

You're all probably aware of two important rules for interpreting scripture: i. if you take a text out of context you make it a pretext; and ii. unclear passages should be interpreted by clearer ones. But when it comes to the roles of women, texts are often made into pretexts, and texts said to be 'clearer', are, in fact, at least as problematic as the ones they're used to interpret.

There have been seven controversial passages in all, but two of those are now generally recognised as presenting no real problem. **Ephesians 5:22-24** (NIV) says:

Wives, submit to your husband's as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the assembly, his body, ... as the assembly submits to Christ, so ... wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

But this is only the first of several sub-sections following v21, which says Christians, should submit to one another: husbands by loving their wives as their own bodies, children by obeying their parents, fathers by not exasperating their children, slaves by obeying their earthly masters, and masters by treating their slaves without threat or favoritism. In that context, a wife's submission to her husband 'in everything' must be defined appropriately, because the instructions to the husband imply that he is required to exercise great sensitivity towards her. This passage is not a mandate for total male hierarchy. If we take it as such, we make it a pretext.

Galatians 3:26-28 (NIV) says:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus ... There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ ...

Some make this a foundation for totally interchangeable roles, and then interpret other passages about women accordingly, which generally means they declare them no longer culturally relevant. But Paul's talking here about joint inheritance in the blessing God promised Abraham. This passage says nothing at all about roles, interchangeable or otherwise. Those who claim it does are making it a pretext.

But now we come to **1 Cor.11:3-16**, **14:34-35**; and **1 Tim.2:9-15**. Don't let anyone tell you that in our English translations any one of them is clearer than the others. Scholars have preconceptions about male-female roles, so interpretation of the Greek in all three presents them with undeniable difficulties. When you read a translation, you're reading somebody's solution to those difficulties, and those solutions deeply affect not only the ways we structure our assemblies, but also the ways we order our homes and marriages and live our daily lives before a watching world. If we want that world to see an outworking of God's plan for our lives, we'd better make sure our witness in these matters really is part of it.

Decisions about which is the clearest passage reflect the interpreter's own preconceptions. Most traditionalists believe Genesis says God made woman subject to man and Paul will be consistent with that. Others say Paul taught that woman should be subject to man so that's what God's sentence of Adam's rule over Eve means. Christian feminists say our structures and culture should reflect an equality they claim existed pre-fall. People, who believe God made Adam and Eve to complement each other, although admirably sensitive to women, maintain that certain

'important' roles should be exclusively male. All agree that all three passages refer either directly/indirectly to the Genesis record. **CHART**

1 Corinthians 11:3 (NIV):

the head of every man is Christ... the head of the woman is man,
and the head of Christ is God

and the man-woman headship here is generally thought to originate in Gen.chs.1-3.

1 Cor.14:34 (NIV):

... women should be silent in the churches, ... in submission, as the Law says ...

and this unspecified 'law' is often understood to be the Genesis record.

1 Timothy 2:11-12 (NIV):

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she
must be silent. For Adam was formed first ... And ... was not the one
deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner ...

which makes the order of creation and Eve's deception the reasons why women may not teach or have authority over men in the assembly. To help explain this, a local Ephesian background is frequently constructed from the passage on widows at **5:3-16**.

Now it gets complicated. Against this background of Ephesian widows aging anything but gracefully, whatever is decided about 2:12 is frequently used to help interpret both Corinthian passages. But, you see, those Corinthian passages are commonly employed to help interpret not only each other, but also 1 Tim.2:11-12. Sometimes the Genesis record itself is interpreted by one/more of the three NT passages. And so the arguments go round ... and round ... and round ...

So where should we start? The fact is, that unless we've understood Gen.1-3 properly, we're bound to tie ourselves in knots trying to understand the others. So today we're going to think about not only what **Gen.1-3** says, but (just as importantly) what it *doesn't* say. We've all heard sermons about Adam, but if we've never really thought much about Eve, or if we misinterpret her, all sorts of things become skewed: not only our marital relations, how we raise our children, and our congregational structures and practices, but even our perception of God's nature. Eve, like Adam, is of profound importance.

