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MINISTRIES

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Answering Atheists: Is the Bible Misogynistic?

Atheists, radical feminists, and other critics of the Bible often claim that the Bible has misogynistic overtones. That is to say, that the Bible is strongly prejudiced against women.

It is claimed that the human authors of the Bible regarded women as mere property and of lesser value than men. Some critics even go so far as to say that God—if He exists—could not have inspired certain passages in the Bible because they promote a “sexist” message.

Is there any validity to these claims?

While there are certainly difficult passages in the Bible, which, on the surface, appear to be misogynistic, the overall message of the Bible honors women as equally valuable to men. This is clearly evident in the very beginning of the biblical narrative:

Genesis 1:27

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Here we see that Scripture clearly affirms the fact that both men and women are created in God’s image. That is to say, men and women are of equal value and purpose in God’s creation and plan.

You would think that if the Bible were hopelessly misogynic, as some claim, God would have set the record straight from the very beginning. Women would be on the level of animals and certainly wouldn’t share the special status of bearing God’s image like men. But that’s not what we see. The Bible clearly affirms the ontological equality of men and women from the very beginning.

This is further confirmed when we look at the specific creation of Eve:

Genesis 2:21-23

So the Lord God (YHWH Elohim) causes a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God (YHWH

Elohim) had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

The Hebrew word for “rib” is *tsela* [say-lah], which means “side.” Metaphorically speaking, God essentially takes half of Adam to make Eve. This passage, again, emphasizes the ontological equality of man and woman. Man and woman are of the same essence. Neither is superior or of more value than the other. As God’s human creatures who bear His image, they are the same.

This is even further confirmed when we look at the original divine establishment of marriage:

Genesis 2:24

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Here we see that marriage is the union of equal partners. The sexual union is to be enjoyed within the boundaries of a committed covenant relationship between man and wife. Women aren’t inferior beings or property that can be used and abused by men. No, sexual relations can be expressed only within the safety and commitment of marriage.

These values and principles established in God’s Word are certainly quite different than what we find in the pagan cultures of the Ancient Near East, which saw no problem with raping and abusing women and throwing them away as if they were nothing. Contrary to the treatment of women throughout the Ancient Near East, the God of Israel was especially concerned about the protection and justice of women, such as widows, who were often oppressed and taken advantage of in the ancient world.

Deuteronomy 10:18

He executes justice for the fatherless **and the widow**, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

As we can see, contrary to the claims of atheists and radical feminists, it’s simply undeniable that the Bible affirms the value and dignity of women. God’s love and concern for women is evident throughout the Old and New Testaments. This is expressed not only in the Creation narrative, but it’s also implicitly evident in various other passages throughout the Scriptures.

For instance, consider the Fifth Commandment:

Exodus 20:12

Honor your **father and your mother**, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord (YHWH) your God is giving you.

Many of us have heard this verse so many times that we tend to gloss over it. But if we stop to read it, we can see that the Bible, once again, clearly affirms the equality of man and woman. Mother *and* father are equally worthy of honor according to this passage and many others. A mother has equal authority over her children.

This is in stark contrast to other cultures in the Ancient Near East where the mother was controlled by her son. Old Testament scholar, Dr. Richard M. Davidson, speaks to the significance of these biblical commands:

Far from being regarded as "chattel," according to the fifth commandment of the Decalogue and repeated commands throughout the pentateuchal codes, the wife/mother was to be given equal honor to the father within the family circle (Exod 20:12; 21:15,17; Lev 20:9; Deut 21:18-21; 27:16). There is no discrimination in favor of father and against mother. The mother's authority over the son is as great in the law codes as is that of the father. The same penalty is imposed upon the son for striking or cursing his father or his mother (Exod 21: 15, 17). In fact, within a Near Eastern milieu in which the mother was often controlled by the son, Lev 19:3 surprisingly places the mother first instead of the father in the command: "You shall each revere your mother and father." This reversal from normal order clearly emphasizes the woman's right to equal filial respect along with her husband.

-Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*, p. 250

Some might suggest that Genesis 2:18 teaches that women are inferior to men and are created only to serve men:

Genesis 2:18

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

However, when we look at the Hebrew word for "helper"—that is, *ezer* [ay-zare]—we find that this word in itself does not suggest an inferior status at all. Indeed, God Himself is called the "helper" of His people:

Psalms 33:20

Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our **help** [*ezer*] and our shield.

Obviously God is not inferior to His people—He's superior!—and yet the authors of Scripture say that God is our helper.

Davidson sheds some light on the meaning of *ezer* as it is used in Genesis 2:

The word *ezer* is a relational term, describing a beneficial relationship, but in itself does not specify position or rank, whether of superiority or of inferiority. The specific position intended must be gleaned from the immediate context. In Gen 2, where God brings the parade of animals but Adam finds no fitting companion, the "help" intended is clearly "real companionship that can be given only by an equal."

-Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*, p. 29

Thus, atheists and radical feminists are simply wrong when they assert that this verse promotes sexism.

Now, it should be noted that there's an in-house theological debate among believers regarding the role of women in the family and the ministry, and there are good arguments on all sides of this debate. However, it is not our intention in this teaching to unpack the nuances of that very specific theological discussion. That particular topic is beyond the scope of this teaching.

Whether one holds to complementarianism or egalitarianism, all believers would agree with our basic argument that the Bible never teaches that one gender is inferior to the other.

For a complementarian, women might be excluded from certain positions within congregational leadership, for example. But that wouldn't negate the Bible's teaching that men and women are equal in value as God's human creatures that bear His image. It certainly wouldn't imply a man's ownership or domination over a woman. It would simply mean that there is a difference between men and women with regard to *their particular roles and responsibilities* within the Church.

Moving forward, if the Bible were truly misogynistic, as some claim, we would expect it to never honor certain women nor speak positively about them. However, the evidence suggests otherwise.

Consider Abraham's wife, Sarah. Abraham and Sarah's relationship certainly wasn't one of oppression and male superiority, but rather of an equal partnership. Sarah is considered just as essential to God's plan as Abraham. Indeed, just as the Bible emphasizes Abraham's seed, in a number of places God likewise says that it is *Sarah's* seed that will fulfill the promise (Genesis 17:18-19; 21:12).

Likewise, the matriarch Rebekah is far from being a mere "extra" in God's story. Rather, she's praised in the Scriptures for her faith and hospitality and presented as a crucial part of fulfilling God's plan. In her book, "Reading the Women of the Bible," Professor of Hebrew Bible and the History of Judaism, Dr. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, writes:

Rivka is the counterpart to both Abraham and Sarah. Like Sarah, **she is the instrument of the promise, the agent through whom Isaac will become the father of a nation**. She is also a second Abraham, who, like him, voluntarily chooses to leave Mesopotamia for Canaan. Her "I will go" answers the four times the issue of going has been raised in the story (vv. 4, 7, 38, and 40) and echoes God's command to Abraham to "Go!" in Gen. 12:1 [...] Rivka is very much like Abraham. They are both models of hospitality, and **the narrator of her story highlights her similarity to him** by describing her actions toward the emissary in the same language that describes Abraham's actions toward his angel visitors (Gen. 18:1-8).

Radical feminists will often point to Genesis 24 as a supposed example of sexism and oppression. This passage details Eleazar's journey to find a wife for Isaac and then bringing home Rebekah. It is asserted that this story illustrates that Rebekah, like all women, are regarded as mere property in the Bible and that they didn't have a choice about whom they could marry.

However, when you simply take the time to actually read the story, such an assertion is utterly without bases and actually contradicted by the evidence. For instance, in Genesis 24:8, Abraham tells Eleazar, "If the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine." Abraham assumes that the woman will have the final say. And that's exactly what we see—Rebekah herself made the decision to travel with Eleazar to marry Isaac (Genesis 24:58).

Rachel and Leah are also shown to be tremendous women of courage and faith. In Genesis 31, we see that they stood up to their father who tried to withhold their inheritance from them, and like Abraham, they were willing to leave their homeland and go where God called them.

In regards to the Genesis Matriarchs, Davidson concludes:

The Genesis matriarchs are not wallflowers. They are not little housewives; they are the founders of the nation. It would be unfair to the portraits of these women to argue that the Genesis matriarchs bow in submission to all men or are under the oppressive authority of their husbands.

Rather, though respectful of their husbands, they are intelligent, forceful, and directive [...] Feminists are right in demanding redress of the long-accumulating record of the subjugation of women. **But they need to rethink the cause of this repression. The Genesis matriarchs were not suppressed or oppressed women.**

-Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*, p. 235

This is only in Genesis, by the way! We haven't even touched the highly valued and influential women throughout the rest of the Bible, such as the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah in the first chapter of Exodus, who defied Pharaoh by sparing the life of Moses.

There's also Rahab, who, in the New Testament, is honored by the apostles for her faith and courage (James 2 & Hebrews 11).

Let's not forget Deborah, who was a prominent judge, prophetess, and leader of Israel. Or Huldah, who was the head advisor to King Josiah.

You also have the book of Ruth, which highlights the faith, loyalty, and boldness of Ruth and Naomi.

You also have the book of Esther, which is all about how a woman became the savior of the Jewish people in the Medo-Persian Empire. The book highlights Esther's courage and leadership.

