

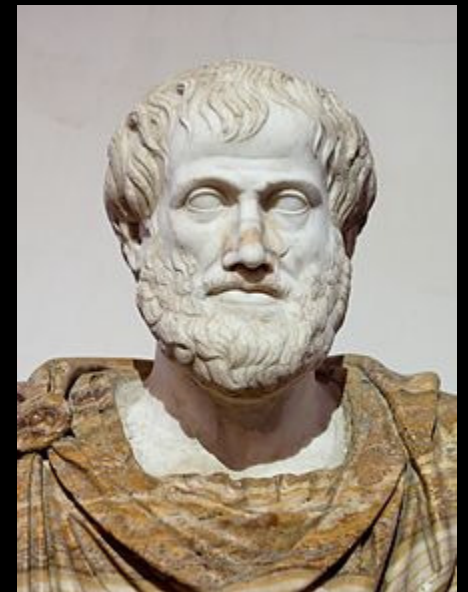
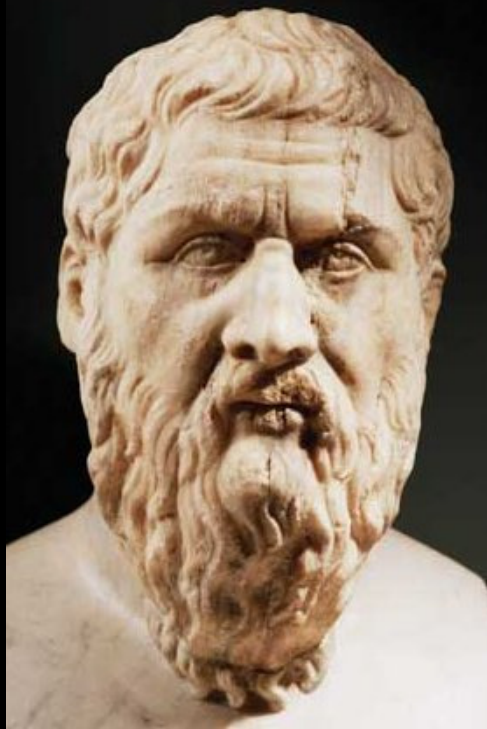
Women in the Early Church

by Mako A. Nagasawa

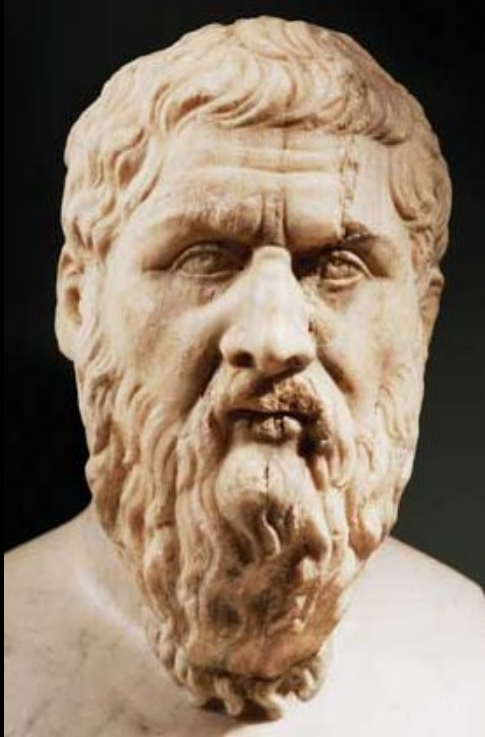
A Male-Dominated Field?



