused woman her accusers did not. The Preacher saw her humanity, her dignity, her experience of oppression at the hands of men, including her erstwhile lover. As a result, together, the Preacher and the woman turned the tables on her accusers—

the accusers become the accused. The Preacher and the woman turned their eyes upon her accusers in judgment, causing them to see themselves anew. They were forced to see the reality of their sinfulness. Yet, even so, they walked away “still holding stones/that we can throw/another day” (lines 42–45).

Through Mitchell’s poignant retelling of the unnamed woman’s story, we are reminded starkly that violence against women is but a stone’s throw away even today, in a Caribbean where public figures are credibly accused, for example, of the rape of a young woman (by a Guyanese member of parliament) or unwanted touching (by the former premier of Cayman Islands). Among the accused are ministers of the cloth, policemen, and ordinary men, who commit intimate partner violence or even murder the women in their lives.³³

A. L. Hendriks introduces similar themes as he likewise undertakes an inter(con)textual reading, by placing the biblical *PA* (con)texts in conversation with contemporary experiences, traditions, and voices, especially those of vulnerable women.

A. L. Hendriks’s “John viii, 2–11, First Person Account”

*We must be discreet he had said
hurt no one a quiet room
in a small hotel suddenly boom
all of them standing round the bed
with hot sticky eyes
saying your husband knows all
then that bastard starts to crawl
mumbling the usual lies
didn't know that she was married
this thing was quite unplanned
as men you'll understand
and away he bloody scurried
the performance in the temple
another bit of farce
that fooled no one take me for an ass
im really not that simple
stoning for adultery hasn't been on for years
they'dve emptied every quarry
no it wasn't me my dears
you were after it was him
o he really got among them with his crack
the one who doesn't sin
start throwing you could've heard a pin
drop then the whole pack shuffled off
never again he said don't worry friend
ive gone off men after this right off
men are the living end
good as divorced probably pregnant
always the woman's worry
we have to carry
the can and the bloody infant
but wouldn't that be just
my kind of luck if I have that problem
ill get back in touch with him*

he looked the sort of chap a girl might trust.

“First Person Account” is told from the perspective of the unnamed and voiceless woman, who “that bastard” leaves to her fate at the hands of her lascivious accusers (as does the lover of the anonymous woman in “A Stone’s Throw”). It is a striking single sentence poem made up of thirty-six lines without punctuation, apart from the beginning capital and the closing full stop. It has a mainly an A B B’ A’ rhyming pattern, although from lines 17–28 there is a change to A B A’ B’ and A A’ B B’. This gives the poem an intensity and a fast-paced movement, reflecting the wry, sarcastic, bitter mood of the woman. The Temple is made the setting, appropriate for a group that intends to catch Jesus on the back foot. The woman is naught but a convenient (though aware) pawn in their game of entrapment.

Jesus, in the *PA*, seems to naturally assume the woman’s guilt.³⁴ She is a willing participant in the act of dishonouring herself, her husband, her household, the Jewish community and, most importantly, YHWH. This is, perhaps, because she has been accused by two or more males, witnesses to her transgression, as the Law required. Once accused, she must appear before YHWH, and the priests and judges.³⁵ Interestingly, versions of the story in early Christian antiquity did not always assume this.³⁶ Hendriks’s female is “guilty,” as she all but admits to falling; she’s fallen prey to a “sweet mouth” Caribbean man, who was out for one thing, “this thing [that] was quite unplanned” and intended to “hurt no one.”

Liturgical Con(texts)

The unnamed woman in “First Person Account” is caught in the act and is left to face her accusers, as her partner in adultery “bloody scurried” away. As discussed in the analysis of “A Stone’s Throw,” there are parallels between the stories of the unnamed woman and Susannah in the Book of Daniel. Unlike some contemporary Christian traditions, the Roman Catholic Church maintains the canonicity of the *PA* and so it is read and preached in the liturgical life of the Church. In the Roman Rite, therefore, the *PA* is usually paired with the deuterocanonical story of Susannah during the third week of Lent. They are linked not only by the motif of women accused of adultery but also text-critically. Both stories are known to be later additions to their current books but have been accepted as canonical by the Roman Catholic Church.³⁷ Susannah is accused of committing adultery with a young man who conveniently escapes as does the unknown woman’s paramour in *PA*. Susannah also narrowly escapes capital punishment with the intervention of a young judge, Daniel, who proves her innocence and the corruption of her accusers, who have a history of sexually violating “the daughters of Israel” (vv. 49–59). Jesus’s intervention is not to prove the unnamed woman’s innocence but to spotlight the guilt of her accusers. In the Roman Catholic liturgy both women represent the Church: Susannah is the symbol of the Church in her fidelity to Christ, while the unnamed woman is the Church redeemed by Christ when she has been unfaithful.³⁸

The Susannah story and the *PA* illustrate well what is at stake in a woman engaging in adultery. In Susannah’s case, the reputation of the Jewish community, Daniel, and her husband Joakim rest on her “innocence or guilt, sexual purity or promiscuity, and fidelity or infidelity to the Lord in heaven or to the Lord of her household.”³⁹ Likewise for the unnamed woman in the *PA*, everyone’s reputation is at stake, particularly that of her husband.

Paradoxically, the subordination of both these women to the men in their life makes them vulnerable, but, to some degree, the men in their life can be made vulnerable by the conduct of these women in patriarchal contexts.⁴⁰ Being the wife of a wealthy man does not protect Susannah from patriarchal violence, rape, or even sexual harassment. “Women who do not pass the test of respectability politics may be easier prey for men of power and authority who want to sexually violate women, but any woman is vulnerable to men who rape.”⁴¹

The dishonour of her husband and its consequences for her are central in the mind of the unnamed woman in “First Person Account.” She fears the outcomes of her actions: “as good as divorced probably pregnant/always the womans worry/we have to carry/the can and the bloody infant” (lines 29–32). Accusations of infidelity or promiscuity are enough to ruin a woman’s reputation, while bolstering a man’s reputation in many instances, including in the Caribbean where ideas of masculinity are often tied up with promiscuous sexuality.⁴² The more honoured a status held by the husband or partner, the more is at stake for him if his wife is accused or proven guilty of infidelity. When men want to violate women and preserve their reputation, they often accuse them of being willing participants or wanting it more than they did,⁴³ and Hendriks captures this well with his unnamed woman’s ironic musings on “carrying the can and the bloody infant.”

Towards a Conclusion

The conventional readings of the story in John 7:53–8:11 place the focus on the woman, her sin, and her rescue from stoning. Indeed, the very naming of the pericope centres her as sinner, having sinned in a most egregious fashion against herself, the Lord of the house (her husband) on whom she depends for her material sustenance and, of course, YHWH God.

The woman remains voiceless even as she is rescued by Jesus, who deftly escapes from the trap set for him by his enemies. As is typical in John’s Gospel, reality is upended and the accusers become the accused, forced to slink away one after the other, without throwing a stone (yet). The two retellings of the *PA* in “A Stone’s Throw” and “First Person Account” present us with inter(con)textual readings that both bring the story to life in our contemporary circumstance while arguably broadening and deepening the sacred text available for teaching and reflection in the church. Even in churches where the canonicity of the *PA* is questioned and the issues related to the account are not fully resolved, it can serve as a vessel to proclaim the truth that the story unveils: forgiveness is available to the worst sinner and care must be taken in passing judgment given the blindness caused by sin. In addition, it has a peculiar resonance around the violence unleashed in condemnation of others, especially the most vulnerable. The metaphor of throwing stones captures this violent response tellingly.

