



RESEARCH ARTICLE

PENTATEUCHAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER EQUALITY: A HISTORICAL-LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL REEVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

This research utilizes historical-critical analysis to situate the texts within their Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) contexts, alongside literary rhetorical criticism to evaluate narrative structures, characterization, and legal codes. Traditional readings often characterize these foundational texts as inherently and rigidly patriarchal, frequently citing them to justify the subordination of women. A dual layered reality is revealed within the text. Genesis 1:27 clearly establishes an original, ontological equality. Whereas Numbers 27 provides an example of subsequent legal codes operating within a patriarchal ANE framework, that introduce subversive, progressive clauses that protect women's agency and rights. The Pentateuch offers a surprisingly robust framework for gender equality when interpreted through its foundational creation narrative and progressive legal adjustments.

Keywords: Ontological equality; gender equality; egalitarian theology; imago dei; pentateuch.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The Pentateuch serves as the ideological and theological bedrock of the Judeo-Christian canon. Historically, these five books have been lauded depending on the interpreter's perspective as the foundational architecture of Western patriarchy. Traditional readings subscribe to a social structure where women are legally, socially, and religiously subordinate to men. But, a critical problem arises when the text is treated as a monolithic endorsement of male supremacy. Conflicts between rigidly patriarchal legal codes and deeply egalitarian narrative currents point to an internal tension within the text. This paper addresses this hermeneutical friction by investigating how the Pentateuch simultaneously mirrors its patriarchal environment and introduces the theological seeds of gender liberation.

2.0. CONCEPTUALIZATION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptualizations

Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics

According to Tribble (1978), this approach operates on two distinct axes: the hermeneutic of suspicion and the hermeneutic of retrieval. Whereas a hermeneutic of suspicion posits that historical texts and their subsequent interpretations are deeply entangled with systems of male dominance (Fiorenza, 1984), a hermeneutic of retrieval seeks to rescue the text from its patriarchal distortions (Tribble 1984).

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The Theory of Divine Accommodation (Synkatabasis)

Historically rooted in Patristic and Reformation theology, and modernized by evangelical egalitarian scholars, this theory posits that God's self-revelation is dynamically adapted to the cognitive, cultural, and moral capacities of a specific historical audience (Bilezikian, 2006). God condescends to communicate through the flawed linguistic and socio-political currencies of the ancient world.

"God does not endorse the fallen social structures of the Ancient Near East; rather, God tolerates and regulates them, embedding within them the seeds of their own eventual subversion." (Davidson, 2007)

Sociologically, this framework views the legislative portions of the Pentateuch as case law designed to mitigate the harsh realities of an ancient, pastoral-nomadic society. As outlined by Webb (2001), when evaluating ancient law, one must distinguish between:-

The Stationary Element: The immediate, culturally bound application of a law, for instance, regulations concerning the purchase of female servants.

The Progressive Movement: The redemptive direction in which the law pushes the society relative to its surrounding cultural environment, for instance, granting those same servants nonnegotiable legal protections. Divine accommodation provides an explanatory mechanism for why patriarchal structures persist in the text without forcing the conclusion that patriarchy is God's transcultural ideal.



Canonical Trajectory Criticism

The final pillar of the framework is Canonical Trajectory Criticism, an approach that evaluates individual texts not as isolated, static statements, but as dynamic components of a developing ethical trajectory across the entire biblical canon (Childs, 1979; Sanders, 1984).

3.0. Materials and Methods

This study is qualitative in nature. The author generates information from secondary sources to elucidate the Pentateuchal perspectives on gender equality from the historical and literary dimensions. The secondary data were generated from textbooks, journal, monographs, and books. Source texts, versions and textual sampling strategy relevant to the problem under investigation are highlighted. Within the methodological framework, this study based on the following: (i) historical-Critical contextualization (ii) literary-rhetorical criticism, and (iii) canonical trajectory analysis

4.0. DISCOURSES

Traditional and Patriarchal Interpretations

Augustine and John Calvin historically argued that woman's creation subsequent to man, combined with her primary role in the primordial transgression of Genesis 3, and they, therefore, established a perpetual mandate for female subordination. In these traditional readings, the patriarchal structures of ancient Israel were rarely viewed as cultural accommodations; instead, they were treated as timeless expressions of divine will.

First and Second-Wave Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics

Russell (1978) and his colleagues, pioneered feminist liberation theologies, arguing that the overarching biblical narrative is one of divine partnership and liberation, which fundamentally contradicts any oppressive societal structures built upon the text. Hence, these scholars demonstrated that the text could be rescued from its patriarchal interpretations using its own literary structures.

Imago Dei (Image of God)

The Imago Dei is conferred simultaneously and identically upon male and female, mandating a shared, collaborative dominion over creation. The creation order of Genesis 2, far from implying male supremacy, culminates in the woman as an ezer kenegdo- an equal, corresponding power created to deliver humanity from the vulnerability. As a result, male dominance over women is explicitly diagnosed in Genesis 3:16 as a symptom of a fractured, fallen cosmos, rather than a reflection of the divine intent.

