

WOMEN AND THE BIBLE

Romans 16:1,7

By Raymond White

It's not that the Bible doesn't talk about women, it's just that it talks so much about men that women get overshadowed. This article tries to balance that, give women their due, and maybe discover that the Bible is more about women than we usually think.

It's no secret that the Bible is patriarchal. But then all ancient peoples were patriarchal. So, was the Bible's patriarchal-ness something that God demanded, locked into his law, or was it just the social patterns of the times? And just how patriarchal was Israel's society, government, and religion? Were Jewish hierarchies totally patriarchal or just mostly patriarchal? To find out, here is my list of high ranking women in the Bible.

[1] WOMEN PROPHETS

What exactly is a prophet? We complicate things when we couple that role with other roles such as a prophet is the leader of a church, or a prophet is a priest, or a prophet is one who has a testimony of Jesus Christ, none of which is biblically true.

At the bare essentials, a prophet is one to whom God speaks. If we leave it at that, we may find surprises, for instance: Being a prophet has nothing to do with the prophet's righteousness — Balaam [*Numbers 22:8*] and Caiaphas [*John 11:49-52*] were both bad men but true prophets. And it has nothing to do with rank — Ezekiel was a prophet priest, Gideon a prophet judge, David a prophet king, and Elijah was just a prophet and nothing else. And it has nothing to do with gender. So, let's find some female prophets.

EVE

Genesis 3:13 And the LORD God said unto the woman [Eve] ...

It doesn't matter for this discussion exactly what God said to Eve, only that he said it directly to her and not through someone else. By my definition, then, Eve was a prophet.

REBEKAH

Genesis 25:23 And the LORD said unto her...

Rebekah was a prophet. God spoke directly to her and not through someone else.

MIRIAM

Exodus 15:20 Miriam the prophetess.

Numbers 12:2 And they [Aaron and Miriam] said, Hath the LORD indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath he not spoken also by us?

Miriam was a prophet. The problem she had here and the deep water she found herself in with God had to do with her hissy fit over Moses' new wife. That she got into trouble with God does not make her not a prophet. She *was* a prophet. But Moses was *more* than a prophet, which she had forgotten in a moment of bad judgment. But Moses pled for his sister and had clout with God, and Miriam was rescued from God's anger.

Micah 6:4 ...I sent before them Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

Centuries later, Miriam was still revered. This triumvirate sounds like a bishopric.

DEBORAH

Judges 4:4 And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time.

Lucky man, Lapidoth, to have first-in-line access to Israel's prophet and judge. His was a privileged position. Would he have a title? We call the wife of our president First Lady. What might we call Lapidoth? My recommendation is First Gentleman.

I'd like to meet Deborah one day. What a wonderful woman she must have been.

THE WIDOW

1 Kings 17:9 Arise, get thee [Elijah] to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee.

This widow woman heard and obeyed the voice of God. God told her to help Elijah and she did. She was as much a prophet as anyone else. So we needn't think that divine contact is exclusive to men. It's remarkable that we don't even know her name.

HULDAH

2 Kings 22:14 Hilkiyah the priest [and others] went unto Huldah the prophetess the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas keeper of the wardrobe :**15** And she said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel ...

2 Chronicles 34:22 And Hilkiyah, and they that the king had appointed, went to Huldah the prophetess :**23** And she answered them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Tell ye the man that sent you to me, :**24** Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will bring evil...

Huldah, was a woman who prophesied. She was not merely the wife of a prophet. Bruce R. McConkie once claimed that a prophetess was the wife of a prophet. That's not true. A prophetess is a woman who prophesies, and Huldah's husband's only claim to fame was that he was the grandson of the keeper of the wardrobe and married to the prophetess. He was no prophet and no one important. Her position had nothing to do with him, other than that she was married — in other words, she was not celibate.

Being the husband of a prophetess is something to be proud of. If my wife were a prophet, I'd be very happy about that. Imagine, being first in line to God's word. "Honey, what did God have to say today?" I bet Shallum had a lot to talk about at the office.

LEMUEL'S MOTHER

Proverbs 31:1 The words of king Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him.

King Lemuel's mother was a prophet. Her words were inspired; he merely recorded them, and that makes her the proper author of this chapter and thus a female Bible author. There is one other — the author of the Song of Solomon was also female.

ISAIAH'S WIFE

Isaiah 8:3 And I [Isaiah] went unto the prophetess; and she conceived, and bare a son. Then said the LORD to me, Call his name Mahershalalhashbaz.

