

# THOSE WHO REVISE AND THOSE WHO REVOLT

## Modern feminism, religious pluralism, and Scripture

“Every woman,” writes feminist Naomi Goldenberg, “working to improve her own position in society or that of women in general is bringing about the end of God. All feminists are making the world less and less like the one described in the Bible and are thus helping to lessen the influence of Christ and Yahweh on humanity . . . .”

“Contemporary feminist critics of religion can be placed on a spectrum ranging from those who revise to those who revolt.”<sup>1</sup>

Goldenberg’s own words place her in the “revolt” category:

“Everything I knew about Judaism and Christianity involved accepting God as the ultimate in male authority figures. A society that accepted large numbers of women as religious leaders would be too different from the biblical world to find the book relevant, let alone look to it for inspiration.

“‘God is going to change,’ I thought. ‘We women are going to bring an end to God. As we take posi-

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tions in government, in medicine, in law, in business, in the arts and finally, in religion, *we will be the end of Him. We will change the world so much that He won't fit in anymore.*”<sup>2</sup>

Feminist writing is often forceful, bitter, and uncompromising. These women, however, are not issuing impulsive, ungrounded complaints. They regularly couple their arguments with accounts of offensive personal experiences. They call attention to the pain women regularly experience. Though they often disagree in their solutions, they are correct. Serious problems exist that need to be addressed.

Feminists claim that Scripture has caused this degradation of women. They quote the early Church Fathers’ graphic descriptions of the “inferior sex”: “You are the devil’s gateway; you are the unsealer of that [forbidden] tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him who the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man [writing to Christian women concerning their dress]” (Tertullian, A.D. 160-225).

However, the prime origin of all these accumulated abuses, they argue, occurred even before the formation of the canon with an alleged pivot away from an ancient matriarchal society and its worship of the Mother Goddess. They cite seeming

evidence for ancient goddess worship, arguing that such hints in the Old Testament occur in the denunciations of Canaanite worship.

They also cite examples from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, along with more minor kingdoms where the Primal Matrix supposedly ruled supreme. A major evidence for them is the thousands of female goddess figurines and carvings discovered by archaeologists, coupled with the paucity of male idols.

One corollary of this alleged primal Old Testament shift to “male god-ism” and patriarchy, feminists maintain, is the conspicuous male bias in all subsequent historical documents. This occurs, they say, not only in Christian history—where they point out the rarity of female saints as compared to the vast representation of men—but also in national historical records, where women rarely have been included. Such male bias, they insist, has also affected literary expression.

In response, feminists seek to re-write history—calling it HERstory. Feminist writer Merlin Stone refers to an ancient Sumerian myth in which the female, like Eve, makes wrong choices, but is instead deified. By contrast, Stone notes, the Eve of biblical patriarchy has been “damned by all subsequent generations for her deed.”

From the biblical narrative of

Hosea, they now celebrate Gomer's desertion of her husband and blatant prostitution. Queen Jezebel, feminists suggest, represents flourishing female pagan worship in Israel.

Along with this, feminists adjust the spelling of words. For example, *theology* becomes "*thealogy*" to avoid the masculine gender of *theos*.

Some feminists now endorse witchcraft, which they argue is one of the many lost "arts" of ancient goddess religion, a treasured remnant that received its "bad reputation" only through persistent male suppression. They claim that witchcraft was forced into hiding because of male determination to destroy any remnants of female power. But now, they maintain, Wicca is finally being liberated from male destruction.

Connected closely with this, feminists sometimes affirm the symbol of witchcraft—the snake or serpent: "It is only from the historical perspective that the story of Eve taking counsel from a serpent makes any sense. The fact that the serpent, an ancient prophetic or oracular symbol of the Goddess, advises Eve, the prototypical woman, to disobey a male god's commands is surely not just an accident. Nor is it an accident that Eve in fact follows the advice of the serpent; that, in disregard of Jehovah's commands, she eats from the sacred tree of knowledge. Like

the tree of life, the tree of knowledge was also a symbol associated with the Goddess in earlier mythology. Moreover, under the old mythical and social reality . . . a woman as priestess was the vehicle for divine wisdom and revelation."<sup>4</sup>

Modern feminists often insist that the Christian patriarchy-stained Scripture forces all women into submission to all men, reminding us how even the Church Fathers interpreted the canon. Interestingly, radical feminists don't seem to question this early church exegesis. With their acceptance of the Church Fathers' position on women (by which they unwittingly reflect early Church Fathers' male interpretation read into Scripture long ago), feminist authors snarl that Scripture as a whole degrades women and that centuries of male dominance have clouded modern minds from realizing this.

