

Was Paul the ‘Father of Misogyny’?

The Apostle Paul has been characterised as both a liberator and oppressor of women.¹ The dichotomy between the two has been labelled one of the great paradoxes of his personality and thought.² What are we to make of his conflicting comments concerning women and their role in the church?

First and foremost, I believe we must analyse Paul in his Jewish context. His complex picture of women fits comfortably within Second Temple Judaism. Many different schools of thought existed in early Judaism, and many held different views of women. Some, like Jesus Ben Sira in the second century BCE, affirmed that “women menstruated because Eve was responsible for Adam’s blood.”³ Other Jewish texts, such as the author of *The Life of Adam and Eve* and Pseudo-Philo, greatly enhance the role of female biblical characters.⁴ There is little evidence that women ever held religious authority in Judaism, yet agrarian Jewish women exercised an impressive amount of authority in the household.⁵

Paul’s surrounding world, both the Jewish and Graeco-Roman aspects, provide context for one of Paul’s most controversial and confusing passages: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. From a Jewish perspective, Paul’s mention of the “angels” in this passage is likely a reference to the episode in Genesis 6 of the angels coming to earth and mating with human females to create the Nephilim—beings more elaborately portrayed in the *Book of Watchers*

¹ David Horrell, *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul’s Ethics* (London/New Delhi/New York/Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2016), 137.

² Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 301.

³ E. Randolph Richards & Brandon J. O’Brien, *Paul Behaving Badly: Was the Apostle a Racist, Chauvinistic Jerk?* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2016), p. 108

⁴ Susan Docherty, *The Jewish Pseudepigrapha: An Introduction to the Literature of the Second Temple Period* (London: SPCK, 2014), pp. 25-26, 55.

⁵ Christine Schenk, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), pp. 7-8; Contrary to Schenk, there is some evidence of women leading worship ancient synagogues. See David A. Fiensy, “The Roman Empire and Asia Minor” in Scott McKnight and Grant R. Osbourne (eds.), *The Face of New Testament Studies: The Face of New Testament Research* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), pp. 46-48.

in the apocryphal 1 Enoch. The recommendation for veils may be Paul's theological attempt to prevent temptation of the angels by the Corinthian women, as it was believed that angels watched over the Christian congregations.⁶ Alternatively, from a Graeco-Roman perspective, Paul's comments may also reflect a response to ancient Mediterranean honour/shame culture:⁷ the coverings were part of the culture of Corinth as ancient medical conceptions viewed the hair of women as a sexual organ.⁸ In order to present the church as orderly he demanded the women, some of whom were clearly discarding their head coverings (v. 4), to continue the practice. This would avoid bringing unnecessary shame to the Corinthian church whose reputation was already in tatters.⁹

Just from this preliminary analysis, I believe the suggestion that Paul was the "father of misogyny" greatly oversimplifies his role as a "populariser" for ancient traditional attitudes towards women, whilst downplaying his role as a developer of ideas that were quite radical for his time. Paul's context can do so much in revealing to us his thought, although much of what he lived in has since been lost. In speaking about Paul's problematic comments concerning the Corinthian women (see 1 Cor. 14:34-35), John Ziesler observes that Paul speaks "in a way that puzzles us, but presumably made familiar sense to the Corinthians."¹⁰ Similarly, E. Randolph Richards and Brandon O'Brien assert that "We are confident the Corinthians understood what Paul meant, but we don't have enough details to be so

⁶ Joseph Fitzmyer, 'A Feature of Qumran Angelology and the Angels', *New Testament Studies* 4/1 (2009), pp.48-58; G. W. Trompf, 'On Attitudes Toward Women in Paul and Paulinist Literature: 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 and Its Context', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42/2 (1980), pp. 196-215.

⁷ David B. Capes, Rodney Reeves, E. Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters, and Theology* (Second Edition; Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2017), p. 194-95.