Isaiah's wife is a prophetess. There is no recorded prophecy of hers but let's allow her to be what the Bible says she is, a prophet. It runs in the family. Maybe her baby was her prophecy. We see again that prophets and prophetesses enjoy the conjugal privileges of marriage. Other than their prophecies, they were ordinary people living ordinary lives.

MARY

Luke 1:28 And the angel [Gabriel] came in unto her [Mary], and said, Hail, thou who art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. :30 And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. :31 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call him name Jesus. :32 And he shall be great, and shall be called the son of the highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David. :33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Let me expand my definition of prophet. Anyone who receives God's word from any divine source is a prophet. That divine source can be directly from God or from an angelic messenger. So Mary is a prophet, and she prophesied. And she did not keep this information to herself, she told everyone who needed to know.

ANNA

Luke 2:36 And there was one Anna, a prophetess, ... :37 ... which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. :38 And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

This female prophet hung around the temple for decades after her widowhood for one reason only, to meet the baby Jesus. She had an established reputation as a prophet, and so when she prophesied to everyone that Jesus was the redeemer, she was believed.

PHILIP'S DAUGHTERS

Acts 21:9 And the same man [Philip] had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy.

So there were Christian women prophets as well as Jewish women prophets. When Luke says that these girls were virgins, he is not implying that they were perpetual virgins, life-long celibates, he means only that they were young and not yet married.

WOMEN FALSE PROPHETS

If a woman can be a true prophet, than a woman can also be a false prophet. It's only fair. Here are two —

Nehemiah 6:14 My God, think thou upon Tobiah and Sanballat according to these their works, and on the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have put me in fear.

Revelation 2:20 ...Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess...

[2] WOMEN LEADERS

In addition to prophetic abilities, some women were leaders in government and in the church, both Old Testament and New Testament.

DEBORAH

Judges 4:4 And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time.

Revisiting Deborah, she was not only Israel's prophet, but also Israel's judge; that is, supreme judge. And she was Israel's second judge following after Othniel, so she was not a late comer, not an afterthought, not a token woman judge.

There were no kings so she was the closest thing to a monarch that they had. She was also their commander-in-chief and told Israel's generals what battles to fight. She was Israel's spiritual and secular leader, their prophet and their government..

JUNIA

Romans 16:7 Salute Andronicus and Junia ... who are of note among the apostles...

Junia is a female apostle. But some scholars say there is an ambiguity, that the text may mean “well known *to* the apostles.” But that’s not how the ancients understood it. It is generally translated “outstanding *among* the apostles” thus Junia is an apostle.

John Chrysostom (4th century) wrote of Junia, “O how great is the devotion of this woman that she should be counted worthy of the appellation of apostle.” And later in the 13th century, men were nervous enough about a female apostle that they purposely misspelled her name as Junias making her a man which they would not have done if the text did not reasonably indicate, to them anyway, that she was indeed an apostle.

PHEBE

Romans 16:1 ...Phebe our sister, which is a servant (diakonos, deacon) of the church...

Phebe is a female deacon. No one disputes that. But then, what is a deacon? The word simply means “servant.” Maybe that means something more today, in a priesthood or leadership sense, or maybe not. What “deacon” means to you depends on what your church says it means. If you think “deacon” implies priesthood, and you also think females can’t have priesthood, then you have a contradiction to deal with it. Like it or not, it is certain that Phebe is a female deacon.

[3] WOMEN AND PRIESTHOOD

This is dangerous ground. Since I have no wish to be an ex-Mormon, I will not be advocating for a female priesthood. J. Golden Kimball, a Mormon apostle with a saucy vocabulary, was once asked if he worried that he might ever be excommunicated. His answer was: “Hell no, I repent to damned fast.” That’s my sentiment exactly. If I ever write anything that draws the attention and ire of general authorities, and if they tap me on the shoulder in an ominous way, I’d retract immediately.

Now, having said that, facts do deserve to be heard simply because they are, well, facts. And so, without advocating either for or against a female priesthood, here are some pertinent facts on both sides of the debate.

As we saw in the previous section, Junia was an apostle (*Romans 16:7*) and Phebe was a deacon (*Romans 16:1*). If we take the common noun sense of those two offices, then we need not see a priesthood connection. But if we take the proper noun sense of those two offices, which is how Mormons use those words, as priesthood offices, (*Article of Faith 6, Doctrine and Covenants 20*), then Mormons are in a bit of a bind. Either apostle and deacon are priesthood offices or they are not. If so, we have two women who hold priesthood offices. If not, then *Doctrine and Covenants 20* suffers because *apostle* and *deacon* mean something other than priesthood. So, take your pick.