Women in the Caribbean continue to fear metaphorical stoning in the form of gender-based violence and other forms of gendered oppression, which forestall and limit their full flourishing as human persons. In too many instances they are silenced for fear that speaking out will be further detrimental to them and their children. Any suggestion of infidelity on the part of a woman can

**Forgiveness is available to the worst sinner
and care must be taken in passing judgment
given the blindness caused by sin.**

lead to violence and even death for the perceived dishonour and disrespect to the male partner. Creative interpretations such as “A Stone’s Throw” call into question the motives of many who stand in judgment, especially when women are the victims of violence, falsely believing and teaching that women bring it on themselves by a word, a look, or a style of dressing. A key example of this is the oft-repeated question when a woman is sexually assaulted: What was she wearing? “First Person Account,” in laying bare the agency of women even in the face of potential violence, opens up the possibility for women to speak up for themselves, no longer fearing stones.

Notes

1. Pamela Mordecai and Grace Walker Gordon, “Introduction,” in *Sunsong Tide Rising*, ed. Pamela Mordecai and Grace Walker Gordon (Longman, 1994) xv.
2. Sun and softness,/Sun and the beaten hardness of the earth,/Sun and the song of all the sun-stars/Gathered together—/Dark ones of Africa,/I bring you my songs/To sing on the Georgia roads. (Sun Song by Langston Hughes, <https://poetrynook.com/poem/sun-song>). Dennis Scott, “Son Song,” in Mordecai and Walker Gordon, *Sunsong*, 152, speaks of the light that goes out when a son has lost his father.
3. Mordecai and Walker Gordon, “Introduction,” in *Sunsong Tide Rising*. “Tide Rising” is the name of a poem in the book *Madonna of the Unknown Nation* (London: Workshop Press, 1974) by A. L. Hendriks, which speaks to the effects of the tides on Caribbean life, while recalling the power of the creative imagination. Hendriks was a prolific writer of short stories and poems; his work appears in several media, including the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Jamaica Gleaner*, and several other anthologies. He is published several times in the *Sunsong* series. His poem, “The Baptist,” was published in *Bite In 2* by Cecil Gray, another poetry collection for secondary students in the Caribbean.
4. Both Mordecai and Walker Gordon’s works are included in the *Sunsong* books.
5. Mordecai and Walker Gordon, “Introduction,” in *Sunsong*, xi.
6. Pamela Mordecai and Grace Walker Gordon, eds., *Sunsong 1* (Longman Caribbean, 1987) v.
7. “A Stone’s Throw” is back on the English B June 2023–January 2027 list of Poems, Novels, and Short Stories for CXC.
8. Stoning is a literal response to acts of unlawful sexuality in the Caribbean, as captured in “Going Up, Going Down,” by Loretta Collins Klobah: “This poem is an eye-witness./That’s why this poem has to be clandestine -/It is in danger of being stoned – Nuh fling rockstone. Kei Miller, *New Caribbean Poetry: An Anthology* (Carcanet, 2007) 63.
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15. See Knust for a contrary argument.
16. Steven Grabiner, “Pericope Adulterae: A Most Perplexing Passage,” *AUSS* 56/1 (2018) 81–114.
17. Hughes, “The Lukan Special Material,” 232–51.
18. O’Day, “John 7:53–8:11,” 639.
19. O’Day, “John 7:53–8:11,” 639.
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The Sexual Violences of Empire, Patriarchy, and Crucifixion

Rebekah Mui Pei Ern

The image of Jesus Christ crucified has been replicated, illustrated, and infused with varied symbolic meanings over its history. That is, over the centuries, many interpretations of the crucifixion have developed, obscuring its original context and meaning. Thus, the many “Christianities” around the world today make competing claims as to the meaning and symbolism of the crucifixion. Cultural imagery surrounding the crucifixion ranges from traditional crucifixes to film portrayals, and from theologies to cross-shaped Easter chocolates.¹ One key example of “crucifixion horror” in film is Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* (2004),¹ which will be the sociological starting-point from which I explore the role of the violated, divine body of Christ in political theology, particularly within the historical and present-day context of imperial masculinity and the patriarchal household.

Crucifixion—Heroic or Shameful?

Neal King’s study, *Heroes in Hard Times: Cop Action Movies in the U.S.*, notes the ritual portrayal of torture enacted upon bare-chested male bodies.² Such torture is not emasculating. Instead, it often serves as a “proof of sacrifice and suffering in a world gone wrong.”³ Torture, in these contexts, serves as a vehicle toward greater masculinity for men who endure it. King notes in a sociological study of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* that the visceral depiction of Jesus’s crucifixion provoked affective reactions among Christian audiences. The cinematic experience became a religious one, where they revered “the sacrificial hero” and realized “the extent of his love.”⁴ Indeed, according to historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez, evangelical authors felt that the film presented an “antidote to the image of the wimpy Christ,” one far more in line with the All-American, “John Wayne” and “Teddy Roosevelt” masculine ideal.⁵ Du Mez notes,

Evangelicals were already fans of Gibson’s work. Gibson was Catholic, but evangelicals recognized that they shared the common creed of militant Christianity and heroic masculinity. For many evangelical writers, references to *Braveheart* rivaled biblical references when it came to discerning God’s will for men. *The Patriot*, too, offered a heroic vision that was sorely lacking in modern America. But nothing matched evangelicals’ fervor for *The Passion*.⁶

Mel Gibson’s films, especially *Braveheart* (1995),⁷ took center stage as a presentation of ideal evangelical masculinity. Prefiguring *The Passion of the Christ*, *Braveheart*’s protagonist endures bare-chested torture and yet retains his dignity, strength, and the audience’s sympathy. The hero’s violence is justified and legitimized by the suffering of his damsel in distress. *The Passion of the Christ*, on the other hand, goes a step further—it presents the viewer, ultimately, as a damsel in distress whom Jesus Christ undergoes torture to rescue and then subordinate as part of his household. The film serves as a vehicle through which Jesus’s role as their Lord (Master) and Savior (Hero) is reinforced. This Jesus is an All-American (pictured right).⁸

Widely read conservative evangelical author John Piper outlined the distinction between “biblical masculinity” and “biblical femininity” in a landmark volume in 1991 that rearticulated and publicly rehabilitated Christian patriarchy against the rising influence of evangelical feminism. He idealized a “breadwinning,” “initiative-taking,” “benevolent,” and “responsible” husband, modelled after the heroic masculine Jesus, to whom wives should offer submission.⁹ Emulating Jesus’s salvific sacrifice, such a husband must “lay down” his life to protect his wife from threatening assailants,¹⁰ suffering “for her safety” and considering himself responsible for her protection. This interpretation of the death of Jesus in the biblical text (e.g., Eph 5:23–25, 33) is consistent with the *Braveheart* ideal.

On the flip side, the heroic rescue of the “damsel in distress” culminates in patriarchal marriage. Having proven his sexual dominion, strength, and command by overcoming sacrificial trials, the “biblically masculine” husband earns a position of authority over his wife. Piper describes femininity as “vulnerable,” “sweet,” “trusting,” “obedient,” and “sensually receptive” and calls on his readers to emphasize and manifest these gendered tropes in their everyday lives and gendered interactions.¹¹ Piper effectively sacralizes cultural gendered ideals, which are a polarized distinction between sexual aggression and sexual passivity/subordination. This is predicated on the evangelical narrative of the heroic and masculine crucifixion, a narrative that can be problematized by the context in which the Roman Empire practiced crucifixion.

