

---

# Reading the Bible for Gender in Development

Brian Albert Smith

---

Christian relief and development organizations make frequent and overt use of Scripture in public-facing publications, internal documentation, and field-level materials. Connections between the Bible and gender equality programming within such organizations are less obvious. This is perhaps not surprising, but it is unfortunate. Recent developments in the field of biblical studies provide an opportunity for engaging the Bible through the lens of gender equality work and vice versa. Following an overview of the practice of biblical studies and an exploration of just how Scripture has been used in gender in development contexts, readings of three biblical passages illustrate the possibility of a more robust engagement with Scripture where Christian development and gender meet.

---

## Introduction

A casual glance at any number of Christian relief, development, and advocacy (RDA) organization websites provides ample evidence that faith plays a prominent role in the field.<sup>1</sup> Christian organizations display and describe faith as a foundational and motivating factor of their work. The Bible is typically less visible than other indicators of faith, but within a few clicks one can usually find a “values” or “beliefs” statement that will often (but not always) include an organization’s claims about the Bible and its importance to the agency’s operations. If the Bible itself is not explicitly named, language such as “gospel,” “Jesus,” “Christ,” “salvation,” “church,” etc., testifies that the organization is rooted in the teachings of Christian Scriptures.

Yet explicit connections between the Bible and such organizations’ work on gender are less obvious. Despite the growth of gender equality awareness and efforts in all sectors of development, it is unclear (at least publicly) how the Bible can and does intersect with agencies’ efforts at gender equality. This may be a reflection of the natural and necessary division between the public face of Christian RDA organizations and the in-house biblical and theological work<sup>2</sup> behind any particular gender equality programming. Further, the subject of gender is contentious in society, and equally (if not more so) contentious within the church. Christian RDA organizations are no doubt aware of this

contention, and therefore may be hesitant to make explicit, public connections between Scripture and gender equality programming. A resolution to this situation is far beyond the scope of this brief paper. But given the importance of the Bible to the various constituencies of Christian RDA organizations, it is unfortunate that it does not play a stronger public role in supporting their gender equality efforts. I hope to demonstrate that Christian RDA organizations can take advantage of recent trends in biblical studies to make better use of Scripture to support their gender equality efforts in a way that is both sensitive to the particular constituencies of the Christian RDA community and reflective of the current field of biblical studies. My suggestions here can find application in programming as well as in the lives of development professionals. Part one provides a brief historical overview of the practice of biblical studies to contextualize current scholarly practice and my own recommendations which follow in part three. Part two examines the current intersection(s) of the Bible, Christian development work, and gender. Part three offers methodological considerations and then provides three examples of gender-sensitive approaches to reading the Bible.

## Methodological Context

Modern biblical interpretation traces its origins to the Protestant Reformation. In general terms, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Offutt and Reynolds (2019) provide a descriptive analysis of Christian RDA organizations.

<sup>2</sup> While there is overlap between biblical studies and theology, I will focus exclusively on the use of Scripture and biblical studies in this paper. Christian theology is typically grounded, to a greater or lesser degree, in the Bible, but I am ultimately most interested in how Scripture does and does not function to support gender equality work within Christian RDA organizations.

Reformation began a shift from “pre-critical” to the “critical” reading of Scripture. This was due in part to an interest in non-ecclesial, popular scriptural interpretation among the Reformers, though Roman Catholic hermeneutics was also ultimately affected by this change. Pre-critical interpretations were often marked by allegorical and theological methodologies. The Reformation brought a renewed commitment to the text, its own history, and the original languages of Scripture. This new focus paved the way for Enlightenment influences on biblical study. Those influences have profoundly shaped the field up to the present day (González 1994).

The past several decades of biblical scholarship have seen an explosion of interpretive methodologies that moved the discipline beyond the Western, historical-critical lens that dominated the 20th century.<sup>3</sup> Broadly speaking, the central focus of biblical interpretation has moved away from questions of authorship and textual development, redaction, and transmission, to interests in the text as literature and questions central to the interests of interpretive communities and individual readers.<sup>4</sup> At present, one finds a veritable smorgasbord of hermeneutical choices in the scholarship, with the latest in African, queer, and Latino/a/e studies taking their places alongside textual criticism, archaeological analysis, and Hebrew language work.

The *locus* of significance or meaning is a helpful consideration in illustrating the concerns of the major groups of interpretive methodologies. In the latter half of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, Christian biblical scholarship held that the meaning of a biblical text was best found in its origins: what it meant to the author and his<sup>5</sup> audience was critical to establishing appropriate meanings for the contemporary reader. One may describe this approach as “behind the text,”<sup>6</sup> the interpreter’s concern is with the author and the historical context that gave rise to their writing/collecting/editing. Readers will focus their efforts on establishing why a text was written, for whom, and when, before drawing out contemporary

significance and application for themselves and their communities.