⁸ See Troy W. Martin, 'Paul's Argument from Nature for the Veil In 1 Corinthians 11:13-15: A Testicle Instead of a Head Covering', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123/1 (2004), pp. 75-84; Tahmina Tariq, 'Let Modesty Be Her Raiment: The Classical Context of Ancient-Christian Veiling', *Journal for the Critical Study of Religion* 16/4 (2013), pp. 493-506.

⁹ Lucy Peppiatt, *Women and Worship at Corinth: Paul's Rhetorical Arguments in 1 Corinthians* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015), pp. 21-43; See William O. Walker Jr, '1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and Paul's Views regarding Women', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94/1 (1975), pp. 94-110 for a case that the passage is an interpolation, and thus not from Paul.

¹⁰ John Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity*. Oxford Bible Series (Revised Edition; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 125.

confident ourselves.”¹¹ This initial admission is important to make as it concedes that we have lost much of Paul’s original Second Temple context. Thus, our conclusions must be tentative and cautious. We now turn to several observations regarding the first part of the statement we are responding to: the claim that Paul does not challenge gender inequality and he must thus be perceived as the ‘father of misogyny’.

Looking at Paul’s undisputed letters, Paul does not blame Eve for the fall of humanity, opting rather to place the guilt on Adam (cf. Romans 5:12-14, 1 Cor 15:22; the opposite view seemingly found in 1 Timothy 2:12-15). This immediately places Paul outside of much Jewish thought towards women and sets a precedent for what many have been an incipient egalitarianism in his epistles.

Concerning Paul’s social politic in Galatians 3:28, Ziesler suggests that the egalitarian undertones only reflect the equal value of men and women in the future kingdom, whilst the “established order must be upheld so long as it lasts” and that women “should remain subordinate to men in accordance with the hierarchal structures of the world.”¹² Ben Witherington III further notes that Galatians 3:28 is “commenting on the necessary coupling of the two sexes and so on a social relationship here, not on gender per se.”¹³

Against Ziesler, the context of Galatians 3 is largely focused on the promise made to Abraham and the law. There is nothing in the verse or chapter to suggest anything other than Paul’s present view of men and women who have been “baptised into Christ” (v. 27). Conversely, Witherington’s view seems more likely. It is supported by the creation account in Genesis 1:27 as underlying Paul’s gender ethic; that both male and female are in the image of God is part of God’s intended design, unlike the relationships between classes and races also mentioned in the verse.¹⁴ Robert Karl Gnuse thus seems to be correct when he argues

¹¹ Richards & O’Brien, *Paul Behaving Badly*, p. 111; similar comments are made by Peppiatt, *Women and Worship*, p. 5.

¹² Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity*, p. 125.

¹³ Witherington, *The Paul Quest*, p. 28, n. 25.

¹⁴ Witherington, *The Paul Quest*, p. 220-22, 226-28.

that this verse is a “programmatic statement to describe the new relationships in the Christian community”¹⁵ in stark opposition to Paul’s surrounding Graeco-Roman ideas about gender.

We must also not neglect the presence of many women in Paul’s letters who operate as his co-workers. Phoebe, the deliverer of his letter to the Romans, is described as a δῖάκονον. This likely denotes more than being just a simple servant, as Paul describes himself and Apollos as δῖάκονοι in 1 Corinthians 3:5 (cf. 2 Cor. 3:6). Paul encourages agreement between the women Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:2-3. He places these women alongside him and another male “labourer” named Clement. Numerous other examples can be provided (see the undoubtedly female Junia in Rom 16:7, Priscilla and Aquilla as equals in 1 Cor 16:19, and other examples in Rom. 16:6; Acts 16:14-15, 17:34).¹⁶

We can see from just these few examples above that Paul likely did challenge gender inequality *in his time*. Paul sought a radical refocusing of the traditional social institutions of his day towards a more “Christocentric” politic. However, this does not necessarily mean that he would agree with modern concepts of gender equality and much of what he says may still be characterised as problematic (see again the comments in 1 Cor 14).