In the New Testament you have women apostles, such as Junia (Romans 16:7).

Pricilla was a woman apostle and missionary (Acts 18; Romans 16:3)

Perhaps most significantly is the account of Yeshua's resurrection, which is the very basis of our faith. Paul said, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile." And yet, the first ones who discovered Yeshua's empty tomb and to meet the risen Lord were His women followers. (Matthew 28)

As we can see, the Bible fully affirms the value and dignity of women both theologically and historically. One last thing we'd like to mention in order to drive home this point would be the Torah itself.

Critics will often assert that the Torah treats women as mere property. However, the commands contained in God's Law, as given through Moses, express the equality of men and women in regards to morality and justice.

Here's how theologian, Dr. Paul Copan, puts it:

The moral and ceremonial laws of Israel presumed that women were not only equal but also shared equal moral responsibility with the men [...] Some might quibble with the ceremonial uncleanness of menstruation, which obviously affects women and not men. But as we'll see, men have their own issues! And the purity laws also address these (e.g., Lev. 15:16-18, 32; 22:4; Deut. 23:10) [...] those claiming that committing adultery against one's neighbor's wife was a "property offense" in Israel are incorrect. Both the man and the woman can be put to death for adultery, but, unlike the Code of Hammurabi, Old Testament law never requires the death penalty for property offenses."

-Paul Copan, Is God A Moral Monster: Making Sense of the Old Testament God, p. 104

This shared moral responsibility between men and women is in stark contrast to what we find in other ancient near eastern law codes, which actually do treat women as property.

For instance, the Torah commands that both the man and woman caught in adultery are to be put to death. In the Laws of Ur-Nammu, however, there seem to be some inconsistencies and double standards. For instance, if the unfaithful wife is the one who “initiates” the adulterous encounter, only she is to be put to death:

If the wife of a young man, on her own initiative, approaches a man and initiates sexual relations with him, they shall kill that woman; that male shall be released.

-The Laws of Ur-Namma (Ur-Nammu), translated by Martha Roth (COS 2.153:409-10; cf. ANET 524)

We also see this with the Middle Assyrian Laws:

If a man [should fornicate] with the wife of a man [...by] her invitation, there is no punishment for the man; the man (i.e., husband) shall impose whatever punishment he chooses upon his wife.

-The Middle Assyrian Laws (Tablet A), translated by Martha Roth (COS 2.132:354-56, 359-60; cf. ANET 181, 185)

Why do these other law codes from the Ancient Near East seem to be inconsistent and subjective in their handling of adultery—even allowing the husband to choose a punishment for his unfaithful wife—whereas the Bible treats the guilt of adultery as absolute?

The reason is that the authors of these other law codes saw married women as the property of their husbands, and thus adultery was a civil offense, not a moral one. As Davidson puts it:

The Mosaic legislation thus seems to go beyond other ANE law codes in treating adultery as primarily **a moral crime against God** and not merely a personal injury to the husband.

-Richard M. Davidson, Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament, p. 348

Indeed, when you really look at the overall picture of the Bible’s treatment of women, it’s undeniable that the Bible fully affirms not only the dignity and value of women throughout history, but also their equal justice and shared moral responsibility.

That’s not to say that there aren’t difficult passages to work through. There are certainly some confusing parts of the Bible, which, on the surface, appear to treat women as property or inferior beings. We will be unpacking those passages in later teachings in this series.

Our intention with this teaching was simply to give a broad overview of the topic and establish a theological basis for our argument, which is that the Bible does not regard women as inferior to men. The difficult topics and passages we’ll go through later will be interpreted in light of what we’ve established in this teaching.

One last thing we'd like to say is to point out the irony here. It's usually atheists who criticize the Bible as misogynistic and who claim that biblical faith devalues women.

Obviously, we've demonstrated, that assertion is simply untrue. But beyond that, it's actually atheism that devalues women.

Consider this, if atheism is true, neither women nor men have any value at all. There's no frame of reference for a person's value on an atheistic worldview. We're just the product of primordial goo—accidents of chance, without any purpose or reason.

Therefore, if any worldview devalues women, it certainly wouldn't be the biblical worldview. It would be atheism.

Furthermore, to criticize the biblical worldview is to make a moral judgment. But if atheism is true, there's no basis for making such a judgment since objective moral values cannot exist in an atheistic framework. Atheists must borrow premises from the biblical worldview in order to even criticize the biblical worldview!

In conclusion, we hope you are able to see that the overall biblical picture. That is, women are fully equal to men as God's image bearers. Women are partners with men in God's plan. Historically, the Bible honors particular women for their faith and contribution in fulfilling God's purposes. While there may be difficult passages in regards to women, the overall picture in the Bible does not devalue women or paint them as inferior.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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