

BOOK REVIEWS

Barr, Beth Allison. *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2021. 218 pp. + 26 pp. notes. Softcover. USD 19.99.

This is an important work synthesizing the scholarship about the role of women in the history of Christianity. The author, Beth Allison Barr, is a professor at Baylor University, specializing in medieval history. She invites the reader to journey with her through Scripture and the Christian past to discover the vital contributions of women. In doing so she shares her experience in confronting Christian patriarchy (complementarianism): “The tradition of male church leaders and the authority of male household heads function within cultures that generally promote male authority and female submission” (14).

At one point, she was barred from teaching 13-year-old boys in her Sunday school class (she comes from the Baptist tradition) because she was a woman. Her support of women teaching Sunday school ultimately led to her husband’s dismissal as pastor. As one reads the book, the very real and pragmatic aspects of complementarian ideas become apparent. Ideas matter” since concepts about women have very real consequences.

Chapter one (11–31) overviews the beginnings of patriarchy. Barr notes how most proponents of patriarchy select specific proof texts (1 Tim 2:9–15, 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). Chapter two (39–70) asks the question, What if so called biblical womanhood doesn’t come from Paul? What if “we have been reading Paul wrong?” (41). What if this is the result of “cultural peer pressure”? (41). “Christians in the past may have used Paul to exclude women from leadership, but this doesn’t mean that the subjugation of women is biblical” (41). Instead, evangelicals have utilized Paul as a weapon for their culture wars and have forgotten Paul’s invitation to be one in Christ (42).

Barr highlights several biblical arguments pertinent to Paul. First, utilizing evidence from church history, she notes that because Adam sinned, husbands made poor leaders for their wives. In fact, Peter Abelard argued that because a woman first anointed Jesus with oil, Jesus overturned male headship.

Male patriarchy was the norm in the world of the NT. Today the emphasis is on *wives* obeying their husbands, but in the world of the early NT, listeners would have been startled by the call for *husbands* to “love your wives and never treat them harshly.” “Christianity was deviant and immoral because it was perceived as undermining ideals of Roman masculinity” (54). Barr argues that Paul uplifts the female body, something denigrated in ancient Roman

thinking. Seven times Paul uses maternal imagery to describe his relationship to the churches.

Roman household codes were directed to men only; Paul addresses everyone. When Paul's writings are compared with these household codes, Paul's writings freed not only women but all household members. "Paul was using a Jesus remix to tell Christians how the gospel set them free" (47). Even non-Christians, like Pliny, criticized early Christians because women were in leadership roles and everyone met together on an equal footing—men, women, children, and slaves—in their homes (53). This was truly revolutionary, Barr concludes, and suggests that in all probability, many have misinterpreted Paul.

Perhaps the most egregious example of getting Paul backward, in her opinion, is the admonition of 1 Cor 14:33–36 about women remaining silent in church (57–63). The author argues that if this code were drawn from his Roman context, and if Paul were more concerned about cultural restrictions placed upon them, it seems that Paul's purpose was to distinguish what the Corinthians were doing from what they should be doing (set off by the apposition, "What!"). Utilizing the work of Marg Mowczko, she affirms that Paul's "meaning is the exact opposite of what evangelical women have been taught" (62). Since Paul allows women to speak throughout his letters (1 Cor 11:1–6 is the best example), it would not make sense that in another passage Paul would limit women's leadership. By interpreting Paul's statement in this narrow way, many "have ditched the freedom in Christ that Paul was trying so hard to give us" (63). This position seems to be aligned with the views of some Adventist pioneers who recognized the cultural limitations of 1 Cor 14 and debated whether this text should limit the prophetic voice of Ellen G. White in early Adventism.

One final point on Paul: in Rom 16, ten women are mentioned as active leaders (64–65). Seven of these women are recognized by their ministry, and Phoebe is specifically identified as a deacon. More women than men are identified by their ministry in this passage (65). This text thereby showcases how the biblical data might contradict modern notions of biblical womanhood (67). As support for this, Barr refers (68) to the 107 inscriptions about women deacons from the early Christian church cataloged by Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek (*Ordained Women in the Early Church* [Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005]).

Chapters three (71–99) and four (101–127) discuss views of women during the medieval and early modern periods respectively. Barr, a medievalist, is in her element, showing how women had greater access to roles of religious authority during the medieval church. Of special note are the stories of Margery Kempe, who stood up to her bishop based on Scripture, an action that shatters stereotypes about medieval women (72–74). Barr argues that "women's stories throughout history have been covered up, neglected, or

retold to recast women as less significant than they were” (84). I see evidence of this in the Protestant Reformation, where clergy were allowed to marry; but this came at a cost since opportunities for women outside of marriage declined. A woman’s primary identity in the wake of the Reformation was as wife and mother, effectively a historical construct.

Chapter five (129–150) is about how women have been written off in the English Bible. Barr describes the role of biblical translations in the cultural war. While on one side, translations like the TNIV prefer a gender-neutral text, a male headship translation is the choice of the editors of the ESV (e.g., Wayne Grudem, encouraged by James Dobson), who argued that recent gender-neutral translations are unfaithful to the Bible by adding the “slippery slope of feminism” to the text, destroying biblical truth (131). Barr notes that Christians have for many centuries translated the Bible in gender-inclusive ways. “While it is certainly true that second-wave feminism in the 1960s contributed to greater concern for gender-inclusive language in American culture, it is also true that concern for gender-inclusive language in the biblical text existed long before modern feminism” (133). The ESV is at least as equally influenced by its non-Christian culture (i.e., patriarchy) as any other translation. One of the best examples of this, she argues, is the KJV of 1 Tim 3:1–13—a text that is widely assumed to reference men in leadership roles. The Greek text uses the words *whoever* and *anyone*, whereas many translators of modern English Bibles insert between eight to ten male pronouns. She cites Peppiatt (*Rediscovering Scripture’s Vision for Women* [IVP Academic, 2019], 39), who concludes that the real problem with female leadership is not the biblical text but the “relentless and dominant narrative of male bias” in translations (148).