Unsurprisingly, determining such facts about ancient texts is not easy, and one reason scholarship turned its focus away from “behind the text” is that most scholars could not agree on the “when” or the “for whom.” Even if some consensus could be found, authorship and authorial intent came under serious fire by the middle of the twentieth century. Biblical scholarship followed the lead of literary scholarship more broadly and began to study the text itself in ways that celebrated the Bible as literature. In this view, biblical texts establish meaning through rhetorical device, structure, word choice, characterization, dialogue, etc., and they can do so independent of the original setting of the author, the first audiences, or even events described in the text. I refer to this interpretive emphasis as reading “within the text.” While some more conservative readers might be unnerved by a departure from traditional historically grounded hermeneutics, many have found this particular focus on the text to be a helpful addition to the methodological toolkit.<sup>7</sup>

In the end, the shift from author to text set the stage for the most recent developments in biblical studies: acknowledging the power of the reader in making meaning. Higher-critical methods too often assumed that interpreters operated objectively, sifting evidence and drawing conclusions without bias or prejudice. But assumptions of readerly objectivity waned as the world became more interconnected and as the biblical studies guild acknowledged the hegemony of the white, male, European perspective that had established its rules and determined its conclusions. Readers began to openly admit their perspectives, goals, and biases. This new-found openness has allowed for interpretations based on affinity and identity, spanning and intersecting the varying components of self and community. We may refer to this type of reading as “in front of the text,” with the reader becoming an active and essential participant in making and discovering meaning, in conversation with the text and with other readers and communities. This addition to the methodological field consciously

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, McKenzie and Hayes (1999) for an exploration of this shift.

<sup>4</sup> Examples abound; a brief and helpful summary can be found in Sharp (2010). Yee (2007) provides a text-specific collection of examples. For important new biblical readings in non-western contexts, see Sugirtharajah (2016).

<sup>5</sup> While some scholars have posited that a few biblical texts may have been written by women, it is most likely the case that the vast majority, if not all, of the authors, compilers, and editors of the Scriptures were men, given the patriarchal nature of the ancient societies out of which the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scriptures come.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to William Randolph Tate (2014) for this framework. Tate categorizes biblical study methodologies according to three interpretive “worlds”: author, text, and reader.

<sup>7</sup> An excellent discussion (with examples) of this kind of work is Powell (1995). A more recent example of an evangelical commentary with a heavy narrative emphasis is Strauss (2014). As far back as 1982, Robert K. Johnston was considering evangelical interpretation in light of this methodological shift.

places contemporary readers in the history of interpretations, admitting that our social contexts and experiences play profoundly significant, if not determinative, roles in our understandings of Scripture. Many scholars have found this to be a hallmark of postmodernism and a slippery slope into relativism; others have discovered here a way through the challenges that the historical critical methodologies of modernism fail to address.<sup>8</sup>

Currently, biblical studies is something of an eclectic field. Scholars work in one area or another, drawing from one, two, or all three of these arenas in their readings of biblical texts. Below I will demonstrate the value of an imbricated approach, one that simultaneously values and layers each of the three periods in the recent history of biblical studies: contextual work behind the Bible, rhetorical analysis of the text itself, and readerly questioning based on their own interests and the interests of those with whom they are in relationship. I believe this approach will prove beneficial for those working in Christian RDA organizations—in program development, in the field, and even in donor relations. I hope to demonstrate the need and possibility for a more robust engagement with Scripture where Christian development and gender meet. First, I will discuss the intersections of Christian development, Scripture, and gender, before proposing how to read the Bible for gender in Christian development work.

## **The Bible, Christian Development Work, and Gender**

**The Bible and Christian Development Work:** In *Walking with the Poor*, Bryant Myers (2011 [1999]) advocates for a holistic, shalom-centered approach to transformational development. Myers' work is important for this discussion because it functions as a "primary framing device" within the Accord Network (Offutt and Reynolds 2019, 12), particularly on the issue of poverty, and is thus likely illustrative of how Christian RDA organizations make use of the Bible. Myers makes frequent reference to the Bible and the Bible's story, for the goals of transformation are "derived from the biblical story" (2011, 330). Myers' view of the Bible is representative of evangelicals, who typically have a "high" view of Scripture.<sup>9</sup> He uses the Bible primarily in a way that is generally called "proof-

texting," in which a verse or passage is called upon to support a statement or argument without a deeper analysis of its text or context. For example, a single paragraph about the "Kingdom of God" includes eight references to four different biblical books: six are only parenthetical references, and the two quotations are provided without context (88). There is little critical engagement with the Bible in which one would consider historical and literary contexts and significant cultural issues (for both author and reader). Myers does articulate ways in which the Bible can function within Christian RDA efforts (beyond merely justifying or motivating development work), and he provides resources on "Why the Bible is Important" and "How the Bible Must Be Used," including three examples of community-based Bible engagement activities in relief contexts (330–341). Two appendices with lists of topics and corresponding biblical passages follow. These are intended to be helpful reference lists, but are also a final example of an engagement with the Bible that rarely moves beyond citing and describing the chapter and verse into a deeper analysis of its meaning in its fuller scriptural context (353–355).

Myers' goal, of course, is changing relief and development work rather than doing biblical study, and he does engage significant practitioners in both theology and biblical studies. But the book itself manifests a curious irony. While building the case for transformational development, Myers uses the Bible as a supportive document, as mentioned above, primarily through the method of "proof-texting." Yet when discussing "how the Bible must be used" (presumably in the field), Myers begins to articulate the sort of questions and emphases that will interest many contemporary biblical scholars. His plea for a "life-to-Bible" (335) approach to biblical engagement in development resonates well with the third category of biblical scholarship described above: reading "in front of the text." Myers' desire to see a reader-centered, context-sensitive engagement of the Bible within development work is both commendable and

<sup>8</sup> For something of a classic evangelical critique of post-modern methodologies such as reader-response criticism, see Barton (1996, especially 235). Sharp (2010), and Clark-Soles (2010) offer more recent and nuanced perspectives. For an excellent discussion of the intersection of post-modern relativism and Christian faith, see Downing (2006, 181–208).

<sup>9</sup> This is often described as "biblicism," in which Bible is an object of devotion, is inspired by God, and is the source of all spiritual truth (Bebbington 1989, 12–13). For a recent important discussion of the phrase "a high view of Scripture," its implications, and function within the church, see Allert (2007).

admirable, even if it is not consistently engaged.<sup>10</sup> Despite the shortcomings, Myers' desire for a deeper engagement with Scripture throughout development can compel us toward stronger intersections of gender, development, and the Bible.