Reasons to Not Expect Much



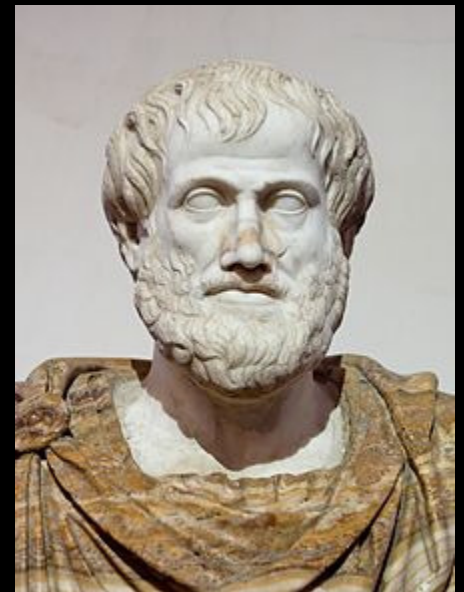
Plato



- 'It is only males who are created directly by the gods and are given souls. Those who live rightly return to the stars, but those who are 'cowards or [lead unrighteous lives] may with reason be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation'. This downward progress may continue through successive reincarnations unless reversed. In this situation, obviously it is only men who are complete human beings and can hope for ultimate fulfilment; the best a woman can hope for is to become a man.' (Plato, *Timaeus* 90e)

Aristotle

- Women are infertile males, are defective by nature (Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, I, 728a)
- 'It is the best for all tame animals to be ruled by human beings. For this is how they are kept alive. In the same way, the relationship between the male and the female is *by nature* such that the male is higher, the female lower, that the male rules and the female is ruled.' (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254 b 10-14)



Jewish vs. Greek Worldviews

Jewish

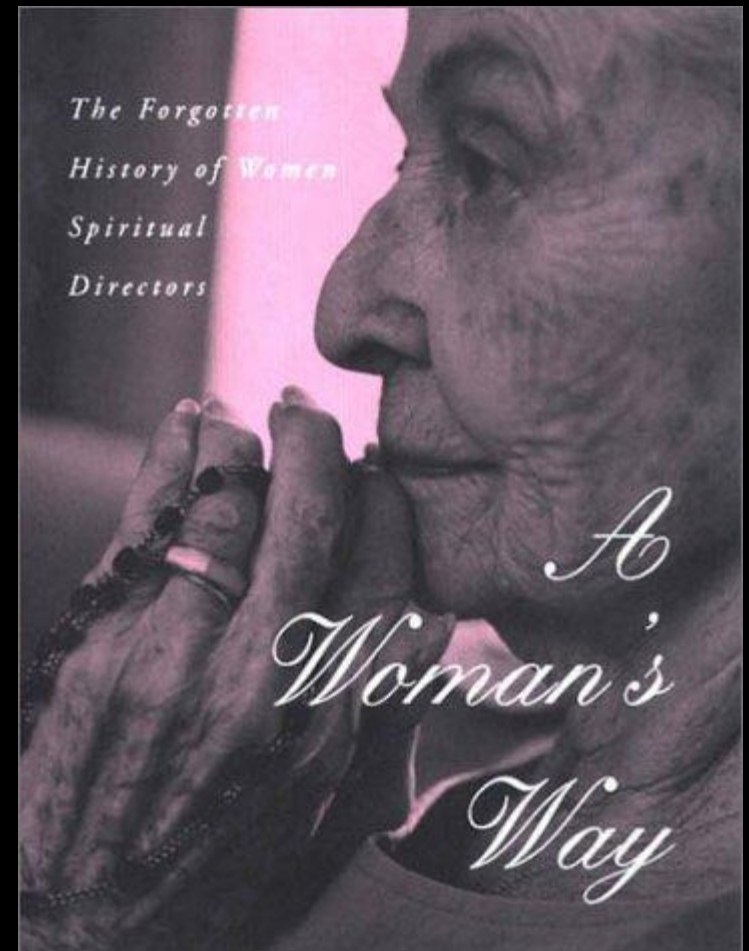
- Physical bodies good
- Death is the enemy
- Hope for bodily resurrection
- Care for the poor
- High sexual ethic of marriage, from creation order
- Men and women equal

Greek

- Physical bodies bad
- Death is release
- Hope for souls to be free; disembodiment
- Not much care for poor
- Have sex with anyone (Epicureans), or deny it (Stoics)
- Men superior to women

