

MALE/FEMALE LEADERSHIP AND KORAH'S REVOLT: AN ANALOGY?

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This study is not intended to be a defense of the male leadership position (commonly called hierarchical or traditional) or of the male/female leadership position (commonly called egalitarian or feminist). Instead it is more narrowly focused on two questions that must be addressed by both camps within evangelicalism: (1) Does the relationship between men and women necessarily reflect a logical reasoning process on the part of God that can be discerned by mankind? (2) Is it important what position is held regarding this issue, as long as one believes in inerrancy? In an attempt to answer these questions two seemingly contradictory passages in the NT (Gal 3:28; 1 Tim 2:11-15) are compared to the revolt of Korah against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16-18) as a helpful analogy to the present debate.

I. THE NEW TESTAMENT TENSION

On the surface Paul's statements in 1 Tim 2:11-15 appear to exclude women from participating in church leadership.¹ More specifically he admonishes them to receive instruction quietly, and they are not to teach or exert authority over men. The natural response of the reader is to ask why this restriction is imposed. What have women done to deserve this? Or, perhaps, what had the women at Ephesus in particular done? That some response was anticipated seems evident in view of the two OT citations supporting the admonition. The first comes from the creation account in Genesis 2 and the second from the story of the fall in the following chapter. By citing the creation narrative the secondary formation of Eve is emphasized—that is, she is formed chronologically after Adam and from the person of Adam. The point made regarding the fall is that Eve was deceived but not her male counterpart. On the surface it appears that it is because of these two historical events, far removed from Paul's time and culture, that women at Ephesus were excluded in some manner from leadership roles among God's people.

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¹The logical thought unit is 1 Tim 2:8-15, which can be divided into exhortations dealing with prayer (vv 8-10) and teaching (vv 11-15). Although men and women are addressed separately regarding the first matter, the apparent restrictions on women do not begin until the subject of teaching and exerting authority arises. Cf. J. Nolland, "Women in the Public Life of the Church," *Crux* 19/3 (1983) 17.

When the average person encounters these verses,² he finds it difficult to understand how Eve's place in creation could have permanently effected a subordinate role for womankind. Likewise one wonders why the deception of the first woman would have resulted in judgment on all women thereafter. This is especially confusing in view of the deliberate sin of Adam within the same context.

What is the key to understanding this text? Is it to be found by answering the "why" questions that arise? Many evangelicals assume this to be the case and have analyzed the text accordingly. Whether they are of the male leadership school or the male/female leadership school, commentators have generally approached this text in a rationalistic fashion, focusing their attention on the assumed "cause and effect" relationship between vv 11-12 and vv 13-15.³

On the male leadership side of the debate many have concluded that a weakness was present in womankind at creation. They argue that this resulted in the fall and permanently rendered women more susceptible than men to poor judgment, and thus to theological and administrative error in the Church. In contrast many in the male/female leadership camp arrive at a different conclusion, but (it seems) by a similar method. They find the logical clue to the mystery in a unique cultural situation then present at the Ephesian church. This, they argue, involved doctrinal heresy or a lack of education on the part of the women in that assembly. When asked why this is not explicitly mentioned in the context, they assert that it is implicitly evident in 1 and 2 Timothy if the reader approaches the text honestly and openly.

This perplexing stalemate is made even more complex by the seemingly contradictory statement in Gal 3:28, where Paul boldly asserts that in the Lord "there is . . . no distinction between male and female," for they are "all one in Christ Jesus." Again a simple reading of the text raises hard questions. For instance, how can Paul say on the one hand that there is no distinction between men and women in the churches of Galatia and then on the other hand prohibit women at Ephesus from participating fully in the leadership roles then occupied by men? How can he be so inclusive with one breath, then so exclusive with the next?

