

Chapter 6

Eve, a Priest in Eden?

P. Gerard Damsteegt



Chapter 2 of *Women in Ministry* tries to explain why there are no women priests in Israel. Its author, an Old Testament scholar, maintains that the absence of female priests in ancient Israel cannot be used as an argument against women's ordination.¹

The author states that he approaches the Bible through "exegetical research." This, he explains, means that he "will not move from *a priori* definitions or from theological positions" but will seek an answer to his question "by listening to the biblical word in regard to its historical and theological contexts as it describes and signifies the institution of priesthood."² In other words, he tries to be as objective as possible.

He gives two reasons for the absence of women priests in Israel: First, a reaction against the ancient Near Eastern culture where priestesses were often associated with sacred prostitution; second, the nature of priestly work in sacrificing animals, thus associating the priests with death and sin. Such priestly labor, he explains, was incompatible with the physiological nature of the woman, traditionally connected with "life and messianic pregnancy."³

The author asserts that "had it not been for these two factors . . . women might well have been priests in Israel."⁴ He adds that "this assumption is further supported by the Bible—implicitly in the messianic view of the priest as transcending the contingencies of birth (gender, class, race) and explicitly in the

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recognition of women in the priesthood both in the Garden of Eden and in the redeemed community [in heaven].”⁵

For evidence of a woman’s call to priesthood in Eden, he refers to Genesis 3:21: “The Lord God made tunics of skin, and clothed them.” The evidence, he suggests, is two-fold. First there is the act of clothing Adam and Eve: “The rare occasions when God dressed humans in the Old Testament always concerned the dressing of priests.” He says that the verb form describing the act of dressing is a “very technical term normally used for the dressing of priests.”⁶ The second evidence he finds in the word *tunic*: “The word for tunic is the same that designates the priestly garment.” This means, he says, that “Adam and Eve were, indeed, dressed as priests.”⁷

From this study he concludes that the “biblical identification of woman as priest in Eden and the redeemed community complements biblical approval of women’s anointing as prophet and judge. In this context, and in reflection upon ordination to pastoral ministry, there is no case for women’s exclusion.”⁸

Can Pagan Customs Be Used to Explain Bible Worship Practices?

The author’s suggestion that temple prostitution by pagan priestesses was one reason why there were no women priests in the Old Testament is not derived from the Bible. He bases his conclusions on certain scholars’ interpretations of the customs and practices of pagan cultures. This method of explaining Bible worship practices by pagan customs is commonly used by non-Adventist higher critics. Adventists, however, traditionally have allowed the Bible itself establish the reasons for its worship practices. I would not call the author a higher critic, but his approach to Scripture in this instance reveals an element of the higher-critical method.

Mrs. White strongly warned believers against the use of higher criticism because it destroys faith in Scripture, undermines it as a divine revelation, and takes away its uplifting power. She wrote, “The work of ‘higher criticism’ in dissecting, conjecturing, reconstructing, is destroying faith in the Bible as a divine revelation; it is robbing God’s word of power to control, uplift, and inspire human lives.”⁹ She saw this method of interpreting the Bible as Satan’s tool, stating that “today by the pleasing sentiments of higher criticism . . . the enemy of righteousness is seeking to lead souls into forbidden paths.”¹⁰ Its influence in destroying faith in the Bible, she said, was similar to the destructive effects the rabbinical traditions had on the Scriptures in Christ’s day.¹¹

Scholarly opinion is divided as to the reasons for the absence of women priests in Israel. Conclusions on this subject depend on the methods scholars use. Commentators who base their conclusions only on the Bible fail to see temple prostitution as a reason for the absence of female priests. Our author, however, has allowed non-biblical practices to determine his interpretations.

When we confine ourselves to the Bible we find another reason for the absence of female priests in Israel. It becomes clear that after sin, God’s plan

stipulated that priests were to be specific males. By contrast, pagan nations showed no interest in following in God's order.

Creative Interpretation and Imagination

The argument that Eve was a priest in Eden is indeed creative, but it is not based on the Bible. Does Scripture support the claim that Genesis 3:21 uses a "technical term" for the act of clothing a priest? When one takes a Hebrew concordance and looks up references to the verb for clothing or dressing a person (*labash* in the Hiphil form, *yalbish*), it becomes clear that there is nothing special or technical about the verbal form "clothed" in Genesis 3:21 that restricts it exclusively to the priesthood, even when God is the one doing the act of clothing. Job 10:11 (RSV) says, "Thou didst *clothe* me with skin and flesh," referring to God's involvement in Job's birth, not to any divine appointment to priesthood. Later in the book, God asks Job, "Do you give the horse his might? Do you *clothe* his neck with strength?" (Job 39:19, RSV), implying, figuratively of course, that God does this for the horse. In Isaiah 22:21, God says that He will *clothe* Eliakim with the robe of Shebna, the steward of Hezekiah's house—definitely not a priestly dressing (see other non-priestly uses in Isa 50:3 and 61:10). And the same form is used in Proverbs 23:21 (RSV): "For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will *clothe* a man with rags." This verb form is commonly used for various acts of clothing.¹²

The claim that God dressed both Adam and Eve in priestly garments is also not supported by the Scriptures. The Hebrew word for "tunic" or "coat" in Genesis 3:21 (*k'tonet*) is indeed "the same that designates the priestly garment," but it is not at all limited to priestly clothing. A concordance will quickly show that the very same word is used to describe Joseph's coat, Tamar's garment, Hushai's coat, and the Shulamite's coat, none of which were priestly (Gen 37:3, 23, 31-33; 2 Sam 13:18, 19; 15:32; Song of Songs 5:3).¹³ Thus the author's argument comes from an incorrect interpretation of the text and has no biblical basis.

