

EXCERPT

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Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women *Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts*

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"Those who advocate for full equality between men and women in the home and the church are often accused of 'playing loose with Scripture.' Peppiatt debunks this myth by demonstrating how thoughtful, thorough engagement with the biblical text supports full mutuality. And this is nothing but good news for women! The introduction alone is worth the price of the book."

Gail Wallace, cofounder of The Junia Project, associate pastor, Foothill Free Methodist Church

The "masculine feel" of Christianity?

At one of our residential teaching weeks at my college, a female faculty member invited students to the front to represent different characters in the Bible. They got to choose the character they wished to represent. She then put them in the order they appear in the Bible, lined up in front of us, making the point that you and I are at the end of the chronological line. We are incorporated into the grand narrative of the Bible that is the story of God's people. It was a great illustration, and I appreciated it for what it was—a point about how we all have joined a long story reaching back over hundreds and even thousands of years.

However, something else struck me as the students went up one by one saying who they had chosen to be. What left an impression on me was the number of women who went up to the front saying that they were representing a man: Moses, David, Daniel, Peter, and so on. There were men at the front also representing men, and there were women representing women: Deborah, Esther, Elizabeth, Mary, and so on. I really enjoyed the fact that so many of our female students took part in the exercise. (It was about half men, half women even though more male characters were represented.) I also noticed the ease with which the women adopted the male persona. This sparked two further thoughts.

First, it is a normal process for female readers of the Bible to identify with the male characters in the Scriptures. We listen to their stories; we are privy to their relationship and conversations with God, their struggles, and their triumphs. The male characters speak to us, and by and large we don't exclude ourselves from the narrative. Second, men don't seem to identify with the women in the same way. This fun exercise at our residential illustrated to me how differently men and women relate to the stories in the Bible and probably always have done. The truth is that women have very little choice but to relate to both an androcentric and patricentric faith. Androcentrism and patricentrism are in the fabric of the Christian faith.

I wish to focus on two questions in these first two chapters. The first is, What is the significance of the maleness of Jesus to what we know of the nature of God? The second is, What is the significance of the maleness of Jesus to our understanding of the salvation story? What I hope to demonstrate is that it is important to distinguish between these two questions because they have different answers, and the way that we answer those questions will, in turn, have an impact on our understanding of how women relate to God.

It appears, as far as we know, that the Bible was written by men, and throughout the whole course of Christian history the majority of Bible readers have also been men. This means, therefore, that the majority of the interpreters of the Bible have largely been men—at least the ones who have written down their interpretations and passed them on to subsequent generations. Our sacred texts have been written, disseminated, taught, and interpreted by men.

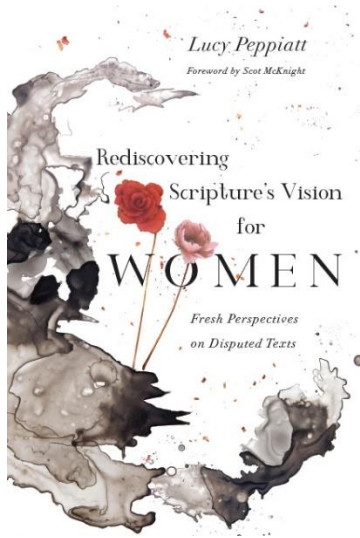
In the Old Testament we have male priests and the twelve tribes of Israel who were given their identity from the twelve sons of Jacob. In addition to this, we have a male Savior who chose twelve male disciples to found the faith and to whom he passed on the role of establishing the church. We address God as Father, and even the Holy Spirit is normally referred



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to as "he." In the living expressions of the faith, we encounter androcentrism and patricentrism everywhere. The Catholic and the Orthodox Churches still have a male-only priesthood, and Catholic priests are referred to as father. Certain Protestant denominations exclude women both from pastoring and from teaching or preaching altogether. Others allow women to lead if a man is placed over her or permit women to teach only women and children. In many churches of the world, a woman would never be seen at the front.

How women deal with this, approach it, and appropriate it (or not), varies from one person to another. I think it is true to say that some do not particularly care. Others continue to view this as somehow right and proper. Still others have rejected the Christian faith because of it, and this is true of some men as well. Many women and men are somewhere in between these two polar opposites. They notice and they care, but instead of seeing it in unrelentingly negative terms, they make an effort to highlight and forefront the role of women in the faith, whether from the Bible or from church history, thus encouraging women to believe that their presence in the story is more prominent than might first be supposed. It is interesting that despite the androcentrism and patricentrism of the Christian faith (and most religions for that matter), it is generally true that women are more religious than men, and worldwide there are more Christian women than Christian men. This appears also to have been true of the early church, where it was known that Christianity appealed more to women, slaves, and children. There must be multiple reasons for this, but, in my view and my experience, one of the reasons for the deep attraction and appeal of Christianity to women is rooted in a profound instinct that we are not really excluded after all, despite what outward circumstances tell us.

This prominence of male figures and masculine imagery and language in the Scriptures and the church was once famously described by John Piper as lending a "masculine feel" to the Christian faith. In some ways it is hard to dispute this. What is in question, however, is whether this is a reflection of a God-ordained order or whether there is another message altogether woven into this supposedly obvious message. Are the prominence of the androcentric and patricentric narratives in the Bible an unequivocal endorsement of patriarchal structures in the church, the home, and society, or are there other narratives within the texts that would lead us to conclude that the Bible subverts these patriarchal structures, offering alternative ways of relating for men and women?

—Taken from chapter one, "An Androcentric Story? Men Everywhere!"



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