*First, was Adam and Eve's **PRE-FALL** relationship a hierarchy or an equal partnership?*

Gen.1:28 (NET Bible):

God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said ... 'Be fruitful and multiply! Fill the earth and subdue it! Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that moves on the ground.'

So Adam and Eve had exactly the same mandate. So does that make them 'equal'? Don't gender differences suggest different priorities and abilities? In ch.1 Eve's certainly not subordinate, but neither is she Adam's equal. But he's not hers, either. What we have here is neither equality nor hierarchy: it's unity-in-diversity. Then we move on to Gen.2:15,18 (NET Bible):

The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden ... to serve it and guard it ... Then ... said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable helper for him.'

Here their role differences are clear. Adam's focus would be on his task in the garden. Eve's would be on him, keeping him company and helping him. So does that make her his subordinate? Is a mother/father helping their child subordinate? Is a doctor/nurse helping a patient their subordinate? Is a man helping his wife her subordinate? Helping clearly doesn't always imply subordination. Eve, in fact, was what made Adam's situation 'good'. He was no longer alone in his task, and God said that was 'very good'. Again, unity-in-diversity. But we fallen humans tend to be drawn to extremes. Either we think this means leadership (with one at least to some extent 'over' the other) or equality (with essentially interchangeable roles). Gen.chs.1-2 support neither.

Some say subordination is *implied* here: i. Eve was created from part of Adam; ii. for his sake; and iii. he named her just as he named the animals. But Adam wasn't subordinate to the earth from which he was made; naming the animals was primarily to teach him he needed a suitable helper; and Eve was created 'for his sake' to help, to be his companion. There is no indication she was subordinate. So they were created to be different, but they *were* created one.

Our second question is: what exactly was their sin? Well, it wasn't eating an apple/fruit from the tree of knowledge. The sin was *taking and eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. People love to expand that: she exaggerated/lied, began with doubt, independent action, talking to 'strange snakes'. But eating that forbidden fruit alone was bad enough to earn the judgment of the difficult lives and eventual death we all face. If we distort that, we blur God's plan and all sorts of errors result. *Whatever Adam and Eve did before reaching out and taking and eating that fruit, it was not sin*. The sin was doing what God forbade them to do. That's what they were questioned about. That's what they confessed to. That's why they were sentenced.

If Eve had listened to the serpent, admired the fruit and considered the benefits proposed, yet (even though deceived) had chosen to obey God anyway, she would have remained innocent. Adam's sin was exactly the same, only he knew exactly what he was doing. They both took that fruit and ate it.

Was Adam present during Eve's temptation-fall? 3:19 (NET Bible) says:

She ... gave some of it to her husband who was with her ...

which I think is pretty clear. But in fact it makes no difference. If Adam *wasn't* there during the actual temptation, why should she run off to get his permission? Nowhere does it say he'd been given dominion over her, and God doesn't charge her with taking independent action. If, on the other hand, Adam *was* present, we know of no attempt on his part to prevent either her conversation with the serpent or her eating the fruit. If he'd been set in authority he shows no sign of it; he seems to have just stood there and watched, and God charges him with neither failure to intervene nor weakness. So whether he was present or not, even if he'd listened intently to a very persuasive enticement from Eve, even if he began to reach out for the fruit but then decided to obey God, he would have remained innocent. He had to take and eat that fruit to

disobey. Adam and Eve's only sin, their tragically *sufficient* sin, was disobedience to that command. All those things people add on distort what really happened.

Thirdly, what role did Eve play in that sin? Some say she was more apt to be deceived than Adam, or in some way more vulnerable, and the serpent knew this when he targeted her first. But God said he intended to make a *suitable* helper, not a morally/emotionally inferior one. Wasn't she made from part of Adam? The very same material? Did God somehow slip up when he re-formed it? Or did he deliberately render it faulty and then describe it as 'very good'? Not credible. One bible-based pastor actually said Adam was made from reason and Eve from emotion, but he didn't get that from the bible; it's straight out of ancient gentile thought. Eve was created essentially just like Adam. When he first lays eyes on her at 2:23 that sameness moves him so deeply that he breaks out in poetry! They had joint dominion over the earth and animals, and God held Eve responsible for her own actions. The serpent's craft was exercised in what he said, not in his choice of a faulty first target.