A more recent illustration of how the Bible operates in Christian development is Selina Palm's survey, "One Body, Many Voices" (2021). This important study demonstrates the nuance and complexity in biblical reading, interpretation, and application found in development contexts in the Global South. Palm's findings include "[n]ew ways of reading Scriptures [in Latin America and the Caribbean] to open up biblical mandates for inclusive social engagement with sacred texts by lay people," and "new contextual African readings" in response to the "colonial misuse of Scripture to legitimize slavery and colonization..." (24, 38). Palm sees her findings as part of the increase in "attention being given to vernacular, contextual Bible interpretations from outside the West" (24).<sup>11</sup> The academy's recent inclusion of reader-centered methodologies can provide important tools to engage audiences within development. Indeed, she concludes that "[c]ritical interpretive methodologies place the Bible in constructive conversation with ordinary people's lived experiences, diverse faith traditions, and the ongoing role of the Spirit within communities" (48). When considered in light of Myers' instructions on "how the Bible must be used," Palm provides evidence of the fruit of such labors.

To this point I have not engaged the subject of gender as it relates to biblical study and Christian development work. Myers discusses gender, advocating for complete inclusion: "Transformational development that does not include gender analysis and seek the empowerment of women will fail" (113). But there is essentially no connection between gender and Scripture in *Walking with the Poor* beyond a sentence about the Garden of Eden story: "The relationship between men and women became distorted and unequal (Gen. 3:16)" (65). But Myers does not address gender vis à vis the Bible, and gender does not appear among the topics in either appendix of transformation-relevant biblical passages. Gender does appear in

Palm's survey in a number of places, but not with significant attention to how the Bible and theological reflection can contribute to the work of gender equality as an intersectional component of development.

**Christian Development Work and Gender:** Just as the biblical scholar is likely to ask different questions of the Bible than the lay person, the sociologist and anthropologist may treat gender differently than the theologian or pastor. Reproductive rights and cultural expectations within marriage are just two areas in which religion exercises powerful influences on gender issues in development. Donor constituencies also bring their own religious and theological perspectives on gender to bear on Christian RDA organizations, and those are perspectives to which agencies are naturally attentive.

As Barbara Crandall (2011), Mariz Tadros (2010), and others have noted, gender and religion have a complicated relationship. Christianity is no exception. Despite the fact that the Christian Scriptures "leave no doubt that Jesus treated all people... as equals" (Crandall 2011, 129), the history of Christianity is unfortunately characterized by hierarchy, war, conquest, colonialism, racism, and sexism, the latter explored at more length in the Jones and Odhiambo article (2025) in this issue. From the fifth century onward, women were subjugated within the structure of the church and enjoyed precious little agency. Even after the Protestant Reformation, a dominant hierarchy remained in most of the church. Scripture was and is frequently utilized to maintain what is perceived as a God-given hierarchy in the family and the Church.<sup>12</sup> The Christian Church is a large and complex place, however, with much diversity of perspective and practice in gender-related issues.<sup>13</sup>

The situation in development contexts reflects a similar complexity. Local religious traditions (Christian and otherwise) may certainly contribute to gender inequities. But in some quarters religious texts and tradition can be reinterpreted to counter gender biases. For example, Josephine Para-Mallam Oluwafunmilayo notes that "Nigerian women from faith-based organizations are now employing religious discourse to mobilize against gender discrimination" (2006, 410).

<sup>10</sup> My critique of Myers will likely sound harsh, but he is simply modeling the dichotomy often seen in biblical studies: the academy asks questions of reader, text, and author, while the layperson makes a different use of Scripture (something he admits on p. 332).

<sup>11</sup> Another excellent example appears in the same volume: Solano Miselis and Condori Quispe (2021) engage extensively on biblical texts through the lens of ethnicity.

<sup>12</sup> Pamela Cochran (2005) provides an excellent history of the tangled web of biblical, theological, ecclesial, and cultural strands that converge when conservative Christians engage the subject of gender. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (2021) reflect contemporary complementarian thinking.

<sup>13</sup> Crandall's chapter on Christianity (2011, 105-149) provides a helpful historical overview of the role and status of women within Christianity. See also Barr (2021).

Similar work has been observed in Thailand (Tomalin 2006). Tragically, the long history of colonialism's justification by means of Scripture has created ongoing challenges in combating inequality and injustice that arise, in many cases, from a colonialized interpretation of Scripture (Stegmann and Marlyn Faure 2015). More recently, Nyahunda Louis et al. have demonstrated that "barriers to gender equality in Nyanga rural district [Zimbabwe] are embedded in cultural, religious, and political factors" (2021, 33). Clearly, religion often inhibits efforts toward gender equality.

Despite these challenges, many voices within the Christian RDA world see faith as an important resource. Marshall and Van Saanen (2007) present an essentially positive and hopeful view of the partnership between the development world and Christian RDA organizations. They acknowledge the challenges of working across faith and development lines, noting in particular women's rights and reproductive health. But gender is not a central focus of this work, and the role of the Bible in this intersection is typically left unexplored.