Similarities to this discussion can be drawn concerning Paul’s comments on slavery. Despite the fact Paul does not condemn the institution, the very fact that he not only addresses slaves who partake in the worship of his churches, but intends for them to be recipients of his letters is remarkable for someone in the first century (1 Cor. 7:21-23; see also among the Deutero-Paulines Eph. 6:5-8 and Col. 3:22-25). Furthermore, Horrell argues that in Philemon 10-17 the social identities of Onesimus and Philemon have not changed, but the nature of their relationship has been altered by them becoming “brothers”¹⁷ The idea

¹⁵ Robert Karl Gnuse, *Trajectories of Justice: What the Bible Says About Slaves, Women, and Homosexuality* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2016), pp. 102-2.

¹⁶ See analysis in Gnuse, *Trajectories*, pp. 104-05; Schenk, *Crispina*, pp. 51-54.

¹⁷ Horrell, *Solidarity*, pp. 139-40

that Paul had nothing to say about social justice is therefore demonstrably false, albeit lacking an outward demand for immediate social change.

It is clear that problems still remain for Paul as an “enabler” of misogyny. This was once illustrated by Patrick Henry in discussing the difficulties of historical reconstructions of early Christianity. He says, in agreement with much of the above analysis, that “women played a significant, maybe even a dominant role in the early Christian community, but it remains true that we have no account *from them* of the meaning of their Christian experiences.”¹⁸ Christine Schenk similarly says, “Christian history was written by men with preconceived notions about women.”¹⁹

Without sources written from the female Christian perspective (which would not appear for more than a century after Paul with the Dairy of Perpetua²⁰), we have no way of knowing the nuances of female Christian experience. It is possible for us to blame Paul for this due to later utilisation (or misinterpretation) of his words by the church,²¹ despite other voices in the early church who accepted that women could hold positions of authority.²² The very fact his words were the basis for such subjugation remains problematic.

Why then does Paul not dismantle these institutions? I believe the answer lies in his eschatology. Although there is a matter of debate concerning the interpretation of Paul’s view of the end times, the overwhelming consensus is that Paul expected it to come within his lifetime, or at least of those whom he was writing to (1 Cor. 7:31, 15:52, 1 Thess. 4:15-5:8).²³

¹⁸ Patrick Henry, *New Directions in New Testament Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), p. 39; italics his.

¹⁹ Schenk, *Crispina*, p. 1.

²⁰ See ‘Perpetua’s Passions: A Brief Introduction’ in Jan N. Bremmer & Marco Formisano (eds.), *Perpetua’s Passions: A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): pp. 5-6.

²¹ See, for example, Tertullian on the Apparel of Women Chapter 1; Augustine, The Literal Meaning of Genesis, 11.42; and in particular John Chrysostom, Homily 9 on First Timothy.

²² See the alternative views of Chrysostom in Homily 30 on Romans when he notes that it was Priscilla who corrected Apollos in Acts 18:26, spends much of the homily praising the work of Paul’s female co-workers, and explicitly interprets 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 as meaning “to hinder her from publicly coming forward, and from the seat on the bema, *not from the word of teaching*” (emphasis mine).

²³ See discussion in Witherington, *The Paul Quest*, 136-42.

If Paul believed that the Kingdom of God was to break in soon and that all human institutions would be overthrown, there would appear to be no reason for him to demand his subjects to overthrow those institutions. If Paul is to be interpreted as demanding subjection and silence from women (a debatable thesis), he nonetheless believed that the end was to come soon and that God's will was to be done. Paul constantly stresses obedience to the authorities (Romans 13:1-7; see also the positive portrayal of the Romans dealing with Paul in Acts 10:1-2, 18:14-17, 21:40, 22:27-30, 27:3) and for his Christians to live quiet lives (1 Thess 4:11; see also 2 Thess 3:12). It is not Paul's place, in his mind, to change society for the sake of social justice, but rather to prepare his people for the coming parousia, where the true justice would take place. Eschatology thus influences ethics.

