

DO THE SCRIPTURES PROVIDE FOR WOMEN TO FILL LEADERSHIP ROLES and HAVE AUTHORITY OVER MEN?

(The Role of the Woman: To Rule or to Serve!)

Introduction

Exactly what is prescribed in the Scriptures with respect to the role of women? Are they to be totally subservient to men as some would have us believe or does Scripture allow for women to be in a position of authority with men? The role Scripture expects of the woman is a vexed question without any real consensus of agreement, especially where ministry is concerned.

We are only interested with the women's role as defined by Scripture and not in woman's battle for social equality. Even in terms of Scripture the authority or otherwise of women is a contentious matter. The Church cannot decide one way or the other with some denominations willing to ordain women and others strongly against such ordination. Judaism does not allow women any authority in the synagogue, indeed they are relegated to the rear of the congregation and most Messianic congregations show a relaxed attitude to women holding leadership roles. That there is such confusion is sufficient to show that this is not a straight forward issue and I doubt that this article will entirely settle the matter for everyone. However, it is hoped that the following will provide some help.

The Created Order

In Genesis chapter 2 we are told,

YHWH Elohim said, "It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make for him a companion suitable for helping him. (Gen.2:18)

The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. (Gen.2:20).

Advocates of the 'women in submission' philosophy argue this verse illustrates that woman was created purely to be the man's assistant, setting the precedent for women to fill a subservient role to man. But the verse can be interpreted in a far different way. YHWH gave the man a lot of work to do maintaining His creation and knew he was unable to do it alone so he gave him a companion to help him. To be of any use this companion would have to be equally up to the task. Thus the woman had to be as able as the man. It is possibly this understanding that has led some translators to present these verses in the following way,

And YHWH Elohim said, "It is not good for the man to be alone, I am going to make a helper for him, as his counterpart." (Gen.2:18)

So the man gave names to all livestock, and to the birds of the heavens, and to every beast of the field. But for the man there was not found a helper for him as his counterpart, (Gen.2:20)

Whilst most translations do not use the term counterpart it most accurately describes YHWH's intention. Stone's edition of the Chumash reads '*He (Adam) did not find a helper corresponding to him.*' Stone also has captured the essence of the woman's stature as does the word counterpart.

But there is more to it than this. YHWH wanted to populate the earth so he killed two birds with one stone and made the man both a helper and a partner for procreation. When we consider this was the primary reason he made them male and female and insofar as procreation is concerned the woman has a far superior role than the man, why would YHWH allot the senior role to the inferior person? It makes little sense.

As well as describing the woman as man's helper she is also man's counterpart. Both the Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries define counterpart as equivalent. So whilst the woman was introduced as an assistant she is of equal status. This understanding is, I believe, confirmed by what is said a little later in Genesis,

For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one (echad) flesh. (Gen.2:24)

The two are to become one flesh. The Hebrew is (*Echad*) and means unity, united, oneness. In other words they are to be a single unit of two parts. Another verse used by the 'women in submission' lobbyists is taken from Paul's epistle to the congregation in Corinth,

For man is not from woman, but woman from man. For man also was not created for the woman, but woman for the man. (1Cor.11:8-9)

When we consider the preceding verses in 1 Corinthians, the apostle makes the point that the man is the head of the woman but he is not, in my opinion, thereby saying women must be subservient. I believe Paul is differentiating between the roles of the man and the women and in particular a husband and wife. It is the man who is the head of the family. His role is to sustain/support the family, whereas the woman's role is to support the man and to enable him to fulfil his role as provider. This is where the title of helper fits. However, each role is equally dependant on the other: they are of mutual importance and status. The woman cooks, takes care of the home and family freeing the man to perform the role YHWH designated for him. We need to accept that YHWH created male and female to be different biologically, physically and mentally: each was designed specifically for the efficacy of their respective roles in life and this is the only differentiation. Unfortunately today society has allowed the roles of each to become confused with women taking on the man's role and vice versa.

There is nothing in the apostle's words that hints of hierarchy. The apostle is merely repeating the order and methodology of the creation record. The fact that the apostle continues in the way he does would support our argument of equality,

However, man is not independent of woman, or woman independent of man, in the Mashiach. For as the woman was from the man, even so the man also is through the woman. But all are from Elohim. (1Cor.11:11-12).

Insofar as The Father and The Son are concerned both male and female are equal. In this passage the apostle nullifies any misinterpretation of Genesis, stating that whilst man was the source of the first woman, subsequently the source of every man is the woman. Thus, rather than insisting that women were created to be inferior to men, the apostle confirms that men and women are mutually dependent upon each other, accordingly there must be equality between them. Let me add a quote from Rabbi Hirsh,

The woman's body was not taken from the earth. YHWH built one side of man into woman – so that the single human being became two, thereby demonstrating irrefutably the equality of man and woman.