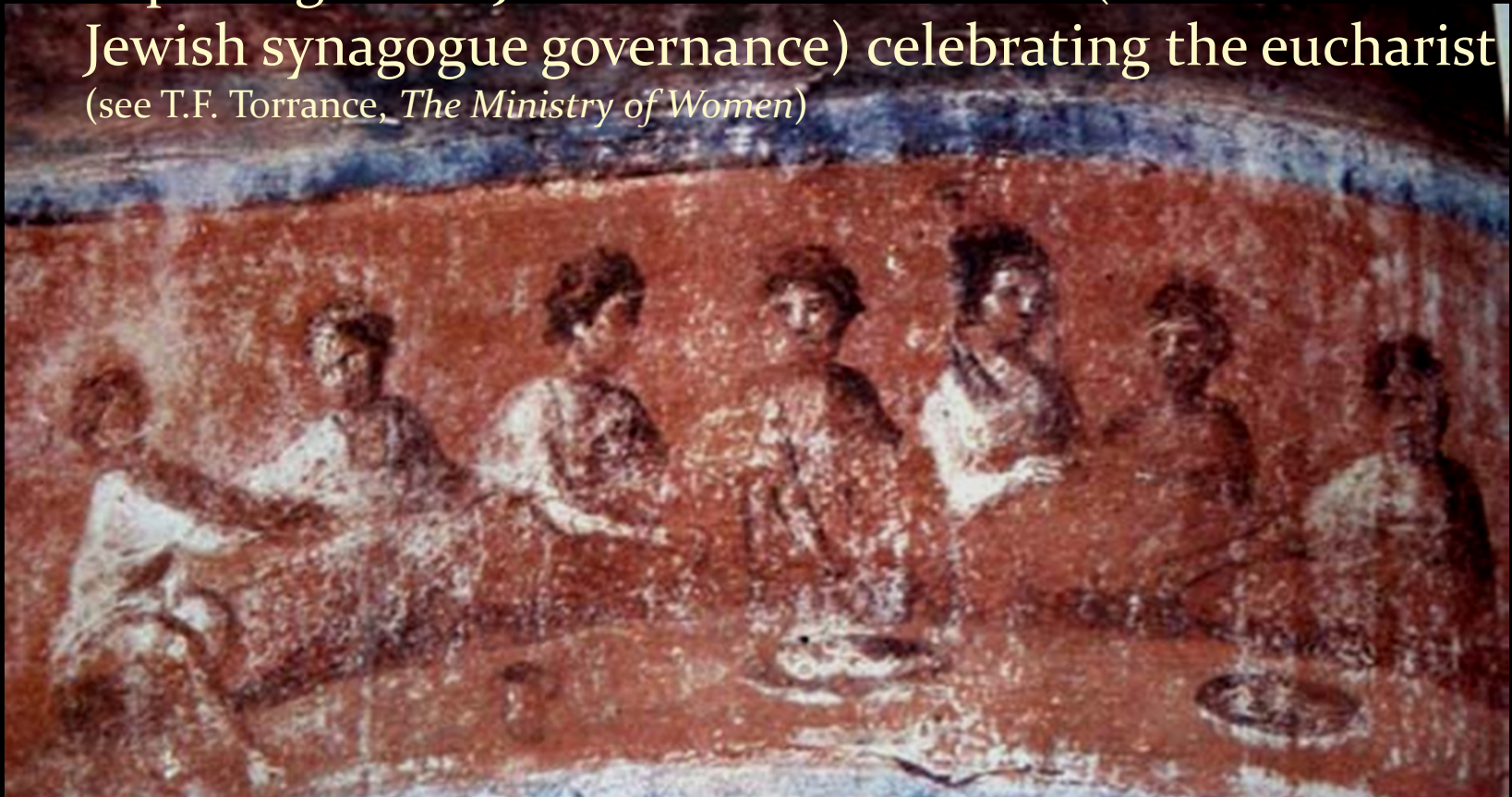
Early Church History

- ‘The premise that women are men’s spiritual equals is accepted and endorsed in all early Christian sources without exception.’ (Patricia Ranft, *A Woman’s Way: The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors*, p.26.)
- Women in early Christianity held positions of authority, were teachers and directors of men as well as women.
- Christian attitude towards vocation:
 - Singleness became a holy vocation (1 Cor.7:17 – 35)
 - Special groups of widows for ministry (1 Tim.4)



Early Church: 1st century?