#### Questioning Feminist Reconstruction

*Historical Selectivity.* Although their historical analysis is extensive, too often feminist writers exhibit great selectivity in their research. Major theories are propounded without substantiation. It is argued, for example, that the whole basis for biblical "male god-ism" is to prop up the male ego, citing Mother Goddess history as support for their argument: "When the patriarchal,

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prophetic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) met the Middle Eastern goddess practices, powerful interests came into conflict. Masculine self-control, social authority, and theological construction (a masculine God) were all bound to see the Goddess temple worship as extremely threatening. Since the patriarchal religions won the battle, their scriptural and cultural authorities became 'orthodoxy,' and the female-oriented fertility religion became foul deviance."<sup>5</sup>

In support of what feminists portray as primeval Mother Goddess worship, many seek to authenticate an ancient matriarchal culture of supposed peace and tranquility. In so doing, they somehow ignore extensive evidence of weapons found in tombs of even the earliest archaeological sites. They exclude the many ancient inscriptions also discovered by archaeologists that describe grotesque wars and butchery carried out by female gods. Instead, feminists

confidently describe the ancient matriarchal society as a now-lost utopia, or "Paradise."

Critics of feminist re-interpretation of history decry this selectivity. Joan Townsend, anthropologist and archaeologist, insists that the Goddess movement is flawed by its "arm chair" archaeology and survey of ancient history: "The existence of a 'universal' or Mediterranean/European-wide Goddess religion, which is claimed to have existed from the Upper Paleolithic through the neolithic and beyond, cannot be validated. The supposition that there existed a peaceful matrilineal/matrilocal kinship organization and/or matriarchy as a political organization in these areas during that period is also unfounded. . . . Sadly, it is this kind of pseudo-history that many women listen to, partly because it is so readily available, and because it appeals to them by giving the illusion of an effective means of acquiring social and political power

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in contemporary society.”<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, feminism exhibits a strong commitment to evolution. Though evolutionary theory claims a fundamental progress along its developing continuum, feminist authors contend that humanity’s shift from goddess worship to male god-ism about 6,000 years ago caused a disaster of great magnitude.

**Misuse of Scripture.** The primary expressions of modern feminism are either condemned in the Bible or are in direct antithesis with its implicit principles, such as the following:

1. *Witchcraft.* Many feminists boldly assert that witches are not evil sorcerers, but rather spiritual women with a special knowledge of healing. “They were burned as witches [in the Middle Ages] because they were women and because they possessed a power to heal that was unacceptable to the male establishment.”<sup>7</sup>

2. *Lesbianism.* This sexual orientation is frequently urged as the ulti-

mate expression of freedom from male dominance. “Women’s liberation and homosexual liberation,” declares prominent feminist Kate Millet, “are both struggling towards a common goal: a society free from defining and categorizing people by virtue of gender and/or sexual preference. ‘Lesbian’ is a label used as a psychic weapon to keep women locked into their male-defined ‘feminine role.’ The essence of that role is that a woman is defined in terms of her relationship to men.”<sup>8</sup>

3. *Dissolved family relationships.* Women are urged to liberate themselves from Western patriarchal shackles by freeing themselves from husbands and children to pursue authentic personal fulfillment.

4. *Abortion.* This practice is championed as another essential freedom from bodily restraints and especially male-dominated sexuality.

**Salvation in Self.** “Starhawk, a feminist priestess . . . maintained that the importance of the goddess

symbol for woman could not be overstressed. . . . ‘The image of the Goddess inspires women to see ourselves as divine, our bodies as sacred, the changing phases of our lives as holy . . . God is in all, and God exists within the feminine psyche. Self is God. . . .’ Z. Budapest, founder of the Susan B. Anthony Coven, stated this precept quite succinctly when she observed: ‘There was opposition within the feminist movement toward the spiritual movement. Those who didn’t share the experiences wondered why intelligent women would want to “worship the Goddess.” They missed the crucial meaning: *It is self-worship.*’”<sup>9</sup>

The accumulation of these anti-biblical positions should disturb orthodox Christianity. Though not all feminists espouse all these positions, they are some of the most prominent attitudes in radical feminist literature. The underlying attitude is a bitter opposition to Scripture and biblical patriarchy.