Deryke Belshaw et al. (2000) offer a similarly positive perspective, focusing on the relationship between the World Bank and churches in Africa. This work provides an assessment of the challenges of working in and with churches that bear the image of colonialism and function as organizations that simultaneously empower and marginalize. While the World Bank is "necessarily nonconfessional," it recognizes the need for and value of working with Church and other religious organizations (viii). The need for gender equality is strongly articulated throughout the text, particularly the section on gender and AIDS. But as in other places, the promise of hope and good gender work for the church (and other Christian organizations) is not robustly connected to biblical studies. Scripture is referenced on several occasions throughout the essays in the collection, but the most thorough engagement resembles the kind of "proof-texting" method we see in Myers.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Bible, Christian Development Work, and Gender:**

Careful students of the Bible are aware of the challenges of reading the Bible for gender equality. Because the communities of ancient Israel, second-temple Judaism, and early Christianity were part of broader patriarchal societal structures, the texts they produced bear the marks of that patriarchy and its concomitant hierarchy. Scholarship has long contested the degree to which the

Bible's teachings on a number of societal issues can and should address our contemporary perspectives and behavior (e.g., slavery, the Sabbath, religion-state relationships, the role of women, human sexuality).<sup>15</sup> Thus, when we look to the Bible, we must be critically aware of the cultural markers borne by the text. And we must be willing to bring those markers into conversation with our own beliefs, which are often developed in conversation with a range of biblical texts in the first place. This is challenging work, as it frequently finds opposition within the hierarchic structures of Christian organizations (including the church). An example from one Christian RDA organization might be helpful.

In 1999, Linda Tripp published her account of gender work within World Vision. As World Vision Canada's Vice President of Advocacy, Tripp was well-positioned to give account of World Vision's work in the latter part of the twentieth century, as well as the organization's biblical and theological reasonings behind it. What Tripp calls "gender issues" (64) were incorporated into World Vision's programming in a variety of ways, because "at least half those living in poverty are women and girls" (64). Tripp acknowledged that local culture and tradition can justify "the denial of access to resources and services, including education and health-care" (64) to women and girls. She addressed the relationships at the heart of the work: "A concern for gender issues and women's poverty is therefore a concern about the roles and relationships which regulate women and men in their daily lives and about how these relationships support or subjugate, empower or deny the individual to engage fully in life — physically, socially, and spiritually" (64).

Tripp recounts that in 1989, "gender issues became a priority for World Vision's Council and Board," which appointed a "Women's Commission" (65). One task of that commission was to write a theological reflection paper that would provide a biblical foundation for a new policy to address the lack of women in both organizational structure and programming. Tripp laments the "slow process" of policy implementation but celebrates the appointment of a first international "Director of Gender and Development" in 1998 (65).

Tripp's presentation of the biblical and theological justification for World Vision's work toward gender equality draws attention to Jesus' treatment of women (nearly universally positive), his breaking of societal norms concerning women's health, inviting women into the public sphere, and addressing the sexual

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the list of leadership qualities evinced by the biblical character Joseph (37), and a list of passages illustrating that "The whole message of the Bible is about HOPE, LOVE, and the FUTURE" (139).

<sup>15</sup> The concept of a "biblical teaching" is more complicated than often realized; *what* the Bible *teaches* is typically a manifestation of a faith community's interpretation of biblical texts.

exploitation of women. She quite generally addresses Pauline texts often used to justify unequal treatment (at best) and misogyny (at worst) (67). This is a helpful document that demonstrates that World Vision was considering issues of gender, both organizationally and programmatically, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But Tripp does not address the Old Testament or some of the more challenging New Testament texts regarding gender, and the lasting impact of her work is unclear.<sup>16</sup> I hope to demonstrate a different, more useful way to make use of Scripture at the nexus of gender and Christian development work.<sup>17</sup>

As indicated above, recent decades have seen a rich expansion of biblical studies methodologies centered in the interests of contemporary readers and their identities, socio-economic statuses, affinities, etc.<sup>18</sup> These developments are not limited to Protestant scholarship; Roman Catholic readers are engaging the same questions (Kelly-Zutowski 2005), as are those in Judaism (Aschkenasy 1998, Freymer-Kensky 2004, Scholz 2017) and Islam (Rahemtulla 2018). This flourishing coincides with increasing awareness of non-Western readings in development contexts and the burgeoning need for gender-sensitive engagement with the Bible, despite its challenging history and characteristics. If we do not wish to reject difficult texts out of hand, we must find ways of reading difficult texts that focus on the marginalized, celebrate their perseverance, mourn their mistreatment, and consider their subversions as potentially inspirational. Following some methodological considerations, I reflect on a few biblical texts in hopes of modeling how development practitioners might incorporate a gender-sensitive

approach to reading Scripture for both personal spiritual enrichment and professional mission.

### Reading the Bible for Gender<sup>19</sup> in Development Contexts

**A Three-Fold Approach:** As I described above, the movements in biblical studies over the last 150 years have provided necessary corrections and openings, allowing for readings that are less dependent upon what texts may have meant in the past, and more centered on speaking to the experience of readers in the present. These shifts in biblical scholarship have paved the way for women to exercise their gifts more fully in the church, as well as within Reformed and Conservative Judaism. Reading “before the text” has provided for greater equality within communities of faith, and there is evidence that such readings are providing for fresh opportunities in development contexts. But these changes do not require a rejection of historic interpretive interests (those that are rooted in the author and the text).

Reading “within” and “behind” the text can also prove beneficial to a gender-supportive hermeneutic. Careful historical work on the ancient world can unearth data about the lived realities of women in the ancient world, which can then better inform our readings of biblical texts.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, attention to the rhetorical artistry of biblical narratives can help us notice the way texts often work to shape the reader’s understanding of character and plot. These explorations “behind” and “within” the text will not always result in encouraging or hopeful interpretations for some, but they will expand the understanding and visions of others by providing valuable insight, thus

<sup>16</sup> In 2022 I worked with the World Vision US Gender Equality and Social Inclusion team to develop a *GESI and Faith Reference Guide*. World Vision GESI staff were unaware of Tripp’s article, and while WV had developed other internal documentation addressing gender in their development programming, it lacked the biblical connections Tripp was intent on making.