- *Catacombs of Priscilla, in the Capella Greca in Rome*
 - 1st century
 - depicting seven Jewish Christian elders (modeled after Jewish synagogue governance) celebrating the eucharist
(see T.F. Torrance, *The Ministry of Women*)



Early Church: 2nd century

- The Acts of Paul and Thecla
 - Known before 190 A.D.
 - 'Go and teach the word of the Lord,' so 'she went to Seleucia and enlightened many in the knowledge of Christ...certain gentlewomen heard of the virgin Thecla and went to her to be instructed in the oracles of God' (ch.10)
- An extremely popular work, read in many places, endorsing a woman teacher

Statue of St.Thecla in Syria



Fresco of Paul and Thecla in Ephesus



Early Church: 2nd century

- The Acts of Paul and Thecla
 - Around 200 AD, Tertullian of Carthage, *On Baptism* 17, complains that 'the example of Thecla' is used by those who 'defend the liberty of women to teach and to baptize.'

Statue of St. Thecla in Syria

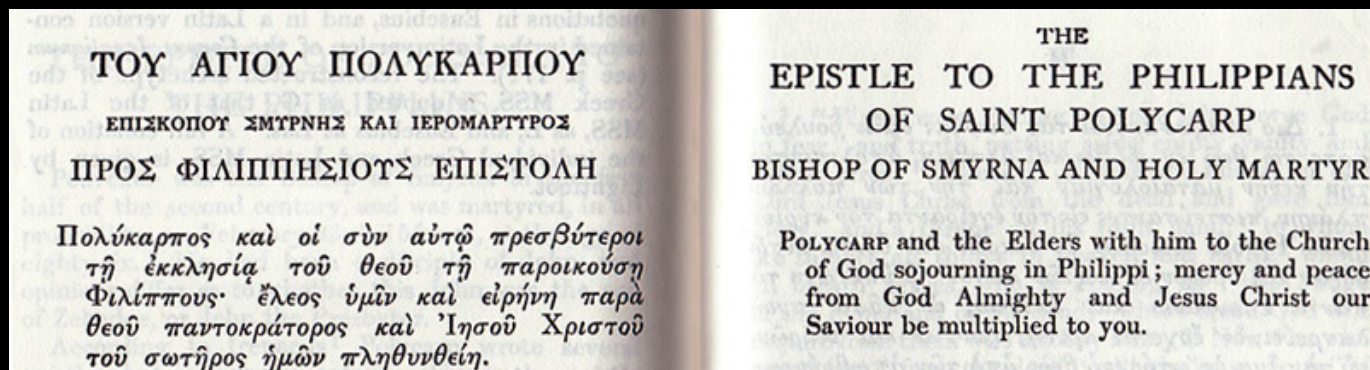


Fresco of Paul and Thecla in Ephesus



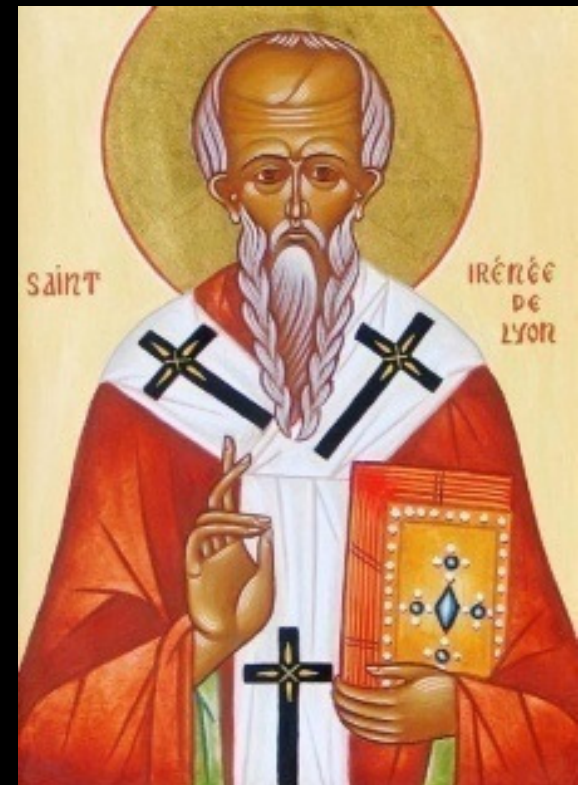
Early Church: 2nd century

- Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, *Epistle to the Philippians*
 - Affirms them for deposing Valens from being an elder, and his wife also (elder?) for *materialism!* (ch.11)
 - Written between 110 – 140 AD
 - *Bottoms up enactment* of excommunication (Mt.18:15 – 18; 1 Cor.5)
 - First known sure quotations (4) of 1 Timothy, suggesting that ‘elders’ are