David Tomb’s *The Crucifixion of Jesus: Torture, Sexual Abuse, and the Scandal of the Cross* is premised on an assertion, one drawn from Roman history, that does something interesting when posited against constructions of heroic, tortured masculinity.¹² Tomb argues that the essence of Roman crucifixion was not pain, but shame. Once, upon hearing a presentation of this concept in relation to the husband’s marital role in Ephesians 5, a conservative Christian male complained to me in an informal conversation that this was, effectively



“castration.” He recognized that masculinity modelled after Jesus’s crucifixion implied some kind of phallic death. He thus could not accept any constraint upon what he viewed as his God-given right—a submissive wife whose role was to serve him and, in his words, “make him feel like a God.”

First-century Romans did indeed idealize heroic battle wounds and the endurance of “pain and death,”¹³ but this was not the point of crucifixion. Romans sentenced political dissidents to crucifixion precisely to prevent the very possibility of their continued heroization. Crucifixion ensured that their memory would be forever disgraced. This served as a demonstration of Roman might toward “enslaved people, rebels, bandits.”¹⁴ This form of *damnatio memoriae* (“condemnation of memory”) was a violation of both the body and honor of victims. Such shame was never considered part of a heroic path toward authority and heroism. James Cone, in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, thus draws connections between crucifixion and lynching, identifying in the declarative rituals of White supremacist mobs the intent to enforce violent social power by desecrating the body of Black victims, condemning them with the ignominy of shame, and threatening those who would similarly challenge the established racial order.¹⁵

The worship of “Jesus of Nazareth,” pretender “King of the Jews,” lived on after his crucifixion. In fact, the crucifixion became central to early Christian sacrament and ritual. Early Christians would not only profess but continually ritualize his deeply shameful and offensive death. They would proclaim “Christ crucified,” this Christ who “endured the cross, scorning its shame” (Heb 12:2 NIV). In doing so, they reconceived the very notion of Roman honor—*dignitas*. James Cone cites Friedrich Nietzsche in identifying in this narrative a “transvaluation,” that is, an upside-down rendering, of social hierarchies and values.¹⁶ What early Christians should normatively have understood was that crucifixion was an intimate, ritualized, violent exchange between the greatest power—Caesar—and those with the least power in Roman society, slaves and symbolic slaves.¹⁷ Caesar represented authority, honor, victory, and sexual impenetrability. Every ritual of the crucifixion declared Caesar’s victory—flogging, stripping, and impalement. These inflicted the “marks of slavery”¹⁸ and, in Tomb’s view, constituted sexual violations.

Bodies enslaved under the Roman Empire were not fully human—if they were male, they were not considered men.¹⁹ Whether male, female, or children, enslaved people were legally subject to sexual violation.²⁰ When early Christians referred to Jesus as equal with God yet bearing the likeness of a slave, such as in one Pauline doxology (Phil 2:6–11), this was literal.

Thus, the early Christian insistence on Jesus’s death as a full manifestation of divine “wisdom” and “power” (e.g., 1 Cor 1:18–25) can be described and examined as an intriguing, unexpected state of communal delusion. This delusion would have been the basis for a transvaluative (upside down) social and political ideology that calls into question social orders of both imperial might and White supremacy. R. Alan Streett, for one, makes the argument that the early Christian eucharistic meal and various enactments and rituals during the meal would have signaled an opposition to, and subversion of, hierarchical Roman social norms.²¹

This leads us to the question, “What kind of response does the crucifixion potentially represent in the face of imperial discipline?” The imperium assumes its authority over bodies that it chooses to discipline. These bodies are subjects of the larger imperial household under its benevolent father, the emperor.²² Thus, the way we choose to narrate and imagine the crucifixion within the imperial household has far-reaching implications for political theology—especially in relation to global empire—today. The imperial household may, indeed, be an interesting framework for examining empire and its constitutive social norms.

Patriarchy and the Christian Imperium

It would be inaccurate to assert that early Christians did not identify and define masculinity based on imperial norms. The postbiblical writings that remain are largely masculine because they were curated, censored, and doctored by fourth and fifth century imperial religious authorities.²³ Second- and third-century Christian leader Clement of Alexandria, for example, prescribed Roman masculine norms for Christian men. In *Paedagogus*, he decries the removal of male body hair, among other practices, as effeminate and transgressive. Dominic Montserrat notes that Roman descriptions of slaves presented them as “infantile,” “ugly,” and “beardless.” They were feminine and “potentially penetrable,” “since, in the ancient world, the visible growth of facial hair marked a man as truly masculine, distinct from slaves, and unavailable for penetration.”²⁴ Clement’s assertions show early Christian acceptance of Roman masculine norms.

“Ambrosiaster,” as Eusebius dubbed him, was the anonymous fourth century author of widely read biblical commentaries. Notably, Ambrosiaster formulated a theology of women’s subordination using the biblical texts that would be cited throughout the Middle Ages. According to Ambrosiaster, women were not truly made in the “image of God” as men were. As David G. Hunter describes, Ambrosiaster believed that female Christians owed their male leaders “special submission and silence”—their subordination was “both social and ecclesial.” Patriarchy, as Ambrosiaster conceived, was inescapable in this life and the next.²⁵ Where did this come from? Hunter writes of Ambrosiaster’s political entanglements, noting,

It is significant that Ambrosiaster has chosen Roman legal practice to illustrate his biblical teaching. By appealing to the subordinate place of women in Roman law to validate his exegesis, Ambrosiaster expresses the concern of a late Roman aristocrat to preserve the established structures of society. By drawing a correlation between the order of creation and Roman civil law, Ambrosiaster reveals a desire both to politicize the Genesis story and to sacralize the political order. On the one hand, the subordination of women which he reads into Genesis is validated by the tutor-guardian relationship which enshrined women’s subordinate place in Roman society. On the other hand, the patriarchal structure of the Roman world is given sacral legitimation by his hierarchical reading of Genesis.²⁶

Early Christian sources reflect a fear of emasculation and penetrability associated with a loss of status, as Alexander Perkin notes,²⁷ as well as an investment in perpetuating the Roman patriarchal order of male *imperium*. Thomas Laqueur traces this fundamental conception of gender and fear of emasculating gender slippage from Roman antiquity

across European history until the 18th century.²⁸ Thus, masculinity continued to be defined by the Roman patriarchal standard, namely, the enactment of sexual dominance and possession.²⁹

Medieval Spanish, for example, drew from Roman language to describe masculinity, *vir*, as freedom from emasculation, synonymous with sexual impenetrability, rationality, virtue, and moral superiority.³⁰ Men who were penetrated or in danger of penetration were not *vir*,³¹ but *mancebo*.³² This became the language that justified colonial violences from the very moment of Columbus's encounter with Arawak people in the so-called New World. According to historian Margarita Zamora, Columbus's journals record him labelling them "beasts" and "monsters" lacking in "intellectual inaptitude"³³ and his naming of them as *mancebo*,³⁴ a word used to describe the effeminacy and penetrability of medieval Spanish slaves. The conquistadors justified the sexual violence that followed, including "genital mutilation of the men and the rape of the women" with these existing cultural definitions of masculinity and penetrability.³⁵

Scholars identify a relationship between patriarchal authority over slaves and sexual penetrability in medieval Christendom³⁶ such as among Spaniards, Scandinavians, and Anglo-Saxons.³⁷ Debra Blumenthal, asserts that "sexual exploitation often was a distinguishing feature of the enslaved woman's experience" in 15th century and late medieval Spain.³⁸ This was uniquely situated in a context where the pretense of "Christian" morality dictated public sensibility. Masters, attributing virtue to their ruling position, would assert that they were "Christian" and did not take advantage of their right to sexual access, but documentation of enslaved women's pregnancies indicated otherwise.³⁹

For wives, exclusive "sexual possession"⁴⁰ as representative of a "gendered polity" defining the relationship between males and females continued from the Middle Ages into modernity, where Toby Ditz argues that settlers of colonial America also exercised sexual access over the enslaved and indentured members of their households.⁴¹ Scholar of early American history Thomas Foster, similarly notes that "bodily self-mastery and emotional moderation"⁴² as well as possession and mastery over women and household subjects characterized early American masculinity. Indeed, Finkelhor and Yllo note that the uphill struggle in the 20th century toward recognizing marital rape not as the assertion of male rights over his wife condoned and enabled by social norms, but as an act of violence.⁴³ Rape culture in contemporary American society continues to be undergirded by definitions of masculinity as characterized not only by aggression, virility, control, and dominance, but also "benevolent" paternalism toward women.⁴⁴

Imperial masculine political theology is thus one of patriarchal authority and discipline across all spheres of life—church, city, household. Theologians cited spiritualized injunctions in the NT *haustafeln*—the household codes—emphasizing the obedience of slaves and submission of wives "as to Christ" (Eph 5:22; 6:5). A practiced spirituality of submission to the established patriarchal order served to reinforce the absence of bodily dignity and autonomy in a slave or wife.