The clothing God gave was not to confirm Adam and Eve as priests but expressed His special care for the couple in the light of the dramatic changes that sin brought to creation. A garment of fig leaves simply would not do. They needed something much more durable and protective against climate changes and to cover their nakedness. Ellen White vividly depicted the changed conditions the couple had to face. "In humility and unutterable sadness they bade farewell to their beautiful home and went forth to dwell upon the earth, where rested the curse of sin. The atmosphere, once so mild and uniform in temperature, was now subject to marked changes, and the Lord mercifully provided them with a garment of skins as a protection from the extremes of heat and cold."¹⁴

To further support his view of Eve as a priest, the author assumes that the animal skins with which God clothed Adam and Eve were taken from the animal that was used for "the first sacrifice in history," "the sin offering."¹⁵ This assumption also is not supported by the Bible. Fortunately, inspiration has

given us a clearer insight into the circumstances of the first sacrifice in full harmony with Scripture.

The sequence in Genesis 3 shows that first the couple was clothed by God, and then they were driven out of Eden. Ellen G. White tells us that at the gates, outside of Eden, Adam was to come to worship God. It was not God but Adam who killed the first sacrificial animal for a sin offering. It was then that Adam, and not Eve, began his role as priest of the family, taking the life of the animal which was offered for the first sin of the first family.¹⁶

In describing the first sin offering after the expulsion from Eden, Ellen White wrote, "When Adam, according to God's special directions, made an offering for sin, it was to him a most painful ceremony. His hand must be raised to take life, which God alone could give, and make an offering for sin. It was the first time he had witnessed death. As he looked upon the bleeding victim, writhing in the agonies of death, he was to look forward by faith to the Son of God, whom the victim prefigured, who was to die man's sacrifice."¹⁷ There is not the slightest biblical support for the author's conclusion that "by bestowing on Adam and Eve the skin of the sin offering, a gift strictly reserved to priests, the Genesis story implicitly recognizes Eve as priest alongside Adam."¹⁸

A close reading of the Scriptures reveals why there has always been a male priesthood among God's people. The reason is to be found in the Old Testament practice of the consecration of the first-born male (Ex 13:2, 12). This first-born male was a type of God's gift of His first-born Son as Savior, Mediator and Priest to humanity. Only a male priesthood could function in this typical manner because Jesus was a male.

Ellen White explained: "The dedication of the first-born had its origin in the earliest times. God had promised to give the First-born of heaven to save the sinner. This gift was to be acknowledged in every household by the consecration of the first-born son. He was to be devoted to the priesthood, as a representative of Christ among men."¹⁹

Conclusion

The first weakness of the chapter we are considering is that the author does not arrive at his conclusions through the "Bible and the Bible only," using the Bible to interpret itself. The suggestion that female prostitute priestesses in pagan cultures were a reason why Israel had no female priests is not based on Scripture but on non-biblical sources. This interpretation is not in harmony with inspiration.

On the contrary, the pagan female priestesses were a perversion of God's original plan for worship. First, God gave the true pattern through a male priesthood which was to be a type of God's first-born. It was Satan who introduced perversions among the nations to distort God's plan for humanity.

The chapter's second weakness is that it does not follow the principle which *Women in Ministry* itself advocates: to take into account the whole Bible. Instead, the

chapter makes a selective use of texts, citing only those which the author claims support his thesis. He should have consulted the whole Bible before concluding that the Bible supports women's ordination. The author feels a burden to assist the church by looking at the Bible from an "ecclesiological perspective,"²⁰ yet he takes no note of texts that are intimately connected with church leadership such as those dealing with the impact of sin on the relationship between male and female (Gen 3:16), the significance of Adam as the first-born and Eve as the first transgressor (1 Tim 2:12-14), and the qualifications for elders and ministers in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. These passages strongly contradict the author's conclusions. Neglecting to compare Scripture with Scripture in the context of the whole Bible undermines the soundness of the chapter's conclusions. Though not justifying the author's methods, one reason for this neglect could be his acceptance of *Women in Ministry's* incorrect assumption that "church organization is not spelled out in the Bible."²¹

His final conclusion that the Bible does not exclude women from ordination as ministers does not have the support of the Scriptures. First, he has not demonstrated that the Bible identified Eve as priest in Eden. Second, he has not produced any evidence that women were *anointed* as prophet and judge. Some—but not all—men who served in those capacities were anointed to their office, but the Bible provides no indication that an anointing took place in appointing women to these positions. It seems that God called these women to various positions without the process of anointing. Furthermore, no woman in the Bible was ever called to the public office as priest of God.

In summary, this chapter falls well short of establishing a biblical basis for women's ordination. Although the author stresses that he approached the Bible from an exegetical perspective, the above facts show that his conclusions are not supported by the Bible. Instead, his research reveals an absence of the use of the time-honored practice among the Protestant Reformers and Adventist pioneers to build conclusions on the Bible and the Bible only regarding biblical teachings and practices.

Endnotes

[Except as noted, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New King James Version.]

1. Jacques B. Doukhan, "Women Priests in Israel: A Case for Their Absence," *Women in Ministry*, pp. 29-43.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 39.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
9. Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 227.
10. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 474.

11. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 142.
12. See, for instance, George V. Wigram, *The Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance of the Old Testament . . .*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1970), p. 638.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 623.
14. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 61.
15. Doukhan, *Women in Ministry*, pp. 36, 37.
16. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 61, 62, 68. See also Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption*, p. 50.
17. *The Story of Redemption*, p. 50.
18. Doukhan, *Women in Ministry*, p. 37.
19. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 51.
20. Doukhan, *Women in Ministry*, p. 29.
21. Nancy Vyhmeister, "Prologue," *Women in Ministry*, p. 3.