 - Not a tops-down hierarchy of so-called ‘early Catholicism’
 - A bottoms-up election mirroring synagogues of diaspora Judaism



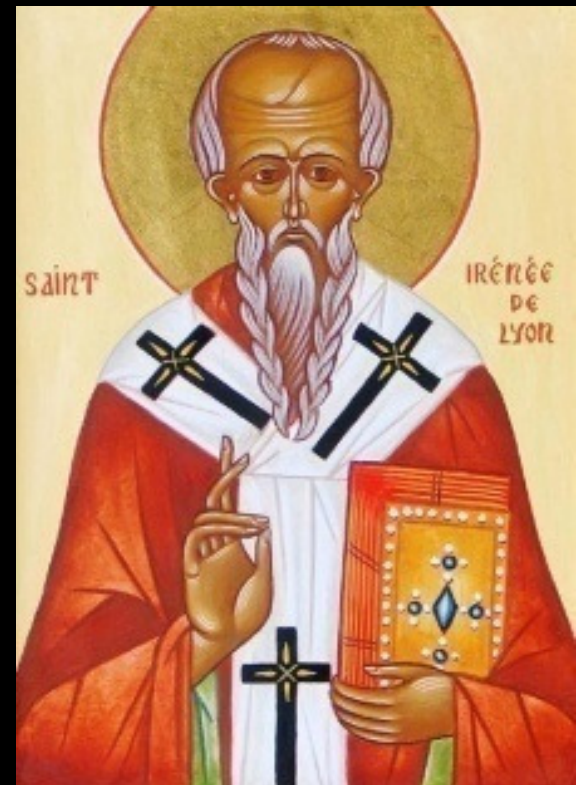
Early Church: 2nd century

- Irenaeus (130 – 202 AD), student of Polycarp in Smyrna, later bishop of Lyons (177 – 202 AD)
 - ‘Why also did it not prefer to make its attack upon the man instead of the woman? And if thou sayest that it attacked her as being the weaker of the two, [I reply that], on the contrary, she was the stronger, since she appears to have been the helper of the man in the transgression of the commandment. For she did by herself alone resist the serpent, and it was after holding out for a while and making opposition that she ate of the tree, being circumvented by craft; whereas Adam, making no fight whatever, nor refusal, partook of the fruit handed to him by the woman, which is an indication of the utmost imbecility and effeminacy of mind...



Early Church: 2nd century

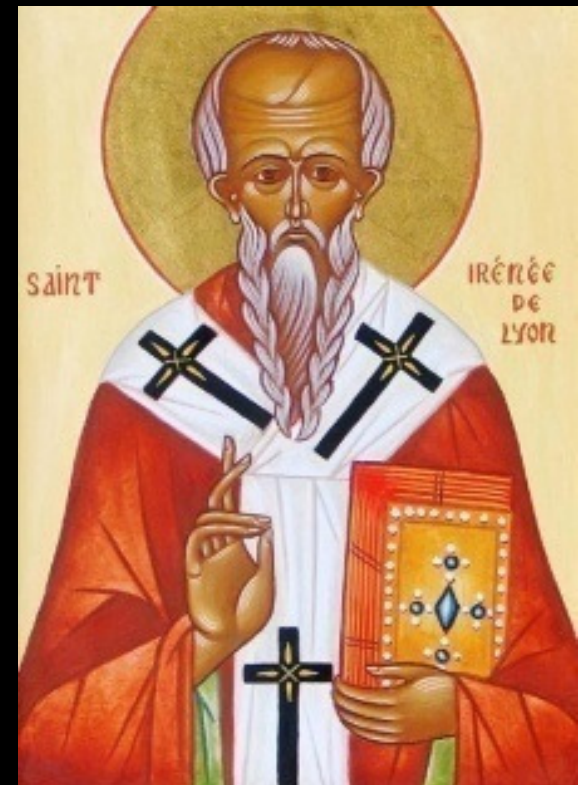
‘... And the woman indeed, having been vanquished in the contest by a demon, is deserving of pardon; but Adam shall deserve none, for he was worsted by a woman,--he who, in his own person, had received the command from God. But the woman, having heard of the command from Adam, treated it with contempt, either because she deemed it unworthy of God to speak by means of it, or because she had her doubts, perhaps even held the opinion that the command was given to her by Adam of his own accord...’