Roman panegyrics celebrated the humiliation and defeat of the Emperor Constantine's rival Maxentius by naming Maxentius as a slave girl. His body was also physically mutilated, decapitated, and

paraded with this label—slave girl.⁴⁵ Thus, lauding the Emperor's undefeated and masculine body means, at the same time, celebrating the denigration of the enslaved body.⁴⁶ The Christianization of Rome under Constantine thus began with the reinforcement of the Roman household order under which the "slave girl" remained humiliated, violated, and marked as lacking imperial masculine virtue.⁴⁷ This correlates with the Byzantine artistic reimagining of the crucifixion after Constantine's ascendancy.⁴⁸ These portraits reconfigured Christ as a regal king, the master of an imperium unmarred by socially *shameful* sacrifice, having undertaken statuesque, *painful* sacrifice.

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Heteropatriarchy and Transgression

Imperial masculinity is a patriarchal order, one that requires individuals to embrace their assigned roles as penetrator or penetrated, masculine or feminized. This is also a *heteropatriarchal* order, one where heterosexual marriage is the ideal and where it is defined by masculine authority, virtue, virility, and sexual conquest. In American conservative evangelical sexuality, deviant behaviors include celibacy or singleness (particularly among women), egalitarian marriages, biblical equality for women, egalitarian sex where neither party is an aggressive "conqueror" of the other, and the failure to practice the corporal punishment of children.⁴⁹ All of these threaten the boundaries between masculine and feminine established by masculine displays of strength and domination of the body. Conservative evangelicals like Piper thus believe that gender equality and feminism threaten distinctions between men and women, distinctions that are solely based on penetrative authority and described in phallogocentric terms.²

The heteropatriarchal household authority is also fragile and has to be protected and enforced,⁵⁰ such as by the punitive shaming and attribution of transgression to those who refuse to enact subordination. This begins in childhood and can be found in authoritarian rhetoric emphasizing parental discipline.⁵¹ As seen in the writings of Augustine and Chrysostom discussed above, patriarchy involves the right and responsibility to exercise corporal punishment over children and slaves. This is based on a theological and political worldview in which discipline and control in each domain—household, church, and government—is the central manifestation of God's divine authority and governance.⁵² Individual autonomy, even bodily autonomy, is seen as dangerous.⁵³

Some, like John Piper, laud nineteenth-century theologian Robert Lewis Dabney, who described the power of corporal punishment of "slaves," "children," "apprentices," and "wives" in English law as normative and benevolent.⁵⁴ Dabney was an antebellum enslaver himself. Indeed, Dabney's interpretation of the crucifixion narrative was one in which the Divine Son is subject to the chastisement

of the Divine Father.⁵⁵ Torture of the Divine Son is necessary to salvation, and it is the Divine Father who enacts this violence. Such theologies maintain an image of the Christian God not as the one who suffers humiliation. Rather he, on one hand, metes out punishment lovingly, and on the other hand, endures such punishment lovingly and submissively. In both cases, patriarchal rationale keeps divine masculinity intact. God is, in the crucifixion, typologized as both Caesar and Christ, master and slave.

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and Dabney's theology of "penal substitutionary atonement" are both largely central in contemporary conservative American evangelicalism. They serve to narrativize the crucifixion in ways very much the opposite of Cone and Tomb's readings. Positing God as the punisher also posits God as the lynch mob and the lynch mob as God, on God's side, and responsibly reinforcing God's imperial household order. The divine sovereign and the patriarch, slaveholder, and segregationist all hold the right to punish and to kill with impunity.

Conclusion

The struggle between Caesar (the symbol of imperial masculinity) and "slave girl" (symbolic of humiliation, violation, and the lack of virtue) plays out in the ongoing struggle between *corpus Christi* and *corpus Christianum*. *Corpus Christi* represents the crucified body and those that shaped its memory and ritualization in previous centuries. *Corpus Christianum* represents imperial Christendom and the process by which the *Corpus Christi* was reimagined in the imperial masculine sense to become a product of Western Empire. Representations of Christ's body and crucifixion remain marred by the ideals of *Corpus Christianum*, embodied, for example, by a Mel Gibson-type, swaggering Saviour. Piper similarly idealizes the church as rightly dominated by a "masculine feel."⁵⁶

Corpus Christianum has literally made a mission for itself of penetrating the world by crucifying, torturing, and erasing the bodies that stood in its way. For example, Christopher Columbus planted a cross on the land he named "San Salvador" after the "Savior" as he and his men began a program of sexualized conquest, a conquest that manifested itself in horrific violences against indigenous bodies including genital evisceration and mutilation.⁵⁷

One failure of pacifist theology has been to imagine suffering under patriarchal and imperial violence as an act of subordination that becomes revolutionary in its own right. Christian anarchist Justin Barringer articulates this idea, claiming that "oppressive power structures are subverted and the oppressed are freed when those with little power, counterintuitive as it may seem, subordinate themselves to the powers that be."⁵⁸ This often leaves penetrators, abusers, and aggressors with the upper hand, able to enact their violence without resistance. Such theology has served as a source of secondary harm for victims of gendered and sexual violences in pacifist communities.⁵⁹

Ultimately, political theologians need to wrestle with a long history of violence in the name of authoritarian order. This includes the legacy of Ambrosiaster and Augustine who viewed subordination in the imperial household as necessary to God's imperial order on one hand and the views of those who see suffering as unjust, yet noble, necessary, and prescriptive on the other.

In conclusion, the battle over the meaning of the crucified Christ is deeply emblematic of imperial realities and imperial meaning-making in Christian history. Reclaiming and reimagining the memory and narrative of Jesus Christ's crucifixion may be one way to challenge existing imperial power-knowledge frameworks. In any case, identifying the imperial masculine household as a violent, crucifying, penetrating force may be helpful in structuring exactly *what* empire is and how we may go about pursuing freedom for those whose bodies are subjected to violating, hierarchical, imperial regimes. This calls for a deeper definition of Christian egalitarianism in the full historical context of imperial gendered violence.

Notes

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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

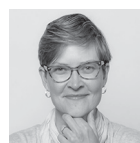
number of named individuals is deliberate and symbolic.

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.



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Where are Your Accusers?

A Sermon by Jill Richardson

I grew up on cop and courtroom shows. I loved the drama of catching the bad guy or seeing a lawyer convince the jury, in commanding tones of injured justice, that the defendant was innocent. Who knew the smoking gun was there all along? Where did that surprise witness come from? And of course, there was always Columbo's "just one more thing" that clinched the person's guilt.

Having worked in a law office and served on a jury, I'm now aware that television doesn't portray a courtroom quite accurately. We don't depict justice as it really happens.

