

# **Editing the Bible for Patriarchy - How Church scribes diminished and devalued women in the early Christian Church**

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If you are an evangelical Christian, a member of the Christian orthodoxy, or just someone that believes that the bible is an authoritative source for spiritual guidance and inspiration, you have a problem. That problem, as born again bible scholar Bart D. Ehrman points out, is that the bible is a fudged document. Original manuscripts of the Gospels or the Acts or the Letters that make up the New Testament do not exist. Original copies have been lost for centuries. What remain are not even copies of these original manuscripts, but copies of copies of copies. What is worse for those who believe in the literal and inspired truth of the bible is that there are differences between all of these copies (Metzger and Ehrman 2005). Scholars disagree exactly how many differences there are, but the count runs as high as 400,000 variations in available manuscripts. The problem is so bad that, as Ehrman points out, “there are more variations among ... manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.” (Ehrman 2007, 90). Any discussion of an “original” and inspired text is impossible because such a thing simply does not exist. These

variations do not mean that we necessarily cannot find the original meaning and intent of the writers of the New Testament, but it does make the search for meaning challenging and problematic. You simply cannot pick up the bible and read it without taking a critical stance.

How exactly did this unfortunate and confusing situation develop? Part of it is simple error. Early copies of originals were made by amateur scribes. These amateurs were Christians in the community copying the texts so that others could read them out loud in the regular meetings that occurred in middle-class Christian homes. Early documents were difficult to copy by hand, amateur scribes had more or less time to copy, and they approached their task with more or less skill and diligence. Thus, errors were often made. However, it was not just innocent error. Sometimes, scribes, even professional ones employed by the nascent Christian Church, made deliberate changes consciously designed to impose a certain theological perspective or to diminish women and impose a patriarchal frame.

## **Gender Progressive**

The alterations made by scribes to the text had a significant impact on how Christians view the role of women. Critics generally assume the New Testament has a conservative and sexist view of women; certainly, it is a product of its time. However, there is evidence to suggest that Jesus and his apostles had a more progressive view of women's status that most patriarchs would like to admit. For example, in one passage, Mathew 22: 24-30, Jesus criticizes the notion that women should be considered property. Here Christians are told the story of a woman who is passed off between seven brothers as if she is property of the family. One by one the brothers die and the wife is forced to marry the next one in line. Finally, she dies and the question is, who will she belong to in heaven. Jesus's answer is simple, she will "belong" to no one.

‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for him. Now there were seven

brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?” Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven

In other words, when the “kingdom comes,” women will not be treated as property. The bible records that the people listening were “astonished” by this teaching, presumably because it was so out of line with the patriarchy of the day that it elicited audible gasps.

The apparent rejection of women as property is not the only astonishing teaching you find in the bible. Some early Christians, in particular the apostle Paul, had a very progressive, even non-binary, notion of gender. In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he admonishes them for straying from the true path. He also dismisses the notion of gender entirely, pointing out the basic and progressive spiritual truth that, in Spirit, in Christ, we are all united as one. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (3: 28-29)

Women are not property. Male and female are irrelevant. These are remarkably messages that resonate down to this day. And these are not the only ones. We also find in the bible that women played prominent and active roles in the church. Jesus was accompanied by women on his travels, women provided financial support for him and his disciples, he engaged in public dialogue with women and, as Ehrman points out, it was women who were “present at his crucifixion and “and who “alone remained faithful to him at the end, when the male disciples had fled (Matt. 27:55; Mark 15:40-41).”

Most significant of all, each of our Gospels indicates that it was women—Mary Magdalene alone, or with several companions—who discovered his empty tomb and so were the first to know about and testify to Jesus's resurrection from the dead (Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 23:55-24:10; John (p. 20:1-2).” (Ehrman 2007, 178–79)

So what happened? Why were women excluded from positions of authority in the emerging Catholic Church even though they clearly were prominent in the beginning? Why do Christian communities often use the bible to justify the suppression of the female sex? I suppose for the same reasons everybody fudges their interpretations; so they can reinforce their personal bias and belief. What is more important here though is to foreground the fact that the bible, in this case the New Testament, though it may contain spiritual truths, is not a divinely inspired text. The Bible is the result of a struggle, a contest, between those representing a more progressive view of human nature and human spirituality, and those pushing a more conservative view where men of power dominate the field. Thus, a certain group of scribes altered the text in places with the explicit intent of diminishing the role of women. According to Bart D. Erhman, there is overwhelming evidence that scribes altered original texts “to make them coincide more closely with [their] own sense of the (limited) role of women in the church.” In fact, he is being quite polite about it. Scribes that edited the Bible literally told women to submit, shut up, and bear children. In 1 Timothy 2, we read