Some say Eve tempted Adam with feminine wiles. After her sin, they think, she transformed into this steamy seductress to whom Adam had been created vulnerable, so it was really her fault he sinned. Are we supposed to believe God made Adam a female companion, told them to multiply, and then forbade them to do that? Adam was as keen as Eve was to pass responsibility for his sin on to someone else, so why didn't he protest to God that given his created nature he'd found her simply irresistible? But, you see, pre-fall Adam *wasn't temptable sexually*. No command had been given on that subject. He was altogether free *except for taking and eating that fruit*. That's what Genesis says Eve suggested. That's what he did. That's why he was judged.

And lastly, to what form of 'rule' did God sentence Eve? Some say he formally established Adam's already-existing rule over her. Some say she deserved to be ruled because, although unsuited to leadership, she'd led Adam astray. Some say the 'desire' she would feel for him (3:16) is the result of sin, an aspiration to control him, the beginning of the 'battle of the sexes', it's 'prophetic', or a 'consequence' of her sin, and the man should overcome it by his rule. Some call the whole of 3:14-19 'the curse'. Others say the only things cursed are the serpent and the earth. Certainly the word 'curse' only appears in relation to serpent and earth, but painful work and painful childbearing can hardly be called anything but curses. But the entire judgment is *not* punishment. In the serpent's judgment, despite their death sentence the human race would survive. That's grace. Eve's offspring would crush the serpent's head. More grace. And the hostility introduced between serpent and people is, from the human point of view, an act of preservation. Grace again. So we should be careful before declaring every other part of these judgments purely 'curses'.

We should never confuse these judgements with the results of sin. God himself is changing things here. Not everything, of course. Adam and Eve were still one flesh. The helper must now help battle thorns and weeds in hard labour. In a very real sense, he would share her pain too. And they would first taste death together when Cain killed Abel. The rule over Eve

must be interpreted in that general context of shared judgments. Verse 16 provides a further pointer: the woman's 'desire'.

Some say this desire is sexual, and, despite her increased pain, it would of course include that. The word appears elsewhere only once in SS, a love-story, where it is obviously sexual; and in Gen.4:7, where Cain must master the sin which desires to have him. Nobody limits sin's desire for Cain to the sexual variety, so given the context of judgment, why do it for Eve? Others say the desire is that Eve would long for Adam to have dominion over her, but in a fallen race I think we can safely say that's a bit hopeful! *In fact the object of Eve's desire is clearly stated: it's the man himself!* In this new pain-filled life beyond the garden, she would need his love and at times his provision/protection. She would need *him!* She would 'reach out' for him. She would 'long' for him. She would 'turn' to him. These are the ways ancient Jewish scholars translated this word into Greek. These are the translations Greek-speaking 1st C Christians (incl. Paul) knew. In the naming of the animals, God had demonstrated to pre-fall Adam that he needed Eve. Now post-fall Eve would reach out for Adam. God made it so. This longing isn't a curse. It recognises the whole woman in the shadow of profound and painful change.

Now that the helper is in need of help, God decrees Adam's 'rule' over her. So what *sort* of rule is it? We need to get this right, because misunderstanding here leads directly to distortion of both gender roles in marriage and its effects upon our children, and in assembly life.

Note that this rule is mentioned only in the woman's judgment. God doesn't tell Adam to rule her. If he's introducing a shift from unity-in-diversity to hierarchy, doesn't that seem a bit odd? They both committed the same sin, then Eve is sentenced to increased pain, and Adam to painful toil and death, in both of which she would share. Any assumption that the rule punishes her even *further* creates an obvious imbalance. Wouldn't you expect parallel sin to receive at least roughly parallel punishment?

Note also that neither Adam's nor Eve's judgment contains commands. God doesn't say she *must* suffer pain in childbearing, or he *must* suffer pain producing food. We're free to try to alleviate both, and we do. But childbirth and food production can in general terms *be expected* to be painful. God has caused these things, so although they're not commands, they're more than prophetic descriptions. They're the Lord God's own decrees, and like any of his decrees, they happen. But in attempting to define the kind of rule introduced here, we should keep our sinful nature in mind, because if we're not on guard we're influenced by that. And we can't just assume that *whatever* happened is what God intended either. What we've got to do is identify a newly-introduced post-fall, marital male rule characterised by God's own nature.