<sup>17</sup> World Vision is not by far, of course, the only Christian RDA organization incorporating gender in their programming. Tearfund’s “Transforming Masculinities” program makes explicit connections to faith and Jesus (Deepan 2024 and Deepan and Blake 2025, in this issue), and their “Hand in Hand” Bible studies demonstrate how the Bible can be used to address gender in development contexts (Tearfund 2015).

<sup>18</sup> For examples of feminist readings, see Bellis (2007), Gafney (2017), Graybill and Huber (2021), and Melanchthon and Whitaker (2021). Latina/o examples can be found in Lozada Jr. and Segovia (2014). For an exploration of the role of the Bible in the lives of some prominent African American Women, see Owens (2013).

<sup>19</sup> In the examples that follow, I focus on the women in the stories. They are most often the marginalized in both the Bible and in contemporary society. But gender-sensitive readings can and should also include men, who are subject to the same societal structures. I should also mention that some biblical interpreters have found in the presence of eunuchs in various biblical passages (particularly the Book of Esther and Acts 8) opportunities to consider the presence of intersex individuals in the Bible. A separate paper could address the intersection of the Bible, Christian development work, and disability/social inclusion. See Moss and Schipper (2011).

<sup>20</sup> Section I of Graybill and Huber (2021) contains eight essays that “engage in rich historical and literary analysis” (15). See also Ackerman (1998), Bird (1997), and Kraemer and D’Angelo (1999).

contributing to a reader's response "before" a text. Another important reason for continuing to allow for readings "behind" and "within" the text is strategic. Many evangelical readers favor historical interpretations in hopes of arriving at the "original" meaning of a text.<sup>21</sup> This corresponds to the common evangelical belief in the inerrancy and/or infallibility of Scripture. Readings that purport to find meaning beyond the original authors' intent or the early audiences' understanding can appear to run the risk of relativism. Incorporating historical inquiry alongside textual and readerly interpretation can encourage those who might be less comfortable reading for the artistry or the activity of the text in relationship with its readers.

I therefore advocate for a three-fold approach to reading the Bible in which all three areas of engagement—behind, within, and before—function and inform one another simultaneously. In following examples, I attempt 1) to demonstrate that attention to historical information will make a text more accessible to contemporary readers, 2) to illustrate that *how* a text is written can affect its meaning, and 3) to invite questions that probe the intersection of Christian development and gender. I trust that those in the field will find themselves asking more salient questions of their own.

**Achsah's Inheritance:** Joshua 15:13–19 tells the story of Achsah, daughter of the ancient Israelite hero Caleb. The context is one of conquest. Joshua has led the Israelites across the Jordan river and into the promised land, and they have conquered the territory of the Canaanites. At this point in the narrative, Joshua is allocating the newly conquered territory to the various tribes. He grants a certain territory and its cities to Caleb, who needs to defeat two cities before assuming control. He takes care of the first city by himself, but asks for assistance in defeating the second city (Kiriath-sepher):

*Caleb said, "Whoever attacks Kiriath-sepher and takes it, to him I will give my daughter Achsah as wife." Othniel son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb, took it; and he gave him his daughter Achsah as wife (Joshua 15:16–17<sup>22</sup>)*

The gender-sensitive reader will immediately notice that Caleb offers his daughter as both incentive and reward. She is the prize for Othniel, and the price that Caleb is willing to pay for his final victory. All

cultures, ancient and modern, have complex rites and customs surrounding marriage, including bride prices and dowries. While we might not understand the precise cultural meanings behind Caleb's offer of his daughter or the relationship between a typical bride-price and the risk that Othniel takes in battle, the text raises such questions and asks us to wonder about the use of a daughter as a reward for military achievement (we find a similar situation between Saul and David in 1 Samuel 18, in which Saul offers his daughter Merab to David in return for David's "valiant" battle performance).

Othniel also bears notice as a relative of Caleb. Though the precise relationships between men is often difficult to determine in the Hebrew Bible (a "brother" can have a broader meaning than one who shares a father or mother), the identification of the winning warrior in this passage as a relative of Caleb indicates that this marriage is particularly suitable in a culture that practices endogamy. Readers in contemporary endogamic societies will find a connection to and understanding of this feature of the story that Western readers will not.

The next scene in the story changes this situation from a seemingly harmful patriarchal practice in which a woman has little or no agency, into a much more complex episode in which a woman exercises at least limited self-determination.

*When she came to him, she urged him to ask her father for a field. As she dismounted from her donkey, Caleb said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Give me a present; since you have set me in the land of the Negeb, give me springs of water as well." So Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs. (Joshua 15:18–19)*

This somewhat cryptic passage is rich with complexities that break down societal and readerly expectations and demonstrate Achsah's desire and capacity to advocate for herself—even to the point of claiming property. Achsah is not content with the land in which her father has "set" her; the Negeb is quite dry, and her portion is apparently unsuitable for her purposes. She initially "urges" her husband to advocate on her behalf, but whether he does or does not is left unsaid. Something seems to be missing after the first sentence, and the reader is left to fill in the gap.<sup>23</sup> We might assume that even if Othniel did do as she urged, she was not pleased with the result. Or we might assume

<sup>21</sup> A classic and still popular example of such an approach is Fee and Stuart (1993).

<sup>22</sup> All translations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Version*.