A woman[\[a\]](#) should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

And in 1 Corinthians 4: 33-36 we find

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

These two passages give clear advice that women are inferior to men and that they should shut up and submit to their role as breeders. The problem with these passages, as Ehrman points out, is that the entirety of 1 Timothy was not written by the apostle Paul but by somebody who came along later. Similarly, the passage in 1 Corinthians 4 was added later as well. Both justify the extreme suppression of women and both were inserted later as part of an effort to “suppress the role of women in the churches...” (Ehrman 2007, 181). These were not the only changes, and the changes were not uncoordinated. As Ehrman notes, “In almost every instance in which a change of this sort occurs, the text is changed in order to limit the role of women and to minimize their importance to the Christian movement.” (p. 182.) Indeed, as a consequence of this suppression, the existence of female apostles was erased as was the fact that women played prominent roles in the early Christian church as deacons, preachers, and such.

So what are we to make of this? For one, it calls into question the notion that anything having to do with human spirituality is reactionary and oppressive. As Ehrman points out (Ehrman 2007), the early Catholic Church was a grassroots Church founded by a common carpenter that catered to women, the poor, and the sick. What’s more, Jesus himself was not exactly respectful of elite authority (Sosteric Under Review). Therefore, this example represents suggestive evidence that grassroots versions of human spirituality are progressive and egalitarian, but that these progressive and egalitarian systems become submerged as reactionary social class and gender roles are imposed onto the text. If this is true, if human spirituality unfolds as a contest between social class and gender groupings, then this represents an important, and largely untapped, area of sociological research.

Speaking of sociological research, as a sociologist, I have some questions. One of the more important questions that needs to be addressed, in my view, is the issue of coordination. The question here is, were the gender-reactionary changes made to the bible just random insertions by a few sexist scribes, or was there a coordinated effort on the part of Church “fathers” to suppress the role of women? If so, how widespread was (and is) this coordination? Ehrman limits interference in the scriptures to individual scribes, saying that “scribes sometimes changed their texts in order to make them coincide more closely with the scribes’ own sense of the (limited) role of women in the church,” but it seems unlikely, given the authoritarian hierarchies that characterize the Catholic Church, that professional scribes worked without direction from their superiors. It is an open question, therefore, to what extent these changes were part of an organized effort to suppress the New Testament’s respect for and acknowledgement of women’s power and place by the patriarchal elites who took over the grass-roots Christian movement. It seems likely since, as Stone (1976) and Gimbutas (2001) note, there is evidence for the widespread suppression of female Goddess spirituality, and the feminine power this represented, by Kurgan invaders (a.k.a. Indo-Europeans or “Aryans”) who descended from the Caucasus and colonized, in three imperialist “waves” (4400-4200 B.C., 300-3200 B.C., and 3000-2800 B.C.), the “relatively peaceful, agrarian, artistically creative, probably equalitarian...and goddess worshipping” societies in Greece, Italy, Britain, Ireland, Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, Germany, Scandinavia, Anatolia, India, Iran, and Chinese Turkestan” (Miriam Robbins Dexter in Gimbutas 2001). Of course, these Goddess spiritualities were long gone by the time Christ came around, but the respect and reverence shown by Christ and the proto-Church for women would almost certainly have come under fire from patriarchal elites who would certainly have felt the need to either erase or, if they couldn’t erase, colonize the progressive grassroots church.

In conclusion, it seems likely at this point that at least some of the changes in the Bible were the result of a coordinated effort to alter the meaning and the message to make it more in line with and supportive of the elite patriarchy of the day. It also seems obvious that the Bible is not a straight-forward revelation of divine spiritual truth, but a contested space where political,

economic, and gender interests intersect and clash. This does not mean there is necessarily no spiritual truth in the Bible, just that if it is there and if it is progressive, then someone has probably tried to cover it up. The reason for the cover-up seems obvious to a sociologist. It was done to reinforce structures of power and to impose forms of compliance. Such was the case with 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians 4, both of which were clearly written to shut women up. Such is the case with other passages in the Bible. This is probably true of other spiritual texts (Gathas, Vedas, etc.) as well. So called sacred texts may represent authentic spiritual truth, even “divine” revelation, but they are also clearly corrupted by those with the power and authority to alter and change the text. It is an open question for anybody interested in studying human spirituality just how much, and in what ways, original spiritual teachings have been changed.

### **Additional Reading**

If you are interested, you can read Ehrman’s full chapter on the “social” factors which caused Church scribes to alter the Bible’s text here -

<http://www.soencouragement.org/annick/misquotingjesus.htm>

### **References**

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