But to get to the heart of the matter, were there ever women priests? There were women prophets to be sure, but did their prophetic callings entitle them to priesthood? I don’t see how. Not one of these lady prophets ever demanded or even requested a priestly duty in the tabernacle or temple. They did not challenge God. Challenging God was dangerous and they knew it. Uzza, for example, learned the hard way about priesthood. He touched the Ark of the Covenant and died (*1 Chronicles 13:10*). King Uzziah also

learned the hard way when he, without authority, performed a priestly function and was stricken with leprosy (**2 Chronicles 26:16-21**). Later, Uzziah's grandson, king Hezekiah, understood that lesson and told the priests, (**2 Chronicles 29:11**) *you alone have been called to stand before God*; meaning, now get on with your jobs.

Priesthood duties are for priests, not for people who want to be priests. If these godly women prophets (better people and closer to God than I will ever be) had been entitled to the priesthood, they certainly would have said so — they had sufficient clout to do as they pleased, but they left the priesthood to the priests, and they were all men.

Why do Christian churches and Mormons in particular not have a female priesthood? The reason is simple: because there exists no such thing in the Bible. Melchizedek, and Aaron, and Jesus Christ were all men. Nowhere is there a female Jewish priest that I know of. And of course this is a political problem today.

In 2008, I was teaching a Gospel Essentials class and thought I had done a good job. Immediately following, a young woman asked me, “Is it true that women can't be priests in your church?” I said, “Yes, that's true.” She left in a huff and never came back. I've thought about her and how I might have better answered her question. If I had a do-over, I would say something like this: “You are asking the wrong question and judging God by your political bent. The question you should be asking is: Is there really a God and what does he demand of us? Then your politics wouldn't matter so much.” That's what I'd say to her today. Might not have persuaded her but might have.

But there are female prophets, female church leaders, and maybe a female apostle.

Which nudges us to a strange conclusion; namely, if women do not have priesthood but do hold leadership offices in church, as Junia and Phoebe did, then we might have to conclude that those offices are not restricted to priesthood holders. Indeed, in the Bible we do see that the priesthood is one thing, and leadership another, and prophecy yet another. And those three roles have nothing to do with each other, certainly not in any absolute sense.

Let's return to the question: Is there any possibility of a female priesthood? My answer is: not likely but let's grasp at some straws.

The word priest, derived from the Latin *pontifex*, means bridge-builder, meaning, of course, bridging people to God by some means or other.

For Jews and Mormons that means *temple* — usually. And that invites me to mention that astute Mormons will recall hearing the word *priestess* in an important place in the temple. I will not be more specific, but I will say that any regular temple attendee who does not recall hearing that word in the temple hasn't been paying attention and needs to be more alert. A few points here:

First: I needn't say the obvious but I will — Priestess means female priest. So there's an important clue that there is a female side of priesthood.

Second: When you hear or read the words king and priest, or queen and priestess, that juxtaposition necessarily infers Melchizedek priesthood, because Melchizedek was both king and priest, political and religious, no separation of church and state. Thus the Book of Hebrews establishes Christ's superiority over the Jewish priesthood (**Hebrews 7:1-3**). So when you hear those words together, priest and king, (or priestess and queen), take note. (**Revelation 1:6**)

Third: If a man cannot perform a valid ordinance without a priesthood ordination (**Article of Faith 5**), how can a woman? And yet, that is exactly what women in the

temple do. Well, they're "set apart." How is that sufficient for a woman but couldn't possibly be for a man?

Enough. I'm already on dangerous ground so I will disengage before I get into further trouble.

Does the Bible offer anything? I've already pointed out that all priests in the Bible are male, and "Sons of Aaron" is decidedly male. But is that God's restriction or just social barriers of the times? Let's toy with this. Here is an interesting verse —

Leviticus 7:6 Every male among the priests shall eat thereof...

If all priests are male, then why the distinction, "every male *among the priests*"? Does that imply that there may be females among the priests? I'm not making a case, I'm just pointing at a possibility.