As with the difficulties within 1 Tim 2:11-15, so it is regarding the tension between 1 Timothy and Galatians. The usual method is to harmonize the apparent contradictions. As was seen above, the approach of male leadership versus male/female leadership advocates does not differ greatly. Assuming that the commentators involved share a high regard for Scripture, the difference lies primarily with which text is treated as foundational and which is "explained" in the light of the other. The male/female leadership camp usually

²R. Nicole lists eight major difficulties in this passage; cf. "Biblical Authority and Feminist Aspirations" in *Women, Authority and the Bible* (ed. A. Mickelsen; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 47-48.

³For a list of some of the more recent sources on both sides of the issue see G. G. Hull's "Response" to P. Gundry's "Why We're Here," D. Scholer's "1 Timothy 2:9-15 and the Place of Women in the Church's Ministry," and C. C. Kroeger's "1 Timothy 2:12—A Classicist's View" in *Women* (ed. Mickelsen), pp. 25, 194, and 227-243 respectively. These articles are themselves an example of this very common approach.

begins with Gal 3:28, pointing out that this is the "clearer" text and that the more obscure statements in 1 Timothy must be interpreted in a harmonious fashion.⁴ The male leadership school, on the other hand, understands 1 Tim 2:11-15 as a straightforward and practical passage—indeed, "one of the few which touches directly upon the question at issue."⁵ The Galatians passage, then, is viewed as the more abstract theological pronouncement, which concerns one's "spiritual" standing before God.

Sadly the attempts of both parties to "explain" Paul's reasoning in 1 Tim 2:11-15 in a logical fashion, and thus to harmonize it with Gal 3:28, have thus far been unsatisfactory to evangelicalism at large.⁶ Nevertheless students of the subject continue to employ this line of reasoning, hoping to find the one missing piece of the puzzle that will settle the issue once and for all. Indeed they hope for an answer to the exegetical civil war within evangelicalism.⁷

This study does not propose to have that final piece of the puzzle in its pocket, nor does it pretend to represent either position by reference to a single passage or verse. But perhaps it can clarify one or two matters so that some unnecessary wheel-spinning can be avoided. To this end the focus is limited to the two questions asked at the outset.

II. THE OLD TESTAMENT ANALOGY

These questions are answered in part by considering an OT event where there arose a faction similar to the one under discussion. It too was related to the exclusion of certain persons from religious leadership. The situation, described in Numbers 16-18, focuses on a debate between two segments of the covenant community. Those making the challenge included a Kohathite Levite named Korah along with a sizable number of his colleagues from the tribe of Reuben. For the sake of analogy this group might be labeled "assistant clergy and laity." The defenders in the dispute were Moses and Aaron, who represent what might be termed "senior clergy."⁸

⁴W. W. Gasque, "The Role of Women in the Church, in Society, and in the Home," *Cruix* 19/3 (1983) 6.

⁵D. J. Moo, "1 Timothy 2:11-15: Meaning and Significance," in *What Does the Scripture Teach about the Ordination of Women* (Evangelical Free Church of America, 1985); J. Piper, "The Order of Creation," *The Standard* (April 1984) 35-40.

⁶C. H. Pinnock, "Biblical Authority and the Issue in Question," in *Women* (ed. Mickelsen) 51-58, makes this evaluation regarding the male/female leadership camp and predicts that the situation is not likely to change. The very fact of the 1984 Evangelical Colloquium on Women and the Bible, which was almost exclusively egalitarian in attendance, resulting in the Mickelsen anthology, along with the theme of the 1986 annual meeting of ETS ("Male and Female in Biblical and Theological Perspective"), makes the same point regarding the male leadership camp.

⁷The history and present state of this controversy touch at the very heart of L. Mercadante's probing question in "The Male-Female Debate: Can We Read the Bible Objectively?," *Cruix* 15/2 (1979) 20-25.

⁸Few commentators consider the priesthood as an analogy to the male/female controversy. J. B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), mentions it only briefly, emphasizing that the Aaronic priesthood does not make the rest of the nation inferior (p. 45).