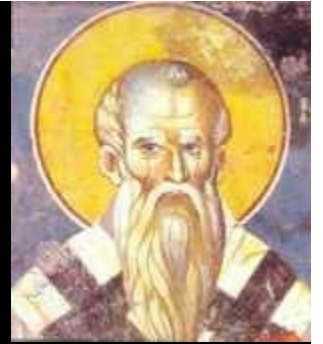
Early Church: 2nd century

‘...The serpent found her working alone, so that he was enabled to confer with her apart. Observing her then either eating or not eating from the trees, he put before her the fruit of the [forbidden] tree. And if he saw her eating, it is manifest that she was partaker of a body subject to corruption.’

Irenaeus of Lyons, *Fragments, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1, par.14



Early Church: 2nd century



- Clement of Alexandria (c.150 – c.215)
 - Teacher and theologian in Alexandria, Egypt, said that men and women needed to be treated equally:
 - ‘Let us, then, embracing more and more this good obedience, give ourselves to the Lord; clinging to what is surest, the cable of faith in Him, and understanding that the virtue of man and woman is the same. For if the God of both is one, the master of both is also one; one church, one temperance, one modesty; their food is common, marriage an equal yoke; respiration, sight, hearing, knowledge, hope, obedience, love all alike.’ (Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor*, chapter 4).

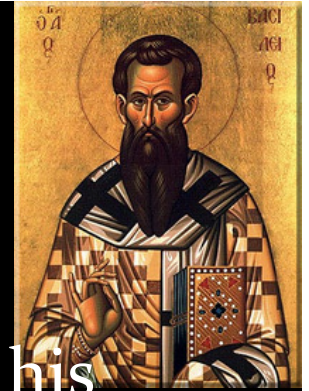
Early Church: 2nd – 3rd centuries

- Opponents of Christianity said the Christians were ‘led by women’
 - Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.55
 - cf. Margaret Y. MacDonald, ‘Was Celsus Right? The Role of Women in Early Christianity’, edited by David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek, *Early Christian Families in Context*, p.157 – 158.
- Christian attitude towards vocation:
 - Singleness became a holy vocation (1 Cor.7:17 – 35)
 - Special groups of widows for ministry (1 Tim.4)

Early Church: 2nd – 3rd centuries

- Prostitution was sinful, but the *male customer* was to blame
 - ‘Despite its condemnation of all premarital and extramarital sexual activity, the Church recognized prostitution to be an inevitable feature of worldly society, which it had no hope or ambition to reform... Canonical wrath was focused, rather, on those who profited from this commerce, for, while prostitution was regarded as a social phenomenon distinct from the sin of fornication, procuring was considered by the Church to be synonymous with the sinful act of encouraging debauch (since the latter is usually associated with a pecuniary motive, whereas fornication can be committed out of passion as well as out of desire for money). **Procuring was therefore considered to be a matter of spiritual jurisdiction, and strong measures were taken against it at the Council of Elvira** (c. 300), whose canons were included in most of the major canon-law collections of the Middle Ages.’
 - Leah Lydia Oates, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, p.12 – 13