This is nothing new. Courtroom scenes have always been played in different ways, sometimes in ways far from just. So, it's refreshing to look today at a trial of sorts that clearly veers toward injustice—but we get a plot twist that only Jesus can deliver. That twist has surprising relevance for the ways we listen to and believe women today.

We are in a sermon series on questions God asks us. Today's story—and the question God asks in it—isn't just a story about one person, or one trial. And it is especially relevant to today's culture.

John 8:1–6 (NLT): Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives, but early the next morning he was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them. As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd.

"Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?"

They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger.

Here's the setting. A crowd. Jesus teaching them. And what happens? This group of men interrupts the teaching to deposit a woman in the middle of the crowd, maybe with little clothing, since the text says she was "caught in the act." It's wrong on so many levels.

Have you ever been embarrassed in front of a group? I remember my tenth-grade spelling bee. At some point, I looked across the room at my crush. He was looking at me! I looked back. I flirted a little. I smiled, made eyes, and was generally overjoyed that he was looking right at me.

Until I realized that *everyone* was looking right at me—because it was my turn. And the entire classroom had seen my awkward tenth-grade attempts at flirting.

I have no idea if I spelled the word correctly.

This woman is completely vulnerable, at risk, and humiliated. This group of men has made sure of it.

The wording says they put her in front of the crowd. Like she is a stray fork or a plate of bad cafeteria food they can toss wherever they like. She is, in fact, their tool for entrapping Jesus. Little more.

She has no agency at all in this matter.

In a mock trial that should have been private and should, by law, have involved the guilty man as well, the men decide to make her shame public instead, because she fits their agenda.

Does this all sound vaguely familiar?

It's the way women have always been treated by power. Jesus isn't having it, as we'll later see. But what exactly is the problem with what the men are doing?

First, for men so intent on keeping the law, they break several.

1. They could and should have brought her privately if they wanted a court judgment. Though Jesus isn't a court judge, they're casting him as one in order to trap him. They brought her in public, to shame her and challenge Jesus. They wanted a dramatic lynching, and they wanted him holding the noose. It's not about justice, and it's not about her. She's collateral damage.
2. They could and should have brought both guilty parties. A man, however, would have demanded his rights. He would not have been as vulnerable. She had no rights. She was an easy target.
3. They could and should have brought the required two witnesses forward immediately. Except, well, for two people to actually witness adultery? They had to see it at the same time and place and have the same story. Adultery is generally a private event. They had to have known where and when it would happen. In other words, they used the woman to set Jesus up.

That's just a start at the injustice of it all.

It was a test of grace or truth. Would Jesus lean too far toward grace—let her go—and break the law? Or would he lean too far toward law—agree to stone her—and seemingly invalidate all he'd taught about mercy? He couldn't win with either choice, and that was the plan.

John 8:7–9 (NLT): They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, "All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.

When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman.

They keep demanding an answer. They are impatient, wanting condemnation on their terms, their timeline.

So Jesus gives his answer. Fine. Toss a stone. Throw it. Hard. But only according to the law that you so carefully keep—the two witnesses have to go first. The crowd would know that was the law. The accusers would, too.

He demands that her accusers be the first to begin taking a life. If your testimony is absolutely truthful, he hints, this should not be hard. If you haven't misrepresented anything, exaggerated, told one tiny lie in this matter—what's more, if you haven't ever sinned—you're good. Go ahead. Throw a rock. But if there's any sin in you, no sin in what you're doing here, you might want to reconsider. Life is sacred—and they know that law, too. No one throws a rock.

Jesus is keeping law for them but enacting mercy for her all at once. Never cross Jesus when death is on the line.

John 8:10–11 (NLT): Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” “No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”

Then Jesus utters one of the most beautiful questions God asks in Scripture. “Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” What’s the truth for us here, in Jesus’s beautiful question?

No one has the power to condemn you except the Lord of grace and truth.

Condemnation is his alone to give or take away. In this life, people will shame us, hurt us when we’re vulnerable, treat us like an object to use, humiliate us, judge and condemn us. But they don’t have the power to make that final call.

Has no one condemned you? No, Lord.

In calling Jesus “Lord,” she is transferring power. She is admitting him as her master. She is transformed by that choice. Her accusers no longer have power over her. They can’t bring her shame, judgment, or hurt. Only he can—but he doesn’t.

As modern people far removed from first-century Palestine, we can’t fully grasp the revolutionary things Jesus did. We don’t know that culture, and we often don’t see his actions as they would have seen them. We prefer to take the obvious moral and assume “Jesus meek and mild” as the norm, except for that Temple table-flipping aberration.

But Jesus was not about the *status quo* then, and he isn’t now either.

He isn’t solely about setting her free here, although he certainly is about that. He’s about much, much more. He’s about the way we treat women, *still* treat women, two thousand years later.

He wasn’t having it then, and he’s not having it now. Look at some details.

She is surrounded by a circle of men willing to sacrifice her for what they want. For their purposes, it doesn’t matter who she is or what she’s done—yet it does. They’ve waited for this woman and this sin.

Think about it—there are sinners all over the place. All they had to do was find some disobedient teenager and haul him in front of Jesus. It could not be too difficult. Being disrespectful to your dad was a serious sin, too, and they could have probably found that on any block. Why not do that, rather than create a contrived drama with this woman and adultery? Why?

Because women and sexual sins were easy targets, just like they are now. It was easy to blame them then, and it still is.

To understand why, we need to recognize two things. First, sometimes we’re the woman in this drama. Second, sometimes, we’re the religious leaders.

It is terribly important that the “accused” in the story is a woman. In the first century, Judaism had stereotyped women as instigators whenever sexual sins were committed and labeled them as lacking the spiritual and moral fiber needed to uphold the law. The sexual passions of adolescence, for instance, were viewed as coming from the seductive attractions of females. The absence of the woman’s lover in the story is crucial.¹

In other words, what was she wearing? What did she have to drink? Where was she walking and when? How did she lead him on? You know the drill.

Jesus saw no man present at the kangaroo court. He did see a whole mess of men throwing blame at a woman. He saw a story that had been and has been since played out a thousand times. He saw a

woman, a co-image of God, used as an object of someone’s passion and then blamed for the outcome. The man got a pass. Don’t tell me Jesus isn’t relevant.

And oh, a third thing to recognize. Sometimes, we’re the audience.

It’s a gambit that has not changed. Vulnerable women are used by the powerful for their purposes. We see the news stories every day, and we don’t even register a reaction anymore to the Harvey Weinsteins, Larry Nassars, or Robert Morris.

The crowd watched the woman dragged before them, and they knew this was wrong. Yet no one stepped forward to say so. No one. They were too afraid of the powerful religious establishment.

It’s too tempting, and too dangerous, to watch #MeToo and #ChurchToo move across our vision, be outraged for a moment, and then move on.

Jesus confronts the whole mess. He sees a woman de-imaged before him by the religious leaders. When he forgives her and gives her back her dignity, he sends a powerful message to his audience.

See these women. Hear them. Don’t turn away.

If we’re the audience, we have some things to ask ourselves before we move on from Jesus’s question—Does no one condemn you?

- Do we listen to women’s stories?
- Do we disallow the tired stereotype of women as emotional creatures, or temptresses who make up stories to trap men?
- Do we raise girls who will respect themselves?
- Do we refuse to shame them or burden them with the sins of men and boys?
- Do we teach our boys that we are all responsible for our own sin?

Sometimes we’re the crowd, too afraid to speak up. Afraid to contradict the religious leaders of our day as well.

I love Jesus even more after this story. He’s not having it. Not then, not now. He won’t stand for people using women or for meting out unequal justice between the sexes. It’s radical. It’s beautiful. And we need to see it for exactly what it was and is.