The case that Korah and his friends present is simple and straightforward. Moreover it is based on the Torah that Moses had delivered at Mount Sinai. Their text is found in Exod 19:6 and states that Israel was to be (among other things) "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." From this the contenders reasoned that layman and Levite alike were holy, that all the congregation of Israel was sanctified, set apart by Yahweh for service. It followed that Moses and Aaron should not hold positions of leadership from which others were excluded without good reason.

In contrast to Korah, Moses and Aaron began from another starting point. In Exodus 28—29 and Lev 21:16—24 Yahweh had limited the "senior clergy" ("priesthood") with a threefold restriction. It was to be comprised of (1) men (2) from Aaron's family (3) without physical defect. Thus by virtue of gender/family/physical wholeness, and unrelated to their ability to perform the service of the tabernacle, all others within God's people were excluded.

One finds in this analogy a tension strikingly similar to that seen above between Gal 3:28 and 1 Tim 2:11—15:

Inclusive statements

All Israel was to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Exod 19:6)	There is no distinction between male and female; they are one in Christ (Gal 3:28)
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Exclusive statements

Only male Aaronides without physical defect may be priests (Exod 28—29; Lev 21:16—24)	Women may not teach or exert authority over men (1 Tim 2:11—15)
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Under the old covenant the exclusion from the priesthood on the basis of gender/family/physical wholeness appears to be contradictory to the inclusive statement that "all Israel was to be a kingdom of priests." Likewise under the new covenant exclusive limitations, such as those found in 1 Tim 2:11—15, seem to fly in the face of the inclusive statement that "there is neither male nor female" in Christ Jesus. Furthermore the inclusive statements appear to the modern reader to be clearer and more logical, whereas restrictions that exclude some of God's people from leadership, without good reason given, come across as puzzling, arbitrary, even unfair.⁹ Although both situations relate to one's spiritual standing before God as it compares with her/his role in leadership among his people, in neither case do the restrictions have direct bearing on one's ability to perform the religious service involved.

III. THE TWO BASIC QUESTIONS

Before drawing general conclusions regarding the significance of the proposed analogy it is necessary to examine more specifically the two questions posed above.

⁹Of course there is not an exact NT analogy to the threefold division found in the (1) twelve tribes of the laity (here represented by the Reubenites), (2) three families of the Levites—namely, Gershonites, Merarites and Kohathites, and (3) Aaronides (both Korah and Aaron were Kohathites, but Aaron was chosen and appointed as priest). The fact that the Kohathites in general were the most privileged of the Levites in that they were entrusted with the care of the tabernacle furniture (Num 3:21—27) may explain Korah's leadership role in the rebellion.

1. *The logical reasoning in 1 Tim 2:11–15.* In relation to the supposed “common sense” reasoning in 1 Timothy, one might ask why in the analogy God chose Aaron and excluded others from the service of the tabernacle. During the years between the Exodus event and his death in the wilderness of Zin, Aaron functions as little more than an administrative aide to Moses. The one exception to this is the account in Exodus 32 where he is called upon to take personal initiative and show true spiritual leadership for a brief time in the absence of his brother. The well-known golden calf blunder that results is sharply rebuked by Moses, but only after it had cost the lives of some three thousand Israelites.

At best there seems to be no positive reason presented in the Torah (from a human perspective) for the appointment of physically whole men from Aaron's family to the priesthood.¹⁰ At worst he and some of his sons were the least likely to have been chosen (cf. Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10). But as it was with God's selection of Abraham and Jacob/Israel,¹¹ so one finds it to be true with the Aaronic priesthood. Though in each case the resultant relationships involved faith and obedience, the initial callings were unconditional.

Further, the choice of Aaron and sons did not give them license to fulfill the negative charges brought against them by the Kohathites and others—namely, exalting themselves above the assembly (Num 16:3). In contrast they had been appointed to the “service” of the tabernacle, which meant representing the nation before Yahweh. Again the analogy to NT leadership in instructive, for likewise here elders are not to “lord it over those allotted to their charge” (1 Pet 5:1–5) but rather are to emulate the servanthood-leadership practiced by Christ (Matt 20:20–28; 23:1–12).