<sup>23</sup> This is an excellent example of Hebrew narrative's use of silence to convey a non-response. We see similar situations in dialogue, in which one conversation participant simply does not respond to the other. The first speaker is then reintroduced by an unnecessary "Then [they] said," which emphasizes the absence of a response. See Exodus 33:20–21 for another example.

that Othniel did nothing. The story moves immediately from her urging her new husband to her approaching her father directly. Caleb's words to his daughter, "What do you want?" could indicate either concern or annoyance.<sup>24</sup> Is he troubled by his daughter, or is he troubled for her? The language invites the reader to make decisions about the story itself. The reader's choice will be influenced by any number of things, including their assumptions about the daughter-father relationship. Achsah then makes her case: the land where he has put her is dry, and she wants access to water as well.

The reader is left with several gaps, and our own cultural norms and expectations will want to fill them in. How we fill them will be determined by our own frameworks and interests. Because Achsah is given as a prize, we might assume that she has no agency or voice. And when she is displeased, her request first goes to her husband. That first request for a field may have been fulfilled by her father (with the dry *Negeb*), but the way the narrative moves immediately to her response shifts our attention away from the men and directly to Achsah herself. She thus inverts the patriarchal structure by reversing the sequence of the initial narrative: she is given by Caleb to Othniel, but when Othniel fails her, she goes directly to Caleb. And her father does not fail her this time.

This is not the only instance in the Hebrew Bible in which women are permitted to inherit land (see Numbers 27), but most careful readers will recognize a certain uniqueness to Achsah's story. Here is a woman who does not settle for an unacceptable portion, and she does not settle for a husband who will not adequately advocate on her behalf. She does not resist the violence of a marriage won by military victory, but neither does she accept a marriage that will not meet her needs. She deserves and demands full access. Contemporary readers will compare their own agency with Achsah's and might also wonder about how this story would have encouraged women in similar situations across the centuries of the story's telling.

**Huldah the Prophetess:** In the latter years of Ancient Judah, king Josiah ordered a restoration of the Jerusalem temple. During that process, the high priest reported,

*"I have found the book of the law<sup>25</sup> in the house of the LORD."* (2 Kings 22:8)

<sup>24</sup> A word-for-word translation of his address is "What to/for you?"

<sup>25</sup> While most English versions translate the Biblical Hebrew word *torah* as "law," it is best understood as "teaching." Just what the high priest discovered in the temple is thought by most scholars to be some form of the book of Deuteronomy.

<sup>26</sup> The story is repeated in 2 Chronicles 34:22–28. The circumstances around the discovery of the *torah* are slightly different in the Chronicler's account, but the portion of the story about Huldah is essentially the same.

The book is taken to the king, who directs the priest to:

*"inquire of the LORD for me, for the people, and for all Judah..." So the priest... went to the prophet Huldah the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah...; she resided in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter, where they consulted her. She declared to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel..."* (2 Kings 22:13–15).

Huldah then speaks on behalf of God. This is a relatively rare circumstance of a woman serving as God's mouthpiece, and this particular situation demonstrates one of the roles of a prophet: speaking truth to power. Prophets in the ancient world worked in several spheres. Some operated within the palace as counselors to the king. Others existed outside the power structures of temple and palace providing check to help balance the powers. Huldah's (God's!) message to the king is not a happy one, but the divine word instigates significant religious reforms. We hear no more of Huldah after this episode,<sup>26</sup> but her brief appearance requires additional comment.

The high priest is commanded to "inquire of the LORD," and the priest goes immediately to Huldah. The priest does not pray, and he does not visit a male prophet. He goes to Huldah, and the king does not balk at the message Huldah returns. Everyone believes what she says, and they respond with significant, national religious reform. And while the reform that ensues is described purely in religious terms, the prophets were known for articulating the intersection between religion and socio-economics (Brueggemann 1978, 17). It is quite possible that this reform movement involved addressing matters of injustice as well as religious infidelity.

Huldah is described as a prophetess and as the wife of Shallum, who may have been the grandson of a government official. So while she may be tangentially connected to the government, she does not live in the temple region or in the palace complex. So why do these officials travel to consult Huldah? The lack of an explanation in the text indicates that none is necessary. The officials went to Huldah because she was known and trusted. Her reputation made her the logical choice, and the reader may well assume that this was not the first time they had visited her.

Finally, while modern readers might be surprised to find a woman consulted in such serious matters, the biblical text itself treats this as business as usual. There

is no hint in the text that this was a surprising action for the king's officials to take, which might give the lie to the reality that relatively few women in the Hebrew Bible are thus represented. Huldah is indeed one of several women who speak about or on behalf of God in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Miriam, Hannah, Deborah, and Abigail), and these occasions are rightly celebrated. But the number of female voices is far, far exceeded by the males who speak for the divine. Contemporary readers are thus left with the question of whether the Bible accurately reflects the reality of the ancient world, or whether Scripture is overly selective in determining which women's stories are told. Today's readers will also compare the work of Huldah to their own experience of women operating within the religious structures of the day and will place this text in conversation with other biblical passages that bear on the roles of women in society more broadly.