Contemporary Evangelical and Revisionist Egalitarian Scholarship

In recent decades, contemporary egalitarian scholars have sought to bridge the gap between a high view of biblical authority and gender equity. Scholars such as Bilezikian (2006) and Davidson (2007) have focused heavily on the concept of progressive revelation and cultural accommodation. Davidson's exhaustive study: *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*, argues that the entire Old Testament including the Pentateuch- presents an Eden ideal of absolute egalitarianism that the subsequent narrative continuously seeks to recover.



The school of thought argues that God condescended to work within the flawed, patriarchal structures of the Ancient Near East (ANE) to gradually pull humanity back toward the creation ideal. Genesis 3:16 does not establish a moral law or a permanent ordinance for human relationships. It simply diagnoses the systemic brokenness that will characterize human history. Consequently, when the later books of the Pentateuch (Exodus through Deuteronomy) navigate patriarchal structures, they are operating within this descriptive, fallen reality.

Re-Evaluating the Creation Order

Exegesis of Ezer Kenegdo

of the 21 times ezer appears in the Old Testament:

2 times it refers to the woman (Genesis 2:18, 20).

3 times it refers to military allies (e.g., Isaiah 30:5).

16 times it refers to God himself as humanity's ultimate rescuer, strength, or shield in times of existential crisis (e.g., Psalm 121:1-2).

An ezer is a power that delivers someone from a position of vulnerability. The modifying term kenegdo (כִּנְגְדּוֹ) literally means "face-to-face" or "corresponding to him." Therefore, ezer kenegdo is best translated as a "corresponding power" or an "equal counterpart." The woman is created not to serve the man, but to rescue him from the existential death of isolation through absolute mutuality.

The Origin of Gender Hierarchy

Genesis 3 documents the fracture of this egalitarian paradise portrayed through the primordial transgression. Following the rupture of trust between humanity and God, the narrative outlines the cosmic and social consequences of the Fall in a series of divine pronouncements. The opening chapter of Genesis establishes the primary cosmological and anthropological framework for the entire biblical canon.

Covenantal Protections and Vulnerabilities

The book of Deuteronomy features progressive adjustments to warfare and domestic law that uniquely shield women from the absolute vulnerabilities of a patriarchal society. The Captive Woman (Deut. 21:10-14): In typical ANE warfare, captured women were treated as spoils of war, subjected to immediate rape and forced enslavement. Deuteronomy radically subverts this practice. An Israelite warrior who desires a captive woman must bring her into his home, allow her to shave her head, trim her nails, discard her captive clothes, and mourn her parents for a full month (Deut. 21:12-13).

This mandatory lapsing period humanizes the enemy woman and honors her grief. Furthermore, if the soldier decides later that he does not want her, "you must let her go wherever she wishes. You must not sell her for money or treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her" (21:14). The law strips the soldier of economic and absolute physical dominion over her.



Case Study in Progressive Revelation: The Daughters of Zelophehad boldly approached the council of elders chaired by Moses. And accepted their request to have unencumbered inheritance since their late father had no male heir. Consequently, Yahweh instructed Moses to enact a law to that effect- that when a man dies without producing male heir, his inheritance passes on to female children.

Cultic and Religious Sphere

Women's Participation in Israel's Worship, Festivals, and Vows

In the cultic sphere, women were not passive observers locked outside the sacred precinct; rather, they were active participants in the liturgical life of Israel. Women regularly attended and participated in the major national pilgrim festivals- the Feast of Booths (Sukkot), Weeks (Shavuot), and Passover (Pesach), as well as communal sacrifices and rejoicing before YHWH (Deut. 12:12, 16:11-14). They presented their own personal offerings and participated in sacrificial meals (1 Sam. 1:3-7). Moreover, women served at the very entrance of the Tent of Meeting, performing institutionalized duties within the sacred precinct (Exod. 38:8). The ultimate expression of religious egalitarianism in Pentateuchal law is found in the institution of the Nazirite Vow (Numbers 6). The text explicitly establishes that the highest level of self-consecration and ascetic devotion in Israel was open to both sexes equally:

"Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man or a woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of dedication to the LORD as a Nazirite...'" (Num. 6:2)

The Nazirite vow allowed a layperson to temporarily achieve a status of holiness that mirrored- and in some aspects exceeded- the ritual purity of the High Priest, for instance, prohibitions against contact with dead bodies, even of immediate parents. By opening this supreme spiritual office to women, the Pentateuch signals that access to intimate divine devotion is entirely blind to gender.