The creation story tells us a great deal about God's nature. When he gave mankind dominion over the earth and its animals he didn't tell them how to do it: he expected them to use their intelligence. Eve didn't come supplied with a job description either. She was simply to help Adam. With the sole exception of the ban on the fruit of just one tree, the creation story is characterised by free will and liberty. That tells us something about the nature of our God. But in defining Adam's post-fall rule over Eve, people come up with everything from total control down to the man's right to have the final say. At every level here they reduce Eve to something less

than Adam's suitable, jointly-mandated companion. She would to some extent, even if only occasionally, be in his power, the power of his now-fallen nature. At best his view would sometimes have precedence. At worst, she'd have no say at all. She'd no longer always be answerable directly to God; she'd have a mediator, her husband. Her ideas and talents would at least sometimes be less valuable than his. His rights would be foremost.

In context, however, her punishment was increased pain. Her longing for him would naturally outwork from that, and some newly-introduced, post-fall rule would inherently follow. So what is it? We have difficulty grasping an authority patterned on God's nature because we're so busy introducing words like 'subjection' and 'dominion' here. Was Adam and Eve's dominion over the earth and its animals simply power/authority? No, it would require both responsibility and appreciation of the amazing diversity of what they were about to rule. Defining Adam's rule over Eve as power/authority/dominion is just as excessive.

In this new pain-filled life, Adam would need to take responsibility for Eve in her role as child-bearer. That's how her needs would be met; that's how her longing for him could be fulfilled. And that, in general terms, is how it's turned out. Men generally do exercise responsibility for their wives. Certainly a lot don't, but many women allow their longing to grow manipulative/domineering too. We humans are very good at inventing ways to distort both the longing *and* the rule. We're dealing with general truths here, truths constantly endangered by our fallen natures. But the underlying fact remains. Given the fall and their sentences, the woman's longing is natural, and so, too, is Adam's rule over her. Any man who thinks in terms of his right to power over his wife, or any woman who thinks in terms of his right to power over her, has tragically missed the point. It's not about power. It's not about rights. It's about assurance. Adam now had a dependant; a helper still, but at times a dependant. During pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and caring for children, it would sometimes be difficult or even impossible for her to help him. Adam's task was to provide for them by hard, sustained toil. To be responsive to their needs he must also take watchful care. Sometimes he may need to make decisions for them. At other times Eve would make her own, or they'd make them together. He had a responsibility, an authority, yes, but an authority which we should define very, very, cautiously.

Its basic context is childbearing, and for anything beyond that we should keep in mind both our own fallen natures and the mutuality of the created relationship. The key is that the parallel punishments for parallel sin are painful toil, increased pain in childbearing, and death. Since other parts of the judgments are clearly *not* punishments, why assume that the rule is an added punishment for the woman? It's linked with her longing for her husband, and it grants him neither absolute nor even necessarily general authority over her. She remains personally answerable to God.

God is here restructuring a relationship which from the beginning involved some differences. Those differences now require Adam to shoulder a new responsibility. Now he has authority to make decisions within that context, but we should make no more of that authority than Genesis itself does. When we find it necessary to make marital decisions, we need to ask if the decision-maker's 'rights' are foremost? Is the true welfare of spouse and family unfocused? Is

anyone's adult responsibility before God being swept aside? Does any family member not feel loved and appreciated, and heard? If so, 'rights' should submit to carefully-assessed responsibility.

If we want the Lord God's plan in our marriages and assemblies, we need to understand both what *did*, and what *did not* happen in the Garden, and what God did about it, not only in his justice and righteousness, but also in his grace. And if we keep that in mind as we interpret the problem NT passages, perhaps the world will be able to see a truly practical outworking of his nature.