Applying the analogy to 1 Tim 2:11–15, it seems that both camps must admit that there is at least the possibility that the reasoning offered by Paul is not “logical” but “typological” in nature. On the one hand, male leadership advocates often wish that the text read: “Because Eve was formed second [and therefore was inferior] and was deceived in the fall [demonstrating that women are more easily deceived], therefore women cannot teach or exert authority over men.” Similarly, many male/female leadership proponents interpret as follows: “Because [meaning ‘for example’] Eve was formed second [meaning ‘educated later’] and [therefore] was deceived in the fall [furthermore because women are teaching heresy in Ephesus presently due to their lack of proper

¹⁰C. J. Vos, *Women in Old Testament Worship* (Delft: Verenigde Drukkerijen Judels & Brinkman, 1968), argues to the contrary, suggesting that women were excluded logically because they (1) were supporters of the family, (2) were not fit for physical labor, (3) were needed for motherhood, (4) were subject to temporary uncleanness, (5) might be mistaken as participating in fertility cults, and (6) caused the mixing of sexes in worship (p. 193). He does not, however, indicate why other non-Aaronic men were excluded.

¹¹Although a case can be made for conditionality with regard to the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:1–3; 17:1; 22:16, 18; 26:4–5), God's choice to call him in Ur, as opposed to anyone else, seems to be conditioned upon nothing more than God's sovereign choice. Likewise the “reason” for God's choice of the nation Israel as compared to any other people is stated in Deut 7:6–7. In sum, it states that Yahweh set his love upon them because he loved them and kept his oath to Abraham. Again his sovereign choice is emphasized.

training], therefore women may not teach or exert authority [in the negative sense of the term] over men [presently in Ephesus until they are better educated].”

Although both of these interpolations link Eve and Ephesus logically, neither reflects a straightforward reading of 1 Tim 2:11–15: “Because Eve was formed second and was deceived in the fall, therefore women may not teach or exert authority over men.” Thus the apostle asserts that the “cause” (if that is the best term) is to be found in a person/Person and event far removed from the abilities (or inabilities) and/or cultural situation of the women at Ephesus. No “logical” link is present in the formula to connect the ancient event with Paul’s restrictions. Consequently the reasoning does not appear logical (from a human perspective) to the modern reader.

In summary, the analogy of the Aaronic priesthood answers in part the question regarding Paul’s logic in 1 Tim 2:11–15 by demonstrating that in the past God had restricted religious leadership on the basis of gender/family/physical wholeness, thus excluding the rest of the congregation, without providing a logical explanation. Indeed the persons involved often proved to be unworthy of their appointment, and yet the decision stood firm throughout the OT era. Furthermore this fact was generally understood and accepted by Israel in spite of the apparent tension created by the inclusive statement received at Mount Sinai—namely, that they were to be a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6).

It may therefore be concluded that if 1 Tim 2:11–15 is understood to teach that God excludes women from certain aspects of religious leadership on the basis of gender alone, this general principle should not be surprising, as if it were a new or unusual way for God to work. Although the number of criteria may have changed from gender/family/physical wholeness to gender alone, the basic principle has remained the same. It means that from a human perspective God sets the general boundaries for religious leadership arbitrarily. Further it seems clear that in both the OT and NT the criteria are unrelated to the individual’s ability to perform the service involved. As illogical as that may seem to the modern mind, it appears to be Biblical in the light of this analogy.

2. *The importance of the issue.* A second aspect of the Aaron/Korah analogy can be helpful in the present debate. The analogy goes beyond the simple reflection of the tension between the inclusive and exclusive statements. In doing so, it provides an example of the two factions within the religious community of that day, who also sharply disagreed on the issue—although both based their arguments on Scripture:

<i>Non-Aaronic Priesthood</i>	<i>Present Debate</i>
	The People’s Challenge
	Both genders are fully human and redeemed. Why do men exalt themselves above women?
	or
All the congregation is holy. Why do Moses and Aaron exalt themselves above the assembly? (Num 16:3)	God appointed male leadership. Why do some rebel against his sovereign choice?