But Genesis gives us a real sliver of a hint of a possible female priesthood. (I don't know how more evasive I can be than that.) And here it is —

Genesis 41:45 And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zephnathpaaneh; and he gave him to wife Asenath the daughter of Potipherah priest of On. :50 And unto Joseph were born two sons before the years of famine came, which Asenath the daughter of Potipherah priest of On bare unto him.

Here we may have finally found a female priest, Potipherah priest of On. Potipherah is a female name — as opposed to Potiphar, the man who threw Joseph into prison. Maybe Potipherah is Potiphar's daughter or sister *or wife* (horrors) — and she gives her daughter to Joseph, perhaps as a reconciliation, an apology, and she becomes Joseph's mother-in-law.

In any case, Joseph's mother-in-law is a female priest in an Egyptian female priesthood, and Joseph, this crucial patriarch of Israel, does not object.

I should note that some scholars suggest that Potipherah and Potipher (Joseph's former boss) are the same person. And why would this prominent man have a woman's name? One scholar suggests that maybe he was castrated. And why that? Because he had a woman's name. That is circular reasoning, intellectually dishonest, and a real stretch.

It's much better to just accept the obvious, that Potipherah is a woman, related in some way to Potipher, and she is a priest. An Egyptian priest to be sure but a priest none-the-less. If you're concerned that she is an Egyptian priest and not a Jewish priest, note that Melchisedec also was not a Jewish priest, he was king and priest of Salem, he was a Jebusite (*Joshua 15:63*). Whereas Potipherah is at least Joseph's Mother-In-Law which makes her, if not quite Jewish, then quasi-Jewish — she's in the family anyway. And Joseph's sons, Ephreim and Manassah, would no doubt talk about grandma, the priestess.

And then there is Zipporah, the wife of Moses, and this strange story —

Exodus 4:24 ...the LORD met him [Moses] and sought to kill him. :25 Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his [Moses] feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. :26 So he [God] let him [Moses] go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision.

For some reason, God got angry at Moses, angry enough to kill him. Apparently God was angry because Moses did not or would not circumcise his son. What appeased God and saved Moses's life was his wife stepping up and circumcising her own son. Her words, "Thou art a bloody man," is not an accusation but an affirmation: "Now you are a bloody man so God doesn't have to kill you."

But my real point here is that the act of circumcision is a priesthood act, a woman did it, and God accepted it. Therefore, what are we to conclude but that, at this moment anyway, Zipporah was a priestess.

Once again, I am not advocating anything, I am not a feminist, I'm just telling you what the Bible says, throwing it out there for whatever use it may be to anyone.

[4] PRIESTHOOD AND PROPHETS

Here is another tantalizing question for you. Who reports to who? Do prophets report to priests, or do priests report to prophets? In other words, whose in charge?

I've already said that prophets and priests and church leaders and government leaders are not the same thing, not biblically. They are all different roles. Now of course it's nice if your priest or judge or king happens to also be a prophet because then he (or she) is more mindful of God's will and does their job right. But the distinctions prompt this question: Who submits to who? Do prophets submit to priests or priests to prophets? Answer: Everyone submits to prophets, even priests, because the prophets are the origin of God's express will. Let's revisit Huldah.

2 Kings 22:14 Hilkiyah the priest [and others] went unto Huldah the prophetess the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas keeper of the wardrobe :15 And she said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel ...

The priest, Hilkiyah, wanted to know God's will. There was only one way to learn that and so, like anyone else, he went to the resident prophet, Huldah, a woman. That may be disquieting to some, but that's what happened.

Priests have their job to do, to bring people to God by ritual sacrifice. And maybe the role of a priest is a male only job. But each priest should keep in mind that their instructions come from God through a prophet and that prophet might be a woman.

Of course a priest might also be a prophet as was Ezekiel, but that's not a given.

It is no doubt unsettling to some to learn that the prophet may be a woman, like for instance Huldah who prophesied to priests, and Deborah who prophesied to generals, and the four daughters of Philip who spent an evening with Paul, (*Acts 21:9*). It is to the prophets that we all, including priests, submit, because their words are God's words.

[5] GENDER ROLES

When the Jews got seriously busy repairing things like the old gate, Nehemiah gave us a list of the people involved. In that list we find this —

Nehemiah 3:12 And next unto him repaired Shallum the son of Halohesh, the ruler of the half part of Jerusalem, he and his daughters.

I wonder what exactly these girls did. Were they carpenters or masons or what? But certainly they were not restricted to traditional female roles such as cooking.