Yet we are left in precarious situation. This position concedes that Paul's goal was not social justice, but rather for his Christians to focus on the future. Thus, the assertion that Paul did not challenge gender inequality would therefore be true. Additionally, many of the aforementioned authors have rightly affirmed that our interpretation of these passages in the undisputed letters has, historically, been wrong; that Paul gladly employed women in his service, recognised their abilities from simple Deaconesses to fully fledged prophets and apostles, and often heaps praise upon them for fulfilling such roles in service to the church.

However, this appears to grant that Paul *has* been the enabler of gender inequality throughout the history of Christendom; that Paul has been interpreted as denying women proper recognition in the church which has contributed to the church's view of women throughout history, whether such interpretations were correct or not.²⁴

If this is the case, what is path forward for applying Paul's ethics today? One way that this has been attempted is by William J. Webb and his "redemptive movement hermeneutic" (hereafter RMH). Webb contends that the problematic passages in Paul (along with those on slavery), were written in a context where such attitudes were permissible. However, reading

²⁴ See this concession in Gnuse, *Trajectories*, p. 113.

Paul against the backdrop of his Graeco-Roman world, his attitudes were contextually quite progressive. They gave an inordinate amount of attention to the needs of women that were quite alien to that of his wider world at the time. This does not remove the problematic nature of the comments we have seen him make (granted that we are interpreting them correctly), but it suggests the beginning of a movement away from the barbarism of the ancient world to a kind of ordered barbarism, which has its roots in the purpose of Old Testament law. As the Old Testament was brought in to show Israel as a light to the nations, despite the persistence of unsavoury views toward women and slaves (e.g., Deuteronomy 22:25-27; Numbers 31:9, 18), it was not meant to be the final word on the ethics applied amongst God's people.

Thus, just as the Old Testament was meant to serve its function at its given time, Paul's comments too are contextually bound. Paul's ethic, applied then, was a form of "love-patriarchalism" heavily steeped in Old Testament contexts.²⁵ The ideal social ethic will come in time, with our current culture on the route from Paul and on its way to that ideal. Or as Webb puts it, "[Paul's] movement was sufficient to signal a clear direction in terms of the possibility of further improvements for later generations."²⁶

The important emphasis in this hermeneutic rests between what is descriptive and what is prescriptive in Paul. Issues that are unique to Paul's cultural situation at the time (such as head coverings) must be seen as describing his particular situation rather than prescribing rules for churches at all locations at all times. As Walton and Sandy put it, "Culture-specific aspects of a locution do not have a universal perlocution... culture-specific aspects of the perlocution need to be translated to an appropriate contemporary

²⁵ Gerd Theissen, "The Strong and the Weak in Corinth: A Sociological Analysis of a Theological Quarrel" in Brian S. Rosner (ed.), *Understanding Paul's Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 127; Witherington, *Paul Quest*, p. 228.

²⁶ William J. Webb, 'A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: Encouraging Dialogue Among Four Evangelical Views', *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* 48/2 (2005), pp. 333-34; see also Gnuse, *Trajectories*, p. 114.

perlocution.”²⁷ Although the Paul of the first century must remain in the first century, Webb argues he planted the seeds of liberation. His world was not yet ready for his radical ideas. But, as the RMH argues, we are getting closer to that ideal.²⁸

Whether the trajectory hermeneutic is consistent and practical will depend on future debates, and it seems that much of current evangelicalism is resistant to its implications.²⁹ But it seems to present a model worth considering especially in light of the occasional nature of Paul’s writings.³⁰

To conclude, we must ask if it follows that Paul’s lack of challenging gender inequality makes him an enabler of it. Does Paul hold a kind of negative responsibility for the suppression of female voices in the church, especially given that the above analyses more than challenge the traditional interpretations? The very fact that Paul’s words have become the “tradition” and have been used to justify the subjection of women (in and out of the church) remains challenging. Nevertheless, Paul’s own world reveals the nuances of his situation. He was not a politician or an activist, but a follower of the risen Christ. Perhaps it would be fair to say that the church has misused Paul. We could equally say that much of church history would have disgusted him. I believe that Witherington’s comment succinctly captures the nuances of Paul’s ancient social politic: “Paul was never a modern egalitarian,

²⁷ John H. Walton & D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2013), p. 45; see also an analysis of cross-cultural application in Craig L. Blomberg and Jennifer F. Markley, *A Handbook to New Testament Exegesis*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), pp. 252-60.