A final comment before we leave Genesis chapter 2, nowhere is it intimated that the woman was an inferior model to man and to interpret the term 'helper in this way is against the tenor of Scripture. What we learn from Paul is that male and female were made to be mutually complementary each to the other without any gender hierarchy. I cannot see any other way of interpreting the following statement by Paul,

The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. (1Cor.7:4)

Is not such a statement conducive to equality? Whilst Paul is speaking in terms of a husband and wife relationship it would be illogical to say a woman is inferior except in marriage when she is equal and then only to a husband. But exactly how are we to interpret the meaning of equality between man and woman?

I believe it is equality with respect to YHWH's plan for creation. Both man and woman are equally essential: each to the other and both for the success of YHWH's plan for creation and we must understand equality in this context.

Women in Ministry

As said above YHWH specifically designed man and woman differently each to fulfil different roles. The question we now have, was woman meant to teach authoritatively over man?

We are going to focus on the apostle Paul's comments in his first epistle to Timothy, in which he is dealing with a false teaching that has infiltrated the congregation in Ephesus and which has captivated the women members of the congregation. This has apparently led to the women over asserting themselves, thereby usurping the authority of the men and creating a disturbance. Consequently, Paul sees the need to reiterate what is the correct status for women in a congregation of worship,

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, she must be silent. (1Tim.2:11-12).

The subject of women in a ministerial role is a different issue to that of equality and in this context it is important not to confuse equality with authority. Paul emphasises this differential with the interjection of verses 13 – 14,

Because Adam was formed first, then Hava. Also it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman, having been deceived, fell into transgression. (1Tim.2:13-14).

An important note is that verse 13 commences with a conjunction and is to be read as a continuation of the preceding verse 12. Thus verses 13-14 provide the reasons for the prohibitions described in verse 12.

The point Paul appears to be making is that the order of creation is indicative of the headship that man has over woman, (refer 1Cor.11:3-10). This is an extremely important indicator of how Paul understood the prohibitions in verse 12. Because the woman was created after man, as his helper, in the apostle's mind she is to submit to the authority of man. This submission is violated if a woman teaches or exercises authority over man.

As said earlier, Paul's first epistle to Timothy is generated by the infiltration of false teaching into the congregation at Ephesus (1Tim.1:3, 4:1-3) and many argue that the context of these verses is confined to this specific incidence at Ephesus and has no general application. Had the apostle been referring to this specific congregation would he not have said, "*I do not permit the women*" rather than say, "*I do not permit a women*" in verse 12. Further weakening of this argument is found when we consider that most of Paul's epistles are generated by specific circumstances, should we therefore consider the greater portion of the Brit Hadashah (New Testament) as irrelevant to our conduct and learning? What is more the apostle's reference to creation, illustrates his belief that the issue in Ephesus is not confined to a local matter but challenges the underlying principles set by YHWH for all humanity. The syntax of these verses clearly show Paul's reason for the prohibitions in verse 12 is the relationship role defined by creation which, according to the apostle commands that woman submit to the authority of man.

What occurred at Ephesus is very similar to what occurred at Corinth several years earlier when the apostle commands for women to be silent and submissive in the Corinthian congregation,

For YHWH is not Elohim of disorder but of peace, as in all the congregations of YHWH's people. Let your women keep silent in the congregations, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the Torah says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home: for it is improper for women to speak in the congregation. (1Cor.14:33-35).

Returning to Timothy, verse 12 is worthy of further scrutiny.

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, she must be silent. (1Tim.2:11-12).

Firstly, by prohibiting women from teaching what exactly is Paul prohibiting? It is clear from the context of the preceding verses that Paul is only concerned with the authoritative proclamation of YHWH's Word. Thus the syntactical relationship between 'prohibition,' 'teach' and 'authority' must be seen in this context. I don't believe the apostle is prohibiting women from all kinds of teaching; merely the teaching of men and the syntax of the verse would support this. The word 'man' which is plainly the object of the phrase 'to have authority over' should also be construed as the object of the verb 'teach.' This understanding aligns with the apostle's permission for women to teach other women (Titus 2:3-4) thus the prohibition is only against women teaching men.

Secondly the phrase 'to have authority over' is also worth a comment because it is a question of application. Is the apostle talking in the negative sense of merely 'lording it over' or the more positive sense of exercising authority over that is, having dominion over? The Greek word used is '*authenteo*' and Strong defines the word in the positive as – to dominate, to usurp authority. Thus we have to conclude that Paul is prohibiting women in any congregation from teaching or having any authority over the men with respect to the authoritative proclamation of YHWH's Word.