The NT generally demonstrates a positive attitude to women. In a culture where it was considered inappropriate for a man to converse with a woman in public, Jesus does it anyway, and he openly has female friends, patrons and followers. Luke, esp., records many stories about women. Paul's co-workers and friends include many women: at Rome alone we know of 10. Certainly Jesus called twelve male apostles, but Junia may well have been an apostle to gentiles. Early assemblies had female prophets and deacons. In 1 Cor., writing to a whole congregation, at 14:26 Paul implies that women minister in the assembly according to their gifts just as do men: sharing a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, an unknown tongue, an interpretation or a prophecy. Nothing suggests women were excluded from ministering healings, discernment of spirits, words of wisdom, miracles, encouragement, contributing to others' needs, showing mercy, and administration – all listed as gifts of the Spirit. Paul instructs Titus about older women teachers of younger women, which implies that men are inappropriate for that task. Judging by the qualifications required for assembly elders (always male), their role is like that of the father of a household (except acting jointly), and in Paul's day in such households, key authoritative roles were commonly held by the master's wife or a female steward. Some women were heads of their own households, and Paul says these too should be responsible for care of family widows. On the whole, male-female NT relationships are for the period remarkably interactive and parallel with those of men. But modern minds saturated in traditional/feminist views find it very difficult to convincingly define the roles women played in early assemblies, and it's rare to encounter someone with the will to challenge their own biases and let the texts themselves indicate their own meanings.

After Gen.1-3, the other passage commonly introduced to interpret the three problem passages is **1 Tim. 5:3-16**. Some things are clear here: the Ephesian assembly has been honouring all their widows regardless of age or way of life. Everyone understands that Paul's purpose is to correct that. But is he talking about only one sort of widow, or also another group with official duties who have taken a vow of celibacy? Is he really saying the assembly shouldn't financially assist any widows under sixty? Is he really saying widows who've married twice/more are ineligible? Doesn't v14 *advise* them to remarry? Isn't this all a bit harsh? What are they supposed to do if they're again widowed and in need of help?

Many claim Paul knows that the Ephesian assembly includes a number of widows whose inappropriate lifestyle leads to unacceptable behaviour in the gathered assembly, and that's why at 2:11-12 he forbids any woman to teach or have authority over men, and that fits both 1 Cor.14:34-35 and 11:3. But *is* there any evidence at the Ephesian assembly for all these out-of-order widows?

Today it's widely recognised that a large proportion of 1 Tim. consist of citations from material which had already become traditional for Christians. 3:14, e.g., is a hymn, and various other passages reflect ideas in II Tim., Titus and elsewhere. But very few people take seriously the fact that 1 Tim. (like II Tim., Titus and Philemon) is a personal letter. Obviously these personal letters were subsequently read in assemblies, but their primary address is personal. In 1

Tim. Paul wants Timothy to know how to treat, and what to expect from masters, slaves, overseers, deacons, older men, younger men, older women, younger women and widows. He's passing on general teaching he considers relevant anywhere. Unless he specifies some local focus, whatever he's saying is what he teaches in assemblies everywhere.

Luke tells us what the Jerusalem assembly did about their widows. Acts 4:34-35 shows their practical care for their poor, and 6:1-6 how from the Jewish pattern they developed specific structures to adequately fund widows on a daily basis. But writing to Timothy, Paul's concern for widows isn't simply financial. At 5:4 he says their own families should care for them, in so doing repaying the care they'd received from them. But parents don't just feed/clothe/house their children. They take responsibility for them in whatever ways are necessary: emotionally, physically and practically. Aging widows may need a parallel kind of care, and if assembly members don't provide it for their own, Paul says, they've denied the faith *and are worse than unbelievers*. He *doesn't* say 'give these widows financial aid'. He says Timothy should make sure that the assembly is 'honouring' widows who are 'truly widows', but *not* 'honouring' others.