Forgiveness, yes. A brilliant escape from the trap of law versus grace, yes. But there’s a greater point we can easily miss if we’re not paying attention—it’s a message of equality and dignity for women everywhere.

Notes

1. Gary M. Burge, *John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan Academic, 2000) ad loc.



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The Wife as a Training Ground: Complementarian Theology and Coercive Control

Bethany Jantzi

Our theology has real life implications. The way that Christians read Scripture and apply it matters greatly. Complementarian teachings hold to a gender hierarchy in marriage in which husbands are appointed by God to lead with wives responding with willing submission. This is fundamentally different from the egalitarian viewpoint of biblical equality and mutual submission. What if these complementarian teachings foster an environment in marriage that jeopardizes women's autonomy? What if the way complementarians frame submission and headship replicate the main dynamics present in an abusive relationship? What if complementarianism operates as a spiritualized form of coercive control that reduces wives to a training ground for their husbands' spiritual and leadership development?

As a believer who is concerned with the implications and consequences of how Scripture is interpreted, I find it striking how the mindset of a domestic abuser is one that can be given spiritual cover within complementarianism. While complementarians profess to protect and honor women, I question how this theology plays out in everyday life.

The field of psychology has made substantial and critical contributions helping us understand domestic abuse. The research on domestic violence has long pointed to an attitude of entitlement as a cornerstone of an abuser's mindset.¹ Adherence to traditional gender roles is a related factor that correlates with elevated levels of abuse.² Men are socialized to believe that having control is a large part of what it means to be a man. Further, they are conditioned to believe that they are *entitled* to be in control.³ Boys are exposed to social and cultural messages that normalize women's abuse and male control over women.⁴

Men who abuse often do so to prop up an insecure sense of self. While men do experience control and abuse from their female partners, men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of abuse where their female partner experiences severe physical violence and chronic fear.⁵ This gender divide is even more clear in cases of domestic homicide which is considered the "ultimate consequence of unequal power relationships between men and women."⁶ Research on femicide cites the social conditioning of men to be entitled to control their partner as a foundational component of relationships that end in homicide.⁷

Yet in Christian communities, husbands receive messages not only normalizing male control over women but using theological justification to do so. Much of the research on the developmental factors and drivers of domestic abuse can be mapped onto complementarian theology. Central to both are hierarchical gender roles and the power dynamics associated with them.⁸ It is then unsurprising that Christian communities that are patriarchal have significant levels of abuse.⁹ While male entitlement, undermining female autonomy, and normalizing male control over women are not endorsed in Scripture, these elements can emerge from a specific belief system.

In light of our current understanding of the primary drivers of domestic abuse, any environment that normalizes a gendered power imbalance and requires female submission as part of a religious practice deserves further scrutiny. I employ the framework of coercive control as a lens to evaluate complementarianism and its domestic impact.¹⁰ Through this, I hope to show how complementarian theology frames wives as training grounds for their husband's development and growth at the expense of the wives' personhood and autonomy.

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Complementarianism and Gender Roles

My conceptualization of complementarianism is based on resources from two organizations: The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) and the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC). CBMW is the flagship organization for complementarianism, formed in 1987 by a group of male leaders from various conservative evangelical churches, united by their concern for the damaging impacts of biblical feminism (egalitarianism) and secular influence on families.¹¹ The core beliefs and values of CBMW are put forward in their document, The Danvers Statement, which sets out that men are called to be the spiritual leaders and heads of their families. Wives are called to come under the headship of their husbands with attitudes marked by submission "in everything," and their submission to their husband is a reflection of their submission to God. Husbands are instructed to take "dominion over our marriages and homes" because this reflects how Christ took dominion over everything.¹² CBMW emphasizes that these specific masculine and feminine roles in marriage are ordained by God.¹³

ACBC, the largest certifier of biblical counselors globally, was founded in 1976. Their focus is training biblical counselors to use Scripture to address their clients' sin, urging repentance and relational restoration to "restore true worship of God."¹⁴ Similar to CBMW, they hold to complementarian theology and view it as critically important.¹⁵

Based on common teachings and problems addressed in CBMW and ACBC resources, I will lay out a basic conceptualization of coercive control with respect to complementarianism.

Coercive Control

Understanding coercive control can provide a valuable framework for the complexity of abuse. It can illuminate the subtle threatening and controlling behaviors that are often missed due to oversimplified conceptualizations of abuse that focus on the use of violence, and as a result, fail to recognize other forms of abuse such as psychological or spiritual abuse. Coercive control is defined as an intentional pattern of behavior that is designed to control another person, resulting in their subjugation. Coercive control produces compliance of, and psychological control over, the victim.¹⁶ A simple way to understand coercive control is to see it as the subtext that carries a threatening “do this or else” implication.

Coercive control is uniquely tailored to the victim.¹⁷ It is not uncommon to see religion and ideology being used to incentivize the victim to accept certain treatment that undermines their own autonomy and places them in a vulnerable position.¹⁸ The fear of consequences—corporeal or existential—can make the victim compliant and obfuscate the harm being done, in favor of being committed to a larger cause or higher plan.¹⁹ In the case of complementarianism, this is seen as God’s true and perfect design for biblical marriage.

These tactics have an incredibly damaging impact on the victim, undermining her sense of self, deepening her reliance on the perpetrator, and eroding her autonomy. Coercive control is also described as a form of psychological captivity in the way it systematically breaks the victim down by hijacking her cognitive independence. All these processes occur while the coercive controller simultaneously eliminates crucial paths for support, connection, and resources that would support life outside the relationship.²⁰

With this basic understanding of coercive control with respect to complementarianism, we look at the emphasis placed on female submission within complementarian marriages.

Female Submission and Male Control in Complementarianism

In complementarianism, the submission of wives is framed as critically important. It has crucial implications for the salvation of the world because ignoring submission distorts the gospel picture. As a pastor at a CBMW conference puts it:

A wife’s submission to her husband’s headship portrays the gospel. How glorious a picture is that of your submission, wife? When a wife gladly, intelligently, godwardly submits to her husband, she shows the Christ who sacrificed for her is a leader worthy to be followed. Her submission is ultimately to Jesus Christ. The Church is always feminine with respect to and in submission to her bridegroom Jesus, so to ignore submission is to distort the gospel picture. So the question for a wife isn’t how much do I have to submit? The question is how well can I submit? And then you see Christ becomes her example as one who submitted to the Father all the way to death, to death on a cross. What a countercultural picture wifely submission offers a watching world. The question comes, why do you submit to your husband? And the door opens for the gospel.²¹

This theology frames wifely submission with incredibly high stakes. The wife’s submission is a compelling and unique tool of influence that only married women possess. It has tremendous power to draw in the curious, watching, and unsaved world.²² Additionally, the Danvers Statement reinforces these high stakes by saying that “denial or neglect of these principles will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large.”²³

Submission is also an issue of obedience to God, with potentially terrifying consequences should a wife fail to submit. As Martha Peace, an enduringly influential ACBC figure whose work is used as a textbook to train biblical counselors, urges, “God will do what He has to do to turn you from your rebellion to humble submission to your husband. Those consequences are painful, embarrassing, and very difficult to endure.” She follows that up with, “Fear of consequences is a powerful motivation,”²⁴ illustrating she is aware of the coercive and threatening underpinning of this demand for wifely submission.