God's Response

Discipline of those who oppose the OT
model of leadership (Num 16:31-50)

Discipline of those who oppose the NT
model of leadership?

Further, and perhaps more importantly, the OT analogy follows the relationship of the parties past their conflict to the resolution brought about by the direct intervention of God. In the Numbers account this comes quite dramatically in the form of (1) the earthquake that devoured Korah and his family (Num 16:31-33), (2) the fire that consumed the 250 men who supported them (16:34-35), (3) the plague that struck 14,700 sympathizers the next day (16:41-50), (4) the revitalized staff of Aaron that brought forth almond blossoms in order to vindicate the Levitical priesthood, specifically represented by Aaron (17:1-13), and (5) the verbal confirmation and clarification by God regarding the duties of the rest of the Levites in relation to the Aaronides (Numbers 17).

How does this concern male/female roles in church leadership? Should one expect a confrontation of the two camps, where the dispute is settled by divine intervention along the lines of the Numbers account? At least to date this has not been the case. The question is made especially difficult by the fact that no NT counterpart to the analogy exists on this particular issue. Hence no Biblical example can be cited of the sort of challenge now being made within evangelicalism by the male/female leadership school that would correspond to Korah's revolt. Or, to see it from the other side, if the male/female leadership school is correct, then the male leadership advocates have been the ones "rebelling against" the NT model for centuries. In either case it is impossible to ascertain God's response or to predict his intervention at some point in the current debate.

In spite of this uncertainty it seems warranted to draw a general principle from the analogy and to apply it broadly to the present impasse facing evangelicalism. Even though God chose Aaron without clearly stated reasons, nevertheless he took that appointment quite seriously. His intervention was dramatic, clear and to the point. By way of application to 1 Tim 2:11-15 and the male/female leadership controversy it may be concluded that the issue should not be viewed as secondary or unimportant.¹² Not only does it concern the personhood of the men and women of the Church; even more soberly it may effect in one form or another a modern display of God's discipline among his people.

IV. WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Four general conclusions can be drawn from this study that might help to lead evangelicalism through the impasse we face. First, the OT analogy warns the modern commentator concerning the seriousness of the issue, regardless of the position held. Although the apparently obvious correlation regarding

¹²Gasque, "Role" 3, implies that the Church will get over this issue as it did that of style of government, which in its day was a major divisive issue among evangelicals. In light of the analogy proposed herein this seems unlikely.

the analogy is to associate the male/female school with Korah and friends, it is possible that a reversal has taken place with the coming of the NT economy. In either case, it is important what position one holds.

Second, in light of the seriousness of the issue an extra measure of care must be taken to interpret the relevant passages with as great a degree of objectivity as possible. On the one hand, the male leadership camp must be willing to destroy the dry, cracked wineskins of traditionalism and replace them with new ones. In doing so they need to atone for the times past and present when they have exalted themselves above the assembly of Yahweh and thus perhaps incited revolt. On the other hand, the male/female leadership school would profit from recognizing that a mild form of rebellion unintentionally can become part of any agenda aimed at insuring one's rights before God and/or among his people. Authority usurped is wrong no matter what the gender or theological position of the usurper.

Third, as sides are being chosen in the heat of the debate, one must take precautions so as not to get swept away with the number of respected persons advocating her/his cause. It is worth noting that the rebellion in Numbers was led by a Levite ("assistant clergy") and two Reubenites (though "laity," yet they were from the firstborn tribe of Jacob). With this level of importance in their leadership it is no wonder so many were willing to join the revolt.

Finally, both sides must admit the possibility that "logical" reasoning may not always be behind the limitations set in the NT. Perhaps by reaching beyond the fall of mankind to the creation account Paul is saying that properly exercised male leadership was to some degree God's intent from the beginning. As evangelicals continue to search for an answer that sounds more "logical" than this, they would do well to keep in mind that Korah's argument still makes perfectly good sense.