**The Syro-Phoenician Woman:** While the story of Achsah illustrates the complicated agency of a daughter given as a battle prize and Huldah demonstrates the reality of a woman moving among the powerful, other biblical texts show us women in entirely different situations. We find women and children who are much closer to those development practitioners might encounter, people whose stories might resonate with people in today's Global South. The vulnerability of an unnamed immigrant mother is on full display in the gospel of Mark, when a woman approaches Jesus to seek help for her daughter:

*[A] woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about [Jesus], and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." And when she went home, she found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone (Mark 7:25–30).*

Ethnicity, gender, and access are at play in this story, and Jesus' initial response will likely offend our modern sensibilities. "Dogs" is a derogatory term in many cultures. In this context it likely refers to her non-Jewish identity.<sup>27</sup> The description of her as a "Gentile, of Syrophenician origin" provides the background for the insult. Syro-Phoenicia was a territory north of the

Sea of Galilee. She is both a religious and geographic outsider. Jesus attempts to dismiss her, but this mother does not give up. While she does not deny her status as a "dog," she protests that her status should not determine her access. Even dogs get crumbs from the children. Jesus agrees.

We do not know whether Jesus actually intended to dismiss the mother, or whether he is taking the opportunity to critique any social or theological position that would deny the demon-possessed child his assistance. I contend that Jesus' original intention is irretrievable and does not matter, given the text's ambiguity. If readers change the tone of Jesus' voice, they might hear sarcasm, sorrow, or condemnation. Was he performing for those listening standing nearby? Did he wink at the woman while he played to the crowd? Each possibility will change the status of the woman in Jesus' eyes. In Matthew's version of the story (Matthew 15:21–28), Jesus twice rejects her plea, which invites for further exploration of how he might *really* see her. But in each version, the mother's persistence changes Jesus' mind, and he acts on her behalf. The story thus demonstrates the injustices of human structures that harm women, children, and the ill. And it shows that human resistance to those structures can subvert them—even those structures that are purportedly of divine origin.

We should also note that the woman places herself in her own child's position in her response to Jesus. Just as her child needs deliverance, so is she a "child" who needs food, willing to pick up scraps from under the table. Mothers reading this story will hear it in ways that fathers may not, and mothers will appreciate the wily nature of her protest. Finally, the unnamed woman's agency is found solely in her own strength. No family beyond her ill child are named; we may assume she is a single mother, widowed or unmarried, in a foreign land.

**In Practice:** Many other stories from both the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scriptures could be examined in similar ways. Intentionally reading behind, within, and before the text allows for multiple perspectives and retellings that attend to the nuances of the texts. Readers can simultaneously celebrate and mourn as they find their own voices and experiences in the text and in community with other readers. As a healthy, white, cis-gendered, middle-class American male with an extensive education, I am challenged to acknowledge that my connections to each of these stories lie entirely within the power structures of the day. If I "identify" with any of the characters in these texts, I must identify with the colonizing patriarch Caleb, the priestly class

<sup>27</sup> In Matthew's account of this conversation, the woman is identified as a "Canaanite," a term used of the original inhabitants of the land of Israel prior to the conquest in Joshua 1–11 (Matt. 15:21–28), and thus an anachronistic insult during Jesus' day. In each account she is clearly marked as Other, by both the writers and by Jesus.

hearing the “word of the LORD” from Huldah, and those using “dog” to label the immigrant mother with a sick child. I am also married, a parent, and part of an interracial household. These factors increase my interest in reading for women, children, and the marginalized. A three-fold reading in community with others can thus enrich our perspectives, enhance our understanding of the texts, and compel us to discover different and deeper meanings as we are variously centered and de-centered in our interpretations.

Reading the Bible in this way requires time and patience. One cannot simply provide a parenthetical reference as evidence of how the Bible supports a program in gender equality. These texts are too complicated for that type of usage, but they are no less our Scripture for their complexity or for their resistance to proof-texting. Gender and our experiences of it (within and outside Christian RDA work) are as complicated as these narratives. Both our sacred texts and the lives of those we serve deserve the time and nuance of careful reading and listening. Whether the stories we read are encouraging or discouraging, whether they empower or frustrate, they provide opportunities to attend to one another through our listening to both the texts and our co-listeners. They can and should be read in community, whether that community is developing gender equality programming, training local staff, or implementing new work.

## Conclusion

The Bible has played a vital role in Christian RDA efforts since their proliferation in the aftermath of World War II. The transformational paradigm articulated by Bryant Myers relies heavily on a shared belief in the authority and relevance of the Bible, but the manner in which the Bible is typically used in Christian development literature is not adequate for addressing the specific needs of gender work. Recent developments in the field of biblical studies provide an opportunity for engaging the Bible through the lens of gender in development and vice versa. Current development work in the Global South demonstrates the possibility of meaningful “life-to-Bible” engagement, and Christian RDA organizations and practitioners would do well to incorporate gender-sensitive biblical engagement at all levels: in professional development, program development and implementation, and constituency relationships.

## References

Ackerman, Susan. 1998. *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*. New York: Doubleday.

- Allert, Craig D. 2007. *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Aschkenasy, Nehama. 1998. *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Barr, Beth Allison. 2021. *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.
- Barton, John. 1996. *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*. Revised and enlarged. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Bebbington, David. 1989. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*. London: Routledge.
- Bellis, Alice Ogden. 2007. *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Belshaw, Deryke, Robert Calderisi, and Christopher Sugden, eds. 2000. *Faith in Development: Partnership between the World Bank and the Churches of Faith in Africa*. Washington: World Bank Publications.
- Bird, Phyllis. 1997. *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Brueggemann, Walter. 1978. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Clark-Soles, Jaime. 2010. *Engaging the Word: The New Testament and the Christian Believer*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Cochran, Pamela D.H. 2005. *Evangelical Feminism: A History*. New York: New York University Press.
- Crandall, Barbara. 2011. *Gender and Religion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition: The Dark Side of Scripture*. London: Continuum.
- Deepan, Prabu. 2021. “How Jesus Is Transforming Masculinity.” <https://www.tearfund.org/stories/2021/11/how-jesus-is-transforming-masculinity>.
- Deepan, Prabu, and Ruby Blake. 2025. “Transforming Masculinities: A Personal Narrative of a Continuing Journey.” *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy* 6 (2): 62–68.
- Downing, Crystal. 2006. *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy, and Art*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
- Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas K. Stuart. 1993. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Freymer-Kensky, Tikva. 2014. *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories*. New York: Schocken Books.