Complementarian theology’s emphasis on inflexible hierarchical gender roles can give rise to, or exacerbate, insecurity in men who perceive themselves as falling short or who fear other men may view them as emasculated. After all, their masculine headship is framed around their entitlement to leadership and control. They see headship as what God requires of them, adding a level of spiritual pressure.²⁵

Michael Kimmel, a leading American sociologist and researcher specializing in masculinity, says men “are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval.” He goes further to say that relationships with women and control over women act as a kind of currency to gain status as a man. Men care more about how other men judge their masculinity than how women evaluate it.²⁶

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In complementarian churches, men are the primary judges, in their positions of authority in church leadership, of how well other men carry out their role. With this pressure of demonstrating their headship, and a sign of their authority being their power over women, there is a risk of establishing a harmful dynamic ripe for abuse of power.

For example, men who accuse women of stepping outside their defined role can more easily justify control because they have lost something they believed they were entitled to. As Dr. Monckton Smith, a forensic criminologist and coercive control expert, puts it:

“Boys are in many ways socialised to believe and expect that they are entitled to be in control of their families: that it is the way of things, a biological imperative. This sets both an expectation and a pressure. Men may defend that absolute right, feeling entirely justified, by enforcing their control in any way they can. To lose that control, or to have it usurped, can feel like humiliation, weakness and failure.”²⁷ Within this theology, as the spiritual leader, husbands have a right to bring correction to a wife who is rebelling against her biblically mandated role. Moreover, their husbandly duty requires them to correct her for her own sanctification.

The importance of submission weighs heavily into how and when a wife can present an appeal to her husband. Constrained by the demand to be submissive, women are instructed to speak sweetly when appealing to the husband—softly, in a soothing tone. They are directed to constantly monitor and regulate their facial expression. A smile is imperative to signify respect even in situations where the husband is clearly in the wrong.²⁸ A wife’s concerns about mistreatment at the hand of her husband may be invalidated if her approach is deemed unsubmitive. Her sinful lack of submission can be framed as being just as concerning as his sin of abusive behavior.²⁹

Adding to this, a wife who desires to appeal to a sinning husband to repent is cautioned that she must be confident in her view that the husband is indeed sinning. If she is incorrect, she is flouting his authority (and God’s) and rebelling in her lack of submission. The value she can bring to the relationship—even her own discernment in witnessing her husband’s sin and urging him towards repentance—is hemmed in by this prioritization of submission. While her husband’s judgment, feelings, and desires hold weight and have value, she should not expect the same.³⁰

The importance of submission weighs heavily into how and when a wife can present an appeal to her husband.

This dynamic makes the wife vulnerable to coercive control because a representative measure of the husband’s headship is how much his wife submits to him. Respect and compliance to his desires highlights the husband’s authority and points to successful headship. This also includes his ability to bring a non-compliant wife back into submission. Any reactive reinforcement of his authority can be normalized and rationalized as him acting within his entitled role, for everyone’s spiritual growth. This spiritual justification can provide cover for a husband’s entitlement to control his wife.³¹

As seen in domestic abuse research, male entitlement to be in control of women is a key driver of abuse, so any ideology which upholds that will make women particularly vulnerable if they dare step outside the bounds, whether accidentally or intentionally.³² Men who abuse their partners do so in an effort to gain control or re-establish their control when they perceive it to be violated or threatened. Any manner of behaviours, comments, or even looks can be interpreted as a signal to the coercive controller that the trap of control, which has been carefully constructed, is under threat.

It is noteworthy that literature on domestic homicide and coercive control cites men experiencing a real or perceived loss of control as the trigger for escalating their abuse and controlling behaviour.³³

It follows then that complementarian theology, which mimics some of the central components that contribute to domestic abuse, would not be excluded from expressing this dynamic. This is concerning because spiritual justification for this attitude towards male control over women contributes to normalizing these dynamics as ostensibly benign patterns that naturally occur in relationships. When a harmful dynamic is normalized, it makes the resulting harm less visible. This compounds the vulnerability of those who already have less power. Within this theology, the wives may have the coercive and controlling behaviors of their husbands framed as typical challenges or conflicts a marriage faces, instead of something much more insidious and harmful—if they are even recognized as problematic at all.

Devaluing Women and Elevating Men

The rhetoric around wives’ submission reveals what is valued about a woman’s role in marriage. This is evidenced by the way submission is highly praised in certain circumstances. These circumstances include instances where the husband’s decisions may have devalued the wife’s intelligence, undermined her autonomy, or negated her personal well-being. This appears in the ACBC and CBMW resources as submission in spite of harsh treatment or unwise decisions made by the husband. These circumstances also include the wife submitting to decisions made by a selfish husband, an overtly abusive husband, or when it is obvious the husband is wrong.

For example, in one ACBC podcast titled, “Submitting to Your Husband When You Think He’s Wrong,” the host asks: “How can a wife work through submission when she disagrees with a non-sinful decision that her husband makes?” The guest answers, “I’m so glad you asked that because so many women come to counseling with that question.” Then they discuss how “she’s not prohibited from giving her opinion . . . and all the reasons.” They conclude with, “but it’s not submission if she just goes along and does what she wants, right? Therefore, submission is defined as following when you have a different idea.”³⁴ Yet, they do not explore how the wife may have a contrasting perspective that could be valuable.

This description of submission makes it seem that what matters most is that the husband does not go along with what his wife wants when it differs from his desires. The way these situations have been framed in ACBC and CBMW articles, and the wife’s submission praised, make it clear that what the wife brings to the marriage that is highly valued is simply her compliance and submission. The wife is encouraged to have submission as her default attitude even when the husband’s actions undermine her personhood.³⁵

Not only are wives required to submit to explicit commands from their husbands, they are instructed to elevate their husbands’ preferences as containing wisdom from God. This was clearly illustrated in CBMW’s article, “Wives, Honor Your Husband’s Preferences,” where the author feels guilty for not complying with her new husband’s preference for her to get up early every morning to make a breakfast sandwich for him. She chides herself for her

“selfish and naïve” decision to not comply: “I figured that what my husband wanted me to do wasn’t a matter of holiness and sin, but a matter of personal preference—so what was the urgent need to honor that preference, especially if it made more work for me?” She concludes that for years he was trying to influence their marriage culture by leading her through his preferences. She now understands that he was simply desiring “nearness” with her which he expressed through his early morning breakfast sandwich requests. She reflects with sadness how her lack of deference caused her to miss many opportunities to experience her husband’s leadership, saying: “It never occurred to me that my new husband was also trying to lead me through his expressed preferences.”³⁶ With submission being such a defining part of the role of a wife, and with the stakes outlined earlier,³⁷ it is not surprising that wives order their routines around those preferences, prioritizing them instead of following their own ideas or instincts.

Meanwhile, let us look at how husbands struggle with the gendered expectations laid on them. A common concern that husbands express when seeking guidance from spiritual leaders, as illustrated in ACBC resources, is feeling under-qualified to perform their biblical mandate because they believe their wives are more spiritual or possess more wisdom or knowledge. Despite this, husbands are told that this does not negate their biblical responsibility to lead.³⁸ This sets up a reality in which some men report feeling insecure, but simultaneously they receive the message that being the head means they are made for dominion. To take dominion, to be in control, is a key part of complementarian framing of headship and masculinity.³⁹

While husbands are told they are to be leaders and that their lack of capability does not negate this calling, wives were encouraged to submit to every request and desire. The wife’s submission, the scope being submission in all things outside of explicit sin (as determined by him), is the training ground where the husband can exercise his dominion and practice his leadership.

These patterns reveal how, within these complementarian spaces, wives can be conditioned to hold back valuable contributions while the husband is told to soldier on, despite awareness of his inadequacies. What is more, the husband may use his wife as a training ground by which to neutralize his inadequacies, as we will now see.

The Wife as Training Ground

“The Wife as a Training Ground” is a theme that emerged from my larger research on coercive control. This theme concerns the way a wife’s submission is prioritized while her personhood is undervalued or suppressed specifically in the service of her husband’s development or to support his headship.