#### **A More Accurate View of Womanhood in Scripture**

Recently, another group of women has emerged who take the canon authoritatively and who cite many overlooked or ignored biblical details regarding women. One valuable result has been a better comprehension of biblical patriarchy. And a number of male scholars have begun to provide a much-needed correc-

tive to previous error.

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No history book is exhaustive. Each historical document includes details deemed by that historian as the most important. Scripture, though including much historical material spanning multiple centuries, is also not exhaustive. Great time voids exist.

Christians have long believed that the development of the canon was superintended by God to include details that are decisive in salvation history from the divine perspective. Furthermore, the issue of gender roles is not a primary concern addressed in Scripture. Rather, as the biblical writers focus the reader on salvation history, these peripheral (to the writers) issues are brushed up against tangentially—and it is these that later readers must be aware of.

The historical panorama, thus, is lengthy yet basically narrow in scope. The reader is informed of

patriarchs and matriarchs, kings and queens, prophets and prophetesses, couched between significant historical voids regarding other female and male personages throughout the many centuries connected by Scripture. In this light, it is unwarranted to insist that males have *always* dominated women. Furthermore, recent probing into the biblical text itself also suggests that this is not the case.

This reasoning appears increasingly valid as overlooked details in biblical narratives are re-examined.

*Sarah.* Abraham's life of faith has been extensively (and rightly) studied and admired. His wife, Sarah, though rarely acknowledged on a par with her husband, is equally remarkable. Consider that: "As Sarah and Abram are approaching Egypt [during the famine], he does not order her to comply with his planned deception. Rather, Abraham must ask her to say that she is his sister. He cohabits with Hagar because Sarah wants him to; and when she decides that Ishmael is a threat to her own son's inheritance, Sarah succeeds in expelling both mother and child. Indeed, God defends her demand; and this is not the only time that the Lord acts on Sarah's behalf. In Pharaoh's court, and within the household of Abimelech, God is concerned that Sarah be protected and returned to her husband."<sup>10</sup>

The Genesis record depicts Sarah as being as crucial to the covenant as Abraham himself. God maintains that *Sarah's* offspring will fulfill the covenant promise—even when Abraham argues that he already has a son, Ishmael: "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant" (Gen. 17:18, 19, NKJV).

"The instruction given to Abraham touching the sacredness of the marriage relation was to be a lesson for all ages. It declares that the rights and happiness of this relation are to be carefully guarded, even at a great sacrifice. Sarah was the only true wife of Abraham. Her rights as wife and mother no other person was entitled to share. She revered her husband, and in this she is presented in the New Testament as a worthy example. But she was unwilling that Abraham's affections should be given to another, and the Lord did not reprove her for requiring the banishment of her rival" (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 147).

"In particular, women have traditionally been depicted as primitive and childish in their aspirations and generally lacking in vision. Fresh study of our female forebears, however, invalidates this view and shows us that the matriarchs were learned, wise women who were highly devel-

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oped spiritually."<sup>11</sup>

Sarah's life surely demonstrates this:

1. When Abraham pleads with her to misrepresent their marital relationship (as they travel to Egypt), he does not approach the suggestion from a position of absolute authority. Sarah appears to have some say in the situation.

2. When Abraham offers hospitality, the patriarch shares in the domestic preparations along with his wife (Gen. 18:6–8).

3. After Sarah's death, little is recorded about Abraham. Genesis 24 deals with the marriage of Isaac, and chapter 25 records Abraham's marriage to Keturah and their offspring in his remaining 48 years. The remaining verses in the Abraham narratives deal briefly with the distribution of his wealth. The record of Sarah's funeral, however, involves an entire chapter in the Book of Genesis.

*Rebekah.* We know more about Rebekah than Isaac, the patriarch!

The chapter on Rebekah is the longest in the Book of Genesis, and this matriarch exhibits the same force of character as Sarah.