Chapter six (151–172), titled “Sanctifying Subordination,” showcases how perceptions of sexuality have flipped. During medieval times, women were perceived as being sexually lascivious, and the modern notion that women had to be protected from male sexual desire is a comparatively recent phenomenon. In doing so, “patriarchy shapeshifted” (153). Modesty and domesticity became idealized. This contributed and sanctified the Victorian “cult of domesticity” (165). Barr cites the well-known work of Catherine Brekus (*Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* [University of North Carolina Press, 1998]), who identified 123 women who preached and exhorted in American churches in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (169). This shows how women learned to adapt to the ever-changing rules of patriarchy, leading to what Brekus terms a “new ideology of female virtue” (169). A key argument for Barr is that the nineteenth century set women back.

Chapter seven (173–200) explores more recent history about how Christian patriarchy became gospel truth. In recent decades, a series of evangelical personalities, especially Russell Moore and John Piper, have

popularized a complementarian ideology. “Many evangelicals believe that supporting women in ministry is a slippery slope leading to liberalism and agnosticism” (177). Yet church history shows that such a narrow perspective is ignorant of Christian tradition. “It is also impossible to maintain consistent arguments for women’s subordination because, rather than stemming from God’s commands, these arguments stem from the changing circumstances of history. New reasons have to be found to justify keeping women out of leadership” (186). Her idea that patriarchy resembles racism in that it doesn’t ever go away, it simply adapts, is surely thought-provoking. Many of the roots for this debate have far more to do with the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. The idea of inerrancy was connected to biblical truth and the authority of male preachers at the expense of women. To put it another way, it was Fundamentalism that contributed in large part to the exclusion of women from the Christian church (189). “The concept of inerrancy made it increasingly difficult to argue against a ‘plain and literal’ interpretation of ‘women be silent’ and ‘women shall not teach’” (190). Such proof texting has obscured biblical truth.

The final chapter (201–218) is a call for women to be free. The notion that women are “weak,” while men are “strong” sets the stage for all kinds of abuse. The notion that women should remain “submissive” and “silent” reinforces and perpetuates such practices. Not to be overlooked is the connection between sexism and racism. “Patriarchy walks hand in hand with racism,” notes Barr, “and it always has. The same biblical passages used to declare Black people unequal are used to declare women unfit for leadership. Patriarchy and racism are ‘interlocking structures of oppression’” (208).

This book resonates with the debates going on within the Seventh-day Adventist Church about the role of women, especially since the 2015 General Conference session that turned down the request to allow individual parts of the worldwide Adventist church to decide on the matter of women’s ordination. Since that time, I have traveled extensively around the world, partly while teaching for the Adventist International Institute for Advanced Studies in the Philippines, with students in my classes from over eighty different countries. In one anonymous country that I visited, I sat as a guest with the president of that territory. He asked me what I thought of the recent decision by the General Conference, noting that he had been reelected as president and director of the women’s ministry too. When I queried why, he responded that it was because of the same recent church decision that “men are supposed to tell women what to do.” He probed me, asking me how I as a foreigner made my wife obey me. When I returned the question, he stated that he had to beat his wife regularly. What was clear to me was how people view women ultimately stems from a combination of cultural practices, along with misuse or misunderstanding of biblical texts. In some views, women are treated as property to be subjugated by men.

Conversely, as I was teaching for an intensive in another country, this time in a place where most of the students were female pastors, one pastor shared her testimony with tears in her eyes. She had given up a prestigious position to make only a small fraction of what she had been making because she felt called by God to do ministry. She said she never asked to be ordained but that some church leaders had visited, telling her and other women that they were only “temporary” until God could raise enough men to replace them. Accusations that women only wanted ordination so they could make more money seemed incredibly petty because she had given up a much higher paying job, and as she said, “I count it the highest privilege in the world to share Jesus every day.” As I taught her and others about the “great cloud of witnesses” that included women across church history and our Adventist past, they shared how this knowledge empowered them to continue proclaiming the “everlasting gospel.”

Barr’s book is well written and carefully researched. As I have engaged some of my complementarian friends, most have simply dismissed this book as written by a liberal, seeking to undermine Scripture—Barr couldn’t possibly have a “high view” of Scripture (the idea that Scripture is divinely inspired and remains authoritative and truthful for our lives today). To my pleasant surprise, the author makes it very clear that indeed she does have a “high view” of Scripture, which ironically is part of what makes this book so compelling. In other words, it is precisely because she takes the Bible seriously that she feels compelled to share the message of Scripture that “all are one in Christ” and to tell the stories of women across time and space who have proclaimed the message of Jesus Christ.

As a teacher, I plan to use this book in the future as a supplemental textbook when I teach church history. Pastors may want to utilize this book as a study book for a small group or a midweek series. While this book will no doubt not be the last word on issues related to gender, it makes it clear that Christians who wish to support and empower women are being both faithful to Scripture and consistent with a great heritage, from the time of the early Christians up to the present, who have used everything within their means to share Jesus with others. One final quibble: Adventist readers will no doubt notice an understandable but significant historical error. Barr mentions that Ellen G. White founded Adventism in 1844. While it is true that she had her first vision in December 1844, most people know that Adventism was a broader movement that preceded Ellen G. White’s ministry, and that the denomination called Seventh-day Adventist wasn’t organized until 1863.

Southwestern Adventist University, Keene, Texas MICHAEL W. CAMPBELL