If the wife’s giftings fall in line with the husband’s ideas and vision for his family, they are seen as valuable. The wife is encouraged to make those contributions. If they fall outside the husband’s or church leadership’s concept of the wife’s role within biblical marriage, they are viewed differently. These parts of a wife’s personhood are unwelcome in the wife, but—interestingly—often viewed as providing an arena in which the husband can develop the skills central to his role as the leader. In these cases, the knowledge,

skill, and personhood of the wife can be suppressed, intentionally underdeveloped, or even punished. Take for example a personality trait like extraversion and interpersonal confidence in mixed-gender settings. This, according to ACBC, is viewed as part of male headship, as this podcast transcript illustrates:

**While husbands are told they are to be leaders
and that their lack of capability does not
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submit to every request and desire.**

When I got married, Zondra was very outgoing and very social while I was not; I would hesitate and I would let her initiate meeting people. I mean it was bad. . . . God needed to grow me in this area. . . . I needed to be reaching out and showing initiative in relationships and meeting people. And so she agreed that she would hang back. She would let me take the initiative. She is naturally out-going so she had to really think through about holding back and letting me step up, meet people, be more decisive, and that has really been helpful. God’s grace was evident; I began to grow in that area and continue to grow in that area.⁴⁰

In this excerpt, we can see how the husband feels entitled to control his wife by curtailing an aspect of her personhood. This control is justified because it is important for *his* growth. It is striking how the development of the husband’s leadership, a process he dictates, is prioritized over his wife’s unique personhood. The husband’s development is so central that it justifies suppressing aspects of her personality.

These parts of her identity are viewed as an obstacle to the husband’s development of traits that are singularly ascribed to husbands. Leadership and decision-making are seen as the distinct domains of men and could include anything that is seen as demonstrating authority or having control, including taking initiative in social gatherings. These traits in the wife are viewed as a threat to the husband and his authority. They could be seen as usurping his divinely mandated authority and resisting his leadership. In these cases, the husband does not only have the right to correct her behavior, but it is his duty. In this process, she could become the training ground for her husband’s development—a unsettling Christian (complementarian) expression of coercive control.

The Wife as Training Ground in Situations of Abuse

The expectation for wives to provide the training ground for husbands to work out their issues is especially clear in discussions around how wives are to respond in difficult and abusive marriages.

While ACBC provides the token recognition that certain Bible verses have been misused to advise wives to return to dangerous marital situations, it emphasizes that, “it is also true that God *can* use the Christ-like behavior of a wife to reach an angry husband.”

It also underscores the multiple ways “that the Lord *can* use the godly behavior of a victim to soften the heart of a sinful spouse.”⁴¹ Wives are exhorted to treat their husbands better than deserved with the hope of influencing his behavior without a word, through pure conduct alone. This is based on a reading of 1 Pet 3:1-2: “Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives” (NIV).⁴² If she removes herself from the marriage, then those opportunities for change diminish. As Martha Peace, the above-mentioned ACBC counselor, puts it, “if you stay in the battle for as long as God requires, God will apply tremendous pressure on your husband to repent.”⁴³ After all, a husband will not experience his “wrath” being “turned away” if she is not still there to offer “a gentle answer.” Therein lies this expectation that the wife is the training ground.

In these examples, it is striking that it is the wife who must continue on in hope that one day God will convict her husband and his behavior will be changed. It is noteworthy how this framing paints a picture of placing one’s hope in God. However, what follows is Scripture being leveraged to apply pressure to wives to shoulder responsibility with potentially grave repercussions. The wife’s responsibility is to provide this ongoing training ground so her husband can work through his sin issues. Frequent references to 1 Cor 11:8–12 throughout CBMW and ACBC resources underscored this dynamic.⁴⁴ The wife exists for the husband, as this example illustrates:

She [Eve] met a need in Adam’s life. She was created to serve him uniquely as a helper “fit for him.” This also is your role as a wife. When God joined you with your husband in marriage, he was meeting a need in your husband’s life. You were made to complete what was lacking in his life, to help make him into a better man, and to serve him in ways only you can.⁴⁵

It seems acceptable to complementarianism that the wife provides a training ground that may at times sacrifice her well-being or require her to subordinate her personhood in service to her husband’s growth. Again, this is a particularly salient feature of abuse through coercive control.

The Cost of Being the Training Ground

A stark implication of the wife’s role as a training ground is that it is not clear when women are free to prioritize their own well-being over submitting to their husband. Peace specifies that outside of the wife dying or God removing her from the situation, she must press on. She is to never stop “fighting” by using her influence. Her influence is her attitude of quiet submission and constant prayer.⁴⁶

It is striking how the wife is granted especially limited personal autonomy. There are multiple stipulations and conditions for how and when she may exercise this limited autonomy. This reflects a level of psychological control that is externally fostered and weakens the victim’s self-trust. Over time, as cognitive independence is weakened, the dependence on the abuser increases.⁴⁷ The victim’s critical thinking becomes replaced by the abuser’s mindset as she is conditioned to see the world the way he does.⁴⁸ This is a significant stage within the development of coercive control where the victim

no longer plans for the future and may not have the psychological resources to seize clear opportunities to escape the abuser’s control.⁴⁹

Considering the messages wives receive about their value and role, and given the psychological control, it is not surprising that Christian women stay longer in abusive relationships.⁵⁰ This environment can foster a psychological state where it is difficult for the victim to maintain the level of autonomy required to make decisions that prioritize her own well-being. This would require her to believe that she has the authority and the right to give herself that permission to leave.⁵¹ After all, she has been conditioned to believe that it is her responsibility and privilege, as a wife, to be that training ground. She may question how much God could use her if she makes the choice to remove herself from the marriage. The default position seems to be that her continued selfless and steadfast example can be a powerful tool for her husband’s growth. This exemplifies how complementarian theology reduces wives to the role of a continuous training ground for the husband’s growth, healing, and development.

Conclusion

Our theology matters. When we follow a theological perspective that sanctifies male control over women as part of God’s design for marriage, we create environments that place wives at increased risk for coercive control. They are more likely to normalize dynamics that are rooted in inequality and downplay the resulting harm. So, when women are conditioned through this theology to believe their role is to be a training ground for their husband’s development and growth, it must be called out. If we truly believe that men and women are equally made in the image of God, we must reject any theology that frames female autonomy as an acceptable sacrifice in the pursuit of biblical marriage.

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- We *believe* in the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ.
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- We *believe* the Holy Spirit equips us for service and sanctifies us from sin.
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- 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.
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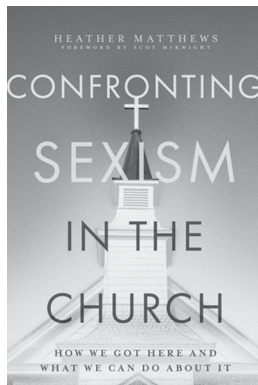
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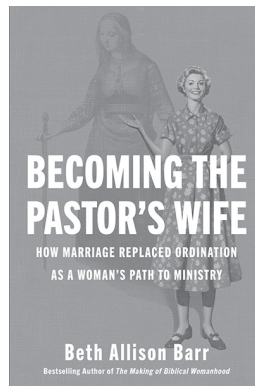
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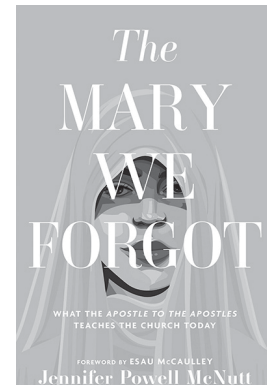
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