When Abraham commissions Eleazar to find a wife for Isaac, he makes a significant allusion to women's status during the patriarchal era: "If the woman is unwilling to come back with you, then you will be released from this oath of mine" (Gen. 24:8, NIV). Abraham assumes the woman will have the final say in the matter. And indeed, ultimately it is Rebekah herself who chooses to go with Eleazar. And her determination to travel with Eleazar is spoken directly by her in the dialogue and not merely reported by the narrator (vs. 58).

Rebekah herself arranges for the hospitality of Eleazar when he arrives. Her father says hardly a word throughout. When Eleazar asks for a place in her father's house, Rebekah offers welcome in her mother's house (vs. 25).

Key terms form an interesting

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correspondence between the narratives of Rebekah and of Abraham. They both leave behind "their country," "their kindred," and their "father's house." Both will be "blessed" and "become great." "With this blessing the narrator quietly moves Rebekah into the cycle of God's promises to the patriarchs."<sup>12</sup>

After Rebekah marries Isaac and becomes pregnant, in apparent misery she is anxious enough "to inquire of the Lord" (25:22, NKJV), and she does this herself. "Only the great prophets like Moses and Elisha and the greatest kings of Israel inquire of the Lord. . . . Rebekah inquires and, as a result, receives the oracle from Yahweh which destines her younger son to rule the older."<sup>13</sup>

Note the formula used to announce Rebekah's delivery: "When her days were fulfilled for her to give birth" (vs. 24, NKJV). This formula is used of only three biblical women: Elizabeth and Mary in the New Testament and Rebekah of the Old Testament.

Later, when her son Esau marries two Hittite women, the text informs us that this was "a grief of mind unto Isaac *and to Rebekah*" (26:35, KJV, italics supplied). Mention of Rebekah's distress suggests that she was just as concerned about the covenant promise as was Isaac.

The Genesis matriarchs were not passive "wallflowers"! It would be unfair to the biblical portraits of these women to argue that within patriarchy, women bowed in submission to all men. Rather, though respectful and devoted to their husbands, they were intelligent, willful, and directive.<sup>14</sup>

**Jesus and Women.** No scriptural evidence suggests that the Messiah ever treated women as inferior to men or urged all women to submit to all men. At this time, though the status of women in Judaism is very complex, the position of the female is generally conceded to have been restricted, at least according to rabbinical rules. Women did not count in determining a *minyan* in worship

(the number needed to organize public Jewish worship, according to the Mishnah). They could not bear witness. Jesus, however, repeatedly rejected these customs.

We must bear in mind, of course, that the Mishnah was not written down in Jesus' day, and many of its remarks against women are almost certainly from after that period. Further, even if these rules were in place in them, this does not mean that all or even many Jews followed them. Mary the mother of Jesus certainly knew the Bible, as she alludes to it in a sophisticated way in her prophetic song. Josephus estimates that there were only about 6,000 Pharisees, and we actually know of the Sadducees only from the Gospels and the writings of Pharisees. So we should not assume that all women in Israel were necessarily treated the same way. Pharisees and rabbis thought they should be treated.

Jesus also refused to limit a woman's horizon to domestic responsibilities. When a woman once called to Jesus from a crowd, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!" Jesus sought to widen this feminine perspective by responding, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:27, 28, RSV). Yet Christ never belittled the role of mother. Indeed, He likened Himself to a mother hen seeking to gather her baby chicks

under her wings (Matt. 23:37).

Some feminists have not been blind to all this and have openly appreciated Christ's attitude toward women. Though much feminist material boils with rage against Scripture, it is arresting to notice how many feminists, though vehement against the canon, refrain from denouncing the Messiah. Often, in fact, they uphold Him as an example of a "revolutionary man" (even though He is male—and God).

**Women in the Epistles of Paul.** Of all the New Testament men, Paul receives the greatest scorn from feminists, especially for his supposedly chauvinistic statements in 1 Timothy. Because of what they consider as Paul's sexist language, feminists often jettison all of Paul's teachings and many times the entire New Testament.

Radical feminists, however, fail to compare Paul's counsel to Timothy, who was ministering in Ephesus, with numerous other Pauline passages portraying Paul's attitudes and actions toward women elsewhere, along with his strong insistence that his teachings were normative, and that his example be followed. Paul as apostle cannot be contradicting himself. He will not be saying one thing in Ephesus and acting contrary elsewhere, though this is often the accusation suggested by feminists.