The Absence of Female Priests versus the Presence of Female Prophets

A critical counter-argument to an egalitarian view of the Pentateuch is the absolute exclusion of women from the Levitical priesthood. Aaron and his sons possess an exclusive monopoly on sacerdotal duties. However, within the ancient Near Eastern context, this structural choice was not necessarily rooted in misogyny, but in a radical theological polemic against pagan fertility cults. In Canaanite, Egyptian, and Babylonian religions, female priestesses frequently engaged in ritual prostitution and fertility rites designed to manipulate the gods (Davidson, 2007). Restriction of the priesthood to males meant that Pentateuchal law severed any association between Israel's worship and sexual magic. Furthermore, because a woman's biological cycles involved the discharge of blood and fluids-which under Levitical law symbolized life and death dynamics rather than moral sin- the strict laws of ritual purity would have logistically disrupted a woman's ability to maintain the uninterrupted, daily schedule required for sanctuary service (Leviticus 15).

Significantly, the structural absence of female priests is balanced by the presence of female prophets. While the priest was a hereditary, institutional administrator who represented humanity to God, the prophet was a charismatically chosen individual who represented God to humanity. Prophecy represents a higher, unearned spiritual authority, and the Pentateuch places a woman at its very inception. Miriam is explicitly designated as "Miriam the prophet" (nebi'ah) in Exodus 15:20.



As a result, she leads the entire nation of Israel in liturgical worship following the crossing of the Red Sea. Later, in Numbers 12:2, Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses's singular authority by declaring, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he also spoken through us?" While Miriam is rebuked for her rebellion against Moses, the text validates that YHWH did indeed speak through her, cementing her position alongside Moses and Aaron as a co-leader of the Exodus paradigm (Micah 6:4).

Theological Analysis of Divine Accommodation

To reconcile the absolute equality of the creation ideal (Genesis 1-2) with the heavily patriarchal social and legal adaptations found throughout Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, one must analyze: The Prophets and Historical Books, Wisdom Literature and The New Testament Fulfillment. These books individually explored legal adaptations and provided further evidence with respect to patriarchy.

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

The Imago Dei is conferred simultaneously and identically upon male and female, mandating a shared, collaborative dominion over creation. The creation order of Genesis 2, far from implying male supremacy, culminates in the woman as an ezer kenegdo- an equal, corresponding power created to deliver humanity from the vulnerability.

Consequently, male dominance over women is explicitly diagnosed in Genesis 3:16 as a symptom of a fractured, fallen cosmos, rather than a reflection of the divine intent. As we navigate this fallen world, the legislative corpora of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy make pragmatic, socio-cultural concessions to the patriarchal structures of the ancient Near East.

Nonetheless, a diachronic, comparative analysis reveals that Pentateuchal law consistently subverts its surrounding cultural milieu. While contemporary ANE legal codes treated women as disposable, economic chattel, the Mosaic covenant introduced revolutionary protections, humanized marginalized women, and recognized women as legal persons with property rights.

5.2. Recommendations

1. Paradigm Shift towards descriptive history and prescriptive ethics: Seminaries, universities, and religious institutions should actively transition away from "flat" canonical readings that fail to distinguish between descriptive history and prescriptive ethics. Curricula focusing on the Old Testament should integrate comparative ancient Near Eastern (ANE) jurisprudence to help students recognize the progressive, humanizing innovations embedded within biblical narrative.

2. Re-evaluation of traditionally biased, patriarchal renderings of pivotal Hebrew terms: Exegetes, commentators, and ministers should re-evaluate traditionally biased, patriarchal renderings of pivotal Hebrew terms. Specifically, the translation of ezer kenegdo as "helper suitable" should be replaced in public discourse, study Bibles, and commentaries with more philologically accurate terms such as



"corresponding power," "equal counterpart," or "rescuing strength" in order to erase the false connotation of innate feminine subordination.

3. Leveraging the Pentateuch's model of progressive revelation and divine accommodation: Ethicists and religious leaders should leverage the Pentateuch's model of progressive revelation and divine accommodation to address contemporary human rights challenges. As the Torah evolved in response to the daughters of Zelophehad, modern faith communities should treat biblical ethics as a dynamic, upward trajectory that compels them to dismantle systemic gender disparities, domestic exploitation, and barriers to female leadership within religious and public spaces.

4. Prioritizing intersectional and intercultural Research within the Pentateuch: Intending biblical scholarship should expand upon the historical-literary method by prioritizing intersectional and intercultural analyses within the Pentateuch. Further research is recommended to isolate how the text uniquely handles characters that experience multiple vulnerabilities- such as Hagar, who faced simultaneous oppression through the vectors of gender, socioeconomic class (enslavement), and foreign ethnicity- in order to fully map the depths of divine responsiveness to marginalized women, among others.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that no conflict of interest exist in this manuscript.

Artificial Intelligent (AI) Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Google Gemini for language refinement. All outputs were selectively and critically retrieved and edited by the author. The author takes full responsibility for integrity and accuracy of the work.

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