My point is this: men do what men are inclined to do, and women do what women are inclined to. That's why "roles" exist. But those roles are not iron clad, not codified in law, they're just social habits. And when needs change, in this case a man having only daughters and no sons, there was no law that restricted women to traditional female roles.

Society does not need such laws because men and women drift into such roles by their own inclinations, and everything gets done that needs to get done. It's called "domestic specialization." It's what families do to survive and thrive. But there is no reason or benefit to preventing women from doing "man's" work, or even to debate the issue. Here, the girls are building the wall right along with their dad and nobody objects.

What is your passion? Whatever it is, that is the path you seek, not what others (including feminists) say you should seek. There's nothing noble about being talked into, or pressured into, doing what you don't want to do.

[6] FEMALE AUTHORS OF THE BIBLE

There are two female authors in the Bible that I know of.

Proverbs 31:1 The words of king Lemuel, the prophecy that his mother taught him.

This wonderful chapter, much of which is about virtuous women, is the prophecy of a mother. Her son, king Lemuel, was merely the scribe who wrote it down.

Song of Solomon 2:1 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.

This entire book, an erotic love letter, is written by a woman and likely treasured by king Solomon.

[7] WOMEN AND INHERITANCE AND OTHER RIGHTS

In times past, ancient and modern, women could not inherit. This was true in English law for instance and did not change until the twentieth century. Whatever finally persuaded Parliament to rectify that injustice, the following Bible text should have weighed in on the argument.

Joshua 17:3 But Zelophehad, the son of Hephher...the son of Manasseh, had not sons, but daughters. *:4* And they came near before Eleazar the priest, and before Joshua the son of Nun, and before the princes, saying, the LORD commanded Moses to give us an inheritance among our brethren. Therefore according to the commandment of the LORD he gave them an inheritance among the brethren of their father. *:5* And there fell ten portions to Manasseh, beside the land of Gilead

and Bashan, which were on the other side Jordan :6 Because the daughters of Manasseh had an inheritance among his sons...

This is a foundation text for many women's rights issues, principally, of course, property ownership. Even if we accepted the idea that only men should inherit property (which we do not), that cannot be absolute for the very reason stated in this text: there are *daughters-only* families and it's not fair for a family to lose its property merely because the parents produce no sons.

Also, there is this —

***Job 42:15** ...and their father [Job] gave them [Job's daughters] inheritance among their brethren.*

Job did not need some legal wrangling to give his daughters their fair share, he just did it. I'm glad England finally got it right, but why did it take so long?

Oh, and then there is voting rights. What state first gave women the right to vote? The answer is: Utah! Oh, those dastardly Mormons, whatever will they think of next.

[8] PAUL AND WOMEN

I don't like this text at all, and I think many pastors are embarrassed when it pops up on the sermon calendar. Why do I bring it up? Because it's there. And because we need to make some sense out of it, or at least acknowledge it.

***1 Corinthians 14:34** Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak [not permitted by who?]; but they are commanded [commanded by who?] to be under obedience as also saith the law [where in the law?]. :35 And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.*

The overly harsh tone of this text (women are not even permitted to learn at church) persuades us to believe that none of this is to be taken seriously today, that it was a characteristic of the time.

I think Paul was in a hissy-fit mood. After all the other things he had to deal with in this letter, something must have happened that set him off at women. That he was in a bad mood is suggested by this —

***1 Corinthians 14:37** If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.*

Here Paul pulls rank — “I'm an apostle, so there!” — which he hasn't done until now. This indicates to me that he really was in a hissy-fit mood. He had good reason to be. I'm not accusing him; I'm just trying to understand him. Apostles have bad days too.

1 Corinthians 16:19 The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.

I wonder how Priscilla felt about women being silent in church — when the church was her own house!

1 Corinthians 11:5 But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head...

Just how is this supposed to work? Paul expects women to be silent in church, but he expects them to pray and to prophesy publicly. That is a contradiction. I don't think he proof-read this letter for logical consistency.

And then there is this which Paul wrote when he was in a better mood —

Galatians 3:28 ... there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ.

I prefer to believe that this verse and not the other one (*1 Corinthians 14:34-35*) better states God's attitude towards women.

But now consider this outrageous possibility: Since we no longer take seriously Paul's ban on women speaking in church, could we just as well no longer take seriously the Bible's ban on a female priesthood? — if there is a ban, and maybe there isn't. Just a thought.

I know — we would need a revelation. But that sort of thing has happened, hasn't it?