

The Portrayal of Women in the Bible and Biblical Inspiration

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This article can be found on: <http://newlife.id.au/equality-and-gender-issues/portrayal-of-women-and-biblical-inspiration/>

One of the reasons I trust the unique inspiration of the Bible is because of what it says about women, or, more to the point, what it doesn't say about women. The Bible never says that women as a group are unintelligent, gullible, deceptive, difficult, emotional, sexually wanton, temptresses, evil, or inferior to men. In fact it says a lot of good things about women.

In the Old Testament, many Bible women are described as beautiful, intelligent, courageous, resourceful and enterprising. Bible women functioned as prophets, teachers, advisors, leaders and deliverers.

In the New Testament it says that the Saviour, the Son of God, came into the world through a woman. Amazing! And each of the four gospels records that the first person to see the resurrected Jesus, at the beginning of the New Covenant era, was a woman.

Women are never mentioned in a bad light in the Gospels. Many Gospel women were faithful and devoted to Jesus. Some even travelled with him and supported his ministry with their own money. In the Pauline letters several women are mentioned as being Christian ministers and colleagues of the Apostle Paul.

This positive portrayal of women in the Scriptures is remarkable considering the patriarchal setting of the Bible and its andro-centric writing.

Yes, there are some horrible stories in the Old Testament that involve the unjust and despicable treatment of certain women. The biblical narratives, however, are not part of teaching or Law, and the injustices and atrocities are not condoned. (I do understand that principles can be drawn from Bible narratives, however.)

In contrast to the Bible's portrayal of women, as soon as you step outside of the canon of Scripture you read the most terrible generalisations about women. Some of these terrible things are even taught by Jewish and Christian writers and philosophers.

Ben Sirach, a Jew writing in 2BC, wrote in his Apocryphal work *Ecclesiasticus* that a good wife is a silent wife and that all women have a disposition of sexual wantonness ([Sirach 25:13-25](#); [26:13-16](#); [42:9-11](#), [12-14](#)). "He maintained that women in general constitute a threat to the dignity and well-being of men and that the most dangerous threat comes from a man's own daughter." ("Women in Second Temple Judaism" in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*.)

An unknown Jewish writer, also writing in 2BC, states that "Women are evil ... treacherous ... lustful ..." ([Testament of Reuben 2:13-16](#))

The Jewish philosopher Philo, writing in the 1AD, "...accepted the Aristotelian judgment that the female is, in and of herself, inferior to the male. He used this to explain the biblical narratives allegorically. The women of the Bible [he thought] represent inferior aspects of a person's psyche, namely the senses, while the male figures represent the superior mind. The creation of woman, for example, is explained as a corruption of the mind by the senses (Opificio Mundi 59)." ("Women in Second Temple Judaism" in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*.)

Tertullian, an early Christian theologian writing in 2-3AD, called women “the Devil’s gateway”. He had the opinion that all women are guilty of the Fall, and that women are especially guilty of Jesus’ death. ([On the Apparel of Women, chapter 1.](#))

There are numerous examples of overt and destructive misogynistic teaching by non-biblical Jewish and [Christian writers](#).

The biblical writings are andro-centric because they were written by men in the patriarchal culture of the Ancient Near East. And we see in the Bible that women, in general, did not have the same social freedoms as men because of this pervasive patriarchal culture. Patriarchy is not God’s ideal, yet he used people within that culture and setting to tell his story. The Bible, however, was also inspired by the Holy Spirit and so there is none of the harsh and crushing misogynist generalisations that are prevalent in non-biblical (or extra-biblical) writings.

Let me reiterate: The Bible never says that women are unintelligent, gullible, deceptive, difficult, emotional, sexually wanton, temptresses, evil, or inferior to men.

The main message of gender in the Bible is that women and men are equal and compatible, and both have been made in the image of God. Women are in no way inferior, less competent or less valuable than men. This message reveals the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This message of genuine equality and mutuality between men and women is the message that the Church should be sharing and promoting among its people and in the world. This is the message that I am sharing.

Endnotes

I am happy to discuss the few Bible verses that appear misogynistic and unjust in the comments section below. Other places to discuss Bible women are on my [Every Old Testament Woman](#) facebook page, on my [newlife.id.au](#) facebook page, or on the [Equality Central Forum](#).

Also, if you have a misogynistic quote from a Jewish or early Christian author please let me know. [Here](#) are some from Church Fathers and Christian Theologians.

Post Script 6.5.13: Wendy Alsup has done a good job of looking at the context of a few of the more unpleasant Old Testament passages concerning women [here](#).