- Gafney, Wilda C. 2017. *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- González, Justo. 1994. "How the Bible Has Been Interpreted in the Christian Tradition." In *The New Interpreter's Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, 83-106. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Graybill, Rhiannon, and Lynn R. Huber, eds. 2021. *The Bible, Gender, and Sexuality: Critical Readings*. London: T&T Clark.
- Jones, Emily, and Jacqueline Odiahambo. 2025. Destigmatizing Eve: Tackling the Underlying Culture of Patriarchal Honor & Shame Undermining the Work of Christian Relief and Development. *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy* 6 (2): 23-38.
- Johnston, Robert K. 1982. "Interpreting Scripture: Literary Criticism and Evangelical Hermeneutics." *Christianity and Literature* 32 (1): 33-47.
- Kelly-Zutowski, Mara. 2005. "The Subversiveness of the Marginalized Women of Scripture: Models of Faith and Action for Twenty-First Century Women." *Gender Issues* 22 (4): 29-42.
- Kraemer, Ross Shephard, and Mary Rose D'Angelo. 1999. *Women and Christian Origins*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Louis, Nyahunda, Chibvura Shyleen, and Happy M. Tirivangasi. 2021. "Barriers towards Sustainable Development Goal (Sdg 5): On Achieving Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls in Nyanga Rural District of Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe." *African Journal of Gender, Society and Development* 10 (3): 33-53.
- Lozada Jr., Francisco, and Fernando F. Segovia. 2014. *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problems, Objectives, Strategies*. Atlanta: SBL Press.
- Marshall, Katherine, and Marisa Van Saanen. 2007. *Development and Faith: Where Mind, Heart and Soul Work Together*. Washington, DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / World Bank.
- McKenzie, Steven, and Stephen Hayes. 1999. *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*. Revised and expanded. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Melanchthon, Monica Jyotsna, and Robyn J. Whitaker, eds. 2021. *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, Gender, and Violence*. International Voices in Biblical Studies 14. Atlanta: SBL Press.
- Miselis, Jocabed Reina Solano, and Juana Luiza Condori Quispe. 2021. "Abya Yala: 'A House that Sings for All Nations.'" In *Theologies and Practices of Inclusion*, edited by Nina Kurlberg and Madleina Daehnardt, 299-316. London: SCM Press.
- Moss, Candida R., and Jeremy Schipper, eds. 2011. *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Myers, Bryant L. 2011. *Walking With The Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. Revised and expanded. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Offutt, Stephen, and Amy Reynolds. 2019. "Christian Ideas of Development: Understanding the Current Theories, Networks, and Priorities of Accord Organizations." *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy* 1 (1): 1-14.
- Oluwafunmilayo, Josephine Para-Mallam. 2006. "Faith, Gender and Development Agendas in Nigeria: Conflicts, Challenges, and Opportunities." *Gender and Development* 14 (3): 409-421.
- Owens, Robin L. 2013. "Scriptures and Identity Formation: Transgressing the Boundaries of Disciplinary Readings." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29 (2): 138-146.
- Palm, Selina. 2021. "One Body, Many Voices: Theological Perspectives on Inclusion and Diversity in the Global South." In *Theologies and Practices of Inclusion*, edited by Nina Kurlberg and Madleina Daehnardt, 21-55. London: SCM Press.
- Piper, John, and Wayne Grudem, eds. 2021. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway.
- Powell, Mark Allan, 1995. "Narrative Criticism." In *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, edited by Joel B. Green, 239-255. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Sharp, Caroline. 2010. *Wrestling the Word: The Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Believer*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Rahemtulla, Shadaab. 2018. *Qur'an of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scholz, Susanne. 2017. *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible: Feminism, Gender Justice, and the Study of the Old Testament*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Stegmann, Robert N., and Marlyn Faure. 2015. "Reading Scripture in a Post-Apartheid South Africa: Re-Imagining Gendered Identity Hermeneutically." *Religion & Theology* 22: 219-249.
- Strauss, Mark. 2014. *Mark*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Sugirtharajah, Rasiah S. 2016. *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*. 3rd ed. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

- Tadros, Mariz. 2010. "Faith-Based Organizations and Service Delivery: Some Gender Conundrums." *Gender and Development* 11. New York: UNRISD.
- Tate, William Randolph. 2014. *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press.
- Tearfund. 2015. "Hand in Hand: Bible Studies to Transform Our Response to Sexual Violence." <https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/series/changing-gender-norms-transforming-masculinities/hand-in-hand-bible-studies-to-transform-our-response-to-sexual-violence>.
- Tomalin, Emma. 2006. "Religion and a Rights-Based Approach to Development." *Progress in Development Studies* 6 (2): 93-108.
- Tripp, Linda. 1999. "Gender and Development from a Christian Perspective: Experience from World Vision." *Gender and Development* 7 (1): 62-68.
- 

Yee, Gale A., ed. 2007. *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

---

**Brian Albert Smith** (PhD, Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion) is Professor of Hebrew Bible at Messiah University, where he teaches Bible and Biblical Hebrew. He also co-directs Thriving Together: Congregations for Racial Justice.

Author email: [bsmith@messiah.edu](mailto:bsmith@messiah.edu)

---