"The Bible points to God as its author; yet it was written by human

hands . . . Different forms of expression are employed by different writers; often the same truth is more strikingly presented by one than by another. And as several writers present a subject under varied aspects and relations, there may appear, to the superficial, careless, or prejudiced reader, to be discrepancy or contradiction, where the thoughtful, reverent student, with clearer insight, discerns the underlying harmony" (*The Great Controversy*, pp. v, vi).

Consider Paul's acknowledgment of women in Corinth publicly praying and prophesying during the service of worship. Moreover, a spate of studies on the Philippian church suggest that "Philippi is perhaps the classic NT case study on the roles of women in the founding and developing of a local congregation."<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, in Romans 16, Paul sends greetings to 26 people in the church at Rome: "Reflecting on the names and circumstances of the people Paul greets, . . . the most interesting and instructive aspect of church diversity in Rome is that of gender. Nine out of the twenty-six persons greeted are women: . . . Paul evidently thinks highly of them all. He singles out four (Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis) as having 'worked hard.' The verb *kopiaō* implies strong exertion, is used of all four of them, and is not applied to anybody else on the list. . . . the

prominent place occupied by women in Paul's entourage shows that he was not at all the male chauvinist of popular fantasy."<sup>16</sup>

Paul's positive inclusion of women is also implicit throughout his writings. He entreats the believers in Rome, for example, to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (12:1, NIV). Paul uses five more-or-less technical terms. He represents followers of God as *a priestly people*, who, in responsive gratitude for God's mercy offer or present their bodies as living sacrifices. These are described as both *holy* and *pleasing to God*, which seem to be the moral equivalents to being physically unblemished or without defect, and a *fragrant aroma* [cf. Lev. 1:3, 9].<sup>17</sup> This passage echoes Old Testament sacrificial language and allows no differentiation of men and women. All the believers are functioning in this New Testament "priestly" role.

Nevertheless, it is Paul's letter to Timothy in Ephesus that modern feminists (and the early Church Fathers) cite most often. And because of this passage, feminists in droves have abandoned scriptural authority. But perhaps they have not given careful consideration to the initial situation that Paul was addressing in Ephesus. Just as biblical patriarchy needs to be fairly interpreted in the light of its original con-

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text, so with Paul's materials.

Ephesus was a major center for goddess worship. Some of its major tenets were that a female goddess gave birth to the world, that the first woman was created before the first man, and that to achieve highest exaltation, wives must claim independence from their husbands, and especially from child-bearing.

Extensive research suggests that a radical religious pluralism existed in Ephesus and that various false teachings were endangering the faith of the new Christian converts there. Thus, Paul was instructing Timothy how to deal with such a stark departure from the Christian faith. Instead of exhibiting a negative attitude toward women, Paul is seeking to preserve the exalted position of the Christian wife. Paul's concern in 1 Timothy 2:8-15, according to Sharon Gritz,<sup>18</sup> is not that women might have authority over men in the church, but that certain assertive women in the church who had been influenced by false teachers would

teach error. For this reason, he charges them to "be silent" (1 Tim. 2:12, NIV).

It appears significant that Paul wrote this singular counsel to Timothy in Ephesus. When he counseled the churches in Philippi or Galatia, for example, a different situation existed, and other issues were addressed: "Far from being intolerant, Paul neither teaches nor suggests in this text [1 Cor. 14:34, 35] anything regarding patriarchalism or female subjection. The real issue is not the *extent* to which a woman may participate in the work and worship of the church, but the *manner*. Paul's corrective does not ban women from speaking in public, but stops the disruptive verbal misconduct of certain wives who are giving free rein to 'irresistible impulses' to 'pipe up' at will with questions in the assembly."<sup>19</sup>

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contradiction. Paul can even be seen demonstrating the attitudes of Christ Himself, who treated men and women with equality in the church, along with carefully preserving the marriage union.

Women in Scripture are observed functioning in many different spheres. Contrary to the interpretations of radical Feminism, biblical evidence does not reveal stifling patriarchy. Feminists have been correct to focus attention on the abuse of women inside and outside the church. Their pain is *real*. Their anger is *deep*. Nevertheless, they have been wrong in their denunciation of biblical patriarchy and the Apostle Paul. Upon a closer reading, the entire canon—taken in its entirety—can be seen to affirm women, whether in the home or in public ministry—or both. □

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