In Paul's world benefactors were routinely honoured. If you built the city new baths, or a street fountain, or funded renovation of a temple/public facility, or corn during famine, or an event, whether you were male or female you received public civic honours, which might mean an inscription, or a crowning, a statue, a seat at the hippodrome, funeral honours and so on. In private life, men and women were supposed to honour their parents. A man's political career could be ruined if he failed to do that. When Paul says that aging Christian widows who have faithfully reflected Christ, are well-known for various good deeds, but have no Christian family members to honour them, should be included in this list, he's applying that same custom of honouring benefactors, whether that be financially or whatever is considered appropriate for individual cases. Widows who haven't faithfully reflected Christ by living the kind of life Christians are supposed to live, don't deserve that honour, he says. And widows under sixty don't get it either; they may receive assembly assistance with the rest of the poor, but they're not to be honoured in this list of benefactors. Qualifications for this honour are simply the standards required of all believers; they're not a specific job description.

So why do people claim this passage does list the qualifications for an official order? Like this: v14 urges younger widows to remarry, but vv11-13 say widows who even *desire* remarriage are worthy of judgment. How can this be explained? Well, 9b *could* mean a 'once-married woman', so at v11 these widows' 'first faith' must be some official vow of celibacy, only their sensual desire/wantonness has proved so overwhelming that they've probably broken that pledge.

That entire argument rests on just three expressions: at v9 *henos andros gune*; at v11 *katastreniao*; and at v12 *pistis*. Interpretation of the first depends entirely on its context, so we need the meanings of the other two. The last means 'faith', and that's how some translate it, but even they generally understand it here to refer to a pledge; others openly translate 'pledge' solely because they believe that's what the context requires, so again the meaning depends on the context. So *katastreniao* is critical. English translations invariably convey ideas of sensual desire

/sexual wantonness, but the word appears nowhere else in the NT, and nowhere in surviving literature/inscriptions or any document from the period. It can be defined only by the literal meanings of its parts together with its context. It has two parts. *Streniao* means 'be self-indulgent'; it can't be restricted to sexual wantonness/sensual desire. The *kata* part *can* intensify meanings of words to which it is attached, but it doesn't always do that. So where do the translators get the sexual connotation from? Their own preconceptions!

But that's not the only thing wrong with this picture. At v11, how come this sexual wantonness seems more directed *against Christ* than *towards* somebody? At v13, why would these widowed 'wantons' so openly spend their time running around gossiping, idling, being busybodies and talking foolishness, all of which surely implies considerable time spent with other women. Wouldn't they be better served going where men might be, or at least trying to *look* like suitable candidates for marriage? At v9, why on earth would the 60th birthday (not 40, 50, 70) mark the point when all this sexual fire can be safely assumed to have burned itself out? And, above all, are there really so many apparently Christian, officially-avowed, aging widows being so rampantly wanton that Paul finds it necessary to cross *all women up to 59 years* off this list? This is *bizarre*!

Judging from surviving literary and medical sources, the aging process at that time was more or less the same as today. Given the physical changes that implies, one would think very few women up to age 59 would be experiencing overwhelming lust. At this early date there's no historical evidence of any official order of Christian widows, let alone an order pledged to celibacy, at Ephesus or anywhere else. Its existence depends solely on that one word in this one text, which is more convincingly translated 'be self-indulgent'. There's no valid reason, therefore, to decide that *pistis* means 'pledge'. And if we compare 3:2 'a one-woman man', 5:9 logically means a 'one-man woman', a woman faithful to her husband however many times she remarried (cf. NIV with alternatives).

And finally, 1st C Greek and Roman parents/guardians often provided brides with dowries which were meant to be the source of their future upkeep. Her husband invested the dowry, and if she became widowed/divorced, her father/legal guardian took over. But the woman herself often had control of the income from those investments, and many other women worked in all sorts of occupations. But even self-funded widows may require other sorts of care. Other assembly women would be slaves, so *could* not legally marry, and their children may legally belong to their masters. Freed female slaves may not be able to expect much support from children who remained enslaved, or (as often occurred) others who were now free but still legally obliged to pay some of their income to their former masters. So when Paul urges younger widows to remarry and have children, he is surely aware of these normal situations. Given his intelligence, social background and experience, not to mention his 1 Cor.7, he hardly seems likely to insist even that all younger *dowried* widows *must* remarry and have children, because it would obviously depend on the availability/suitability of husbands!

So in I Tim. 5 there is no evidence whatsoever of large number of celibate widows whose lustful behaviour makes up part of the Ephesian background. We need to understand that when considering 1 Tim.2:9-15.