Another contention is that the apostle is not speaking about the relationship of man to woman in a generic sense rather he is specifically referring to the relationship between a husband and wife. But this argument is weak. In verse 8 Paul says every man, not just husbands, should lift up their hands in prayer. Similarly in verse 12 he says, "*I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, she must be silent*" Paul does not say 'over her husband' as would have been more appropriate if he was speaking in terms of a marriage relationship.

Finally I would like to annul the argument that Paul is only referring to women who are seeking to teach falsely. Surely if this was the case Paul would have specifically made this point, what is more such a prohibition applies to any teacher.

Conclusion

It would be amiss not to acknowledge that women are mentioned in both the Tanakh (Old Testament) and the Brit Hadashah (New Testament). The Tanakh records YHWH appointing women to the position of prophetess; Deborah in Judges, Huldah in 2 Kings for example and in the Brit Hadashah, three women in particular are mentioned; Phoebe, Priscilla and Junia, (some translations have masculinized the name to read Junias however, there is no evidence existing of this era to support the change to masculine). So in light of all this just how are we to understand Paul's prohibition?

We must remember that there are several types of ministry described within the Scriptures: Paul refers to these as 'gifts of the Spirit.' The apostle is not excluding women from every ministry or gift but specifically from the teaching of or dominion over men. It is clear that YHWH does not wish for women to be excluded from prophetic ministry and no doubt from certain other ministries and we must interpret Paul in this context.

In an effort to firmly close this issue it is probably worth examining what is actually said in the Brit Hadashah about Phoebe, Priscilla and Junia. There is only a single reference to Phoebe,

*I commend unto you Phoebe our sister a servant (*diakonons*) of the congregation which is at Cenchrea (Rom.16:1).*

Here Paul is merely introducing Phoebe to others explaining that she has a role in the congregation at Cenchrea without saying what her role is. The Greek *diakonons* refers to a clerical role not a teaching role. It is probably the origin of the word deacon which is allotted to a clerical helper of the church. There are

five references to Priscilla; Acts 18:1, 18, and 16, Rom.16:3 and 1 Cor.16:19 of these only one can be considered a challenge to this study,

And he (Apollos) began to speak boldly in the congregation. And when Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the Way of Elohim more exactly. (Acts.18:26)

From this verse it could be inferred that Priscilla lectured Apollos but this is speculative. The passage says that both Priscilla and her husband talked to Apollos. They both ran a home ministry and whilst Priscilla would not have been allowed to teach or have authority over the men she would obviously have been actively involved: their ministry would have been a joint effort to some degree, thus it is not surprising that they were together when they confronted Apollos. Which of the two led the conversation is not clear but whatever, a single isolated incident such as this does not equate to a teaching role within a ministry.

As with Phoebe there is only a single reference to Junia,

Greet Andronikos and Junia, my relatives and my fellow prisoners, who are eminent among the emissaries, who also were in Mashiach before me. (Rom.16:7).

In describing Junia as eminent among the emissaries some consider this to infer that Junia was herself an emissary of some standing but such an interpretation is inconsistent with Paul's decree for women not to teach men and therefore has to be incorrect. However, if we consider Paul to be saying that the emissaries had a high regard for Junia the inconsistency is removed.

By way of a final comment on the issue of authority within a congregation, Paul reinforces his position describing the characteristics of a leader in masculine terms only,

An overseer, then, should be blameless, the husband of one wife, sober, sensible, orderly, kind to strangers, able to teach, not given to wine, no brawler, but gentle, not quarrelsome, no lover of money, one who rules his own house well, having his children in subjection with all reverence, for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how shall he look after the assembly of Elohim? Not a new convert, lest he become puffed up with pride and fall into the judgment of the devil. And he should even have a good witness from those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. Likewise attendants are to be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for filthy gain, holding to the secret of the belief with a clean conscience. And let these also be proved first, and then let them serve, if they are found blameless. Wives in the same way: reverent, not false accusers, sober, trustworthy in every way. Let attendants be the husbands of only one wife, ruling children and their own houses well. For those who have served well as attendants gain good standing for themselves, and much boldness in the belief that is in Mashiach Yahusha. (1Tim.3:2-13)

The creation record describes the woman's role as assistant (helper) to man, this was the principle reason for the creation of Eve and sets the precedent for the position of women. It is this precedent that is the basis of Paul's directive with respect to women in a congregation. To summarize, women may fulfil any role provided it does not contravene Paul's directive for a women not to teach men or have authority over men. YHWH is an Elohim of order and we must worship Him in an orderly manner with decorum: there should not be any gossiping (by the men or the women) whilst a sermon is being delivered.

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