²⁸ We should note that the RMH is a multifaceted model that has existed before Webb’s model and has itself evolved into different models since. Webb argues that we can move to a better ethic found in the NT (which both the above authors find problematic), whilst other versions stress that the NT ethic for women is legitimate but has simply been misinterpreted through church history.

²⁹ See the critiques by Thomas R. Schreiner ‘Review of *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*’, *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6/1 (2002), pp. 46-65 and Wayne Grudem, ‘Should we Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic? An Analysis of William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*’, *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 (2004), pp. 299-346. Blomberg, a complementarian himself, advises caution in using a trajectory hermeneutic where unnecessary, but contends that “Webb’s hermeneutic as a method is justifiable” (*New Testament Exegesis*, p. 253, n. 35).

³⁰ On the occasional nature of Paul’s letters, see Richards & O’Brien, *Paul Behaving Badly*, 16; Capes, Reeves, & Richards, *Rediscovering Paul*, pp. 352, 54.

but he was also not like modern advocates of strong forms of patriarchy in the home and in the church.”³¹

Bibliography

- Blomberg C. L., Markley, J. F., *A Handbook to New Testament Exegesis*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010).
- Bremmer J. N., Formisano M. (eds.), *Perpetua's Passions: A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- Capes, D. B., Reeves, R., Richards, E. R., *Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters, and Theology*. Second Edition; Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2017.
- Docherty, S., *The Jewish Pseudepigrapha: An Introduction to the Literature of the Second Temple Period* (London: SPCK, 2014).
- Fiensy, D. A., “The Roman Empire and Asia Minor” In McKnight S and Osbourne G. R. (eds.), *The Face of New Testament Studies: The Face of New Testament Research* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).
- Fitzmyer, J. A., “A Feature of Qumran Angelology and the Angels’, *New Testament Studies* 4/1 (2009), pp.48-58.
- Gnuse, R. K., *Trajectories of Justice: What the Bible Says About Slaves, Women, and Homosexuality*. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2016.
- Grudem, W., ‘Should we Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic? An Analysis of William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*’, *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 (2004), pp. 299-346
- Henry, P., *New Directions in New Testament Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979).
- Horrell, D. *Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Ethics* (London/New Delhi/New York/Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2016).
- Martin, T. W., ‘Paul's Argument from Nature for the Veil In 1 Corinthians 11:13–15: A Testicle Instead of a Head Covering’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123/1 (2004), pp. 75-84.
- Peppiatt, L., *Women and Worship at Corinth: Paul's Rhetorical Arguments in 1 Corinthians* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015).
- Richards, E. R., O'Brien, B. J., *Paul Behaving Badly: Was the Apostle a Racist, Chauvinistic Jerk?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016).
- Schenk, C., *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017.
- Schreiner T. R., ‘Review of Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals’, *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6/1 (2002), pp. 46-65.

³¹ Witherington, *The Paul Quest*, p. 186.

- Tariq. T., 'Let Modesty Be Her Raiment: The Classical Context of Ancient-Christian Veiling', *Journal for the Critical Study of Religion* 16/4 (2013), pp. 493-506.
- Theissen, G., "The Strong and the Weak in Corinth: A Sociological Analysis of a Theological Quarrel" in Rosner B. S. (ed.), *Understanding Paul's Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
- Trompf, G. W. 'On Attitudes Toward Women in Paul and Paulinist Literature: 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 and Its Context', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42/2 (1980), pp.196-215.
- Walton, J. H., Sandy, D. B., *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2013).
- Webb, W. J. 'A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: Encouraging Dialogue Among Four Evangelical Views', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48/2 (2005), pp. 331-49.
- Witherington, B., *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998).
- Ziesler, J., *Pauline Christianity*, Oxford Bible Series (Revised Edition; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).