Early Church: 4th century



- Gregory (335 – 395 AD), bishop of Nyssa, honors his sister Macrina the Younger, his mentor, theologian, and founder of a monastic community where slaves and free people were equals, and co-leader of a monastery
 - Gregory's *Life of Macrina* was his biography of her (379 AD)
 - Gregory's *On the Soul and Resurrection* were his dialogues with his sister as she taught him Christian doctrine
 - Macrina was the granddaughter of another Christian female philosopher, Macrina the Elder



Early Church: 4th century

- Gregory of Nazianzus (c.329 – 390), archbishop of Constantinople, condemned laws made by men for men:
 - ‘Why did they punish the woman but considered the man innocent? The wife is considered sinful while the unfaithful man does not suffer. I don’t accept this legislation. I don’t accept this tradition. Men are legislators and all the laws are against women.’ (*Sermon XXXVII*).



Early Church: 4th century

- ‘The Church firmly rejected, of course, the Roman notion of a permanent stigma attached to women who had once been prostitutes. Because all people were considered sinners who must repent to be saved, prostitutes found themselves in no especially stigmatized category but were accepted, like all other sinners, provided they abandoned their former life. Indeed, several of the female saints of the early Church were former prostitutes. Thus, **the Church's position on prostitution, crystallized by the fourth century**, consisted of these three elements: acceptance of prostitution as an inevitable social fact, condemnation of those profiting from this commerce, and encouragement for the prostitute to repent.’
 - Leah Lydia Oates, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, p.13

Early Church: 4th century

- Melania the Elder (325 – 410 AD)
 - Wealthy widow
 - Founder of a dual (male and female) monastic community on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, in 375 AD
 - Left her young son in Rome to do so, and was *honored for it* in Christian literature (!)
 - Called a ‘Desert Mother’
 - Friend of Jerome, Augustine, Paulinus of Nola
 - Mentor to Evagrius of Pontus



Early Church: 4th century

- John Chrysostom (c.349 – 407 AD)
 - Priest in Antioch (386 – 397), Archbishop of Constantinople (397 – 407), one of the three holy hierarchs and fathers of the Eastern church
 - ‘Their women used both to pray and prophesy unveiled and with their head bare, (*for then women also used to prophesy*) but the men went so far as to wear long hair as having spent their time in philosophy... You see that some obeyed, whom he praises; and others disobeyed, whom he corrects by what comes afterwards’ (John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, Homily 26 on 11:2 – 16).

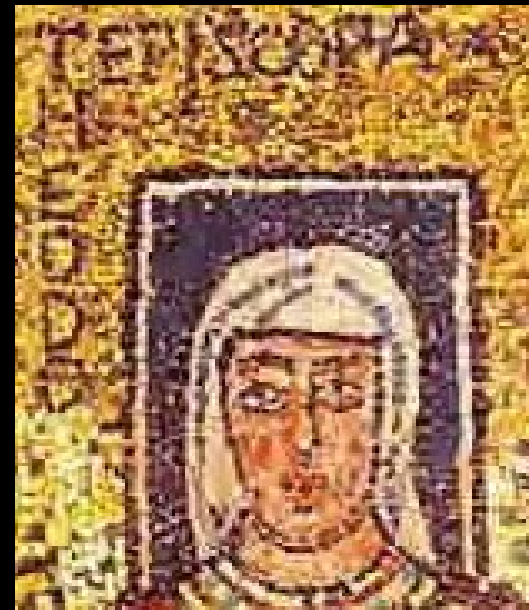


Early Church: 4th century

- John Chrysostom (c.349 – 407 AD)
 - On the question of Eve being subordinate to Adam: ‘For with us indeed the woman is reasonably subjected to the man: since equality of honor causes contention. And not for this cause only, but by reason also of the deceit which happened in the beginning. Wherefore you see, she was *not* subjected as soon as she was made; nor, when He brought her to the man, *did either she hear any such thing from God, nor did the man say any such word to her*: he said indeed that she was bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh: [Genesis 2:23] but of rule or subjection he nowhere made mention unto her. But when she made an ill use of her privilege and she who had been made a helper was found to be an ensnarer and ruined all, then she is justly told for the future, your turning shall be to your husband. [Genesis 3:16]’ (John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, Homily 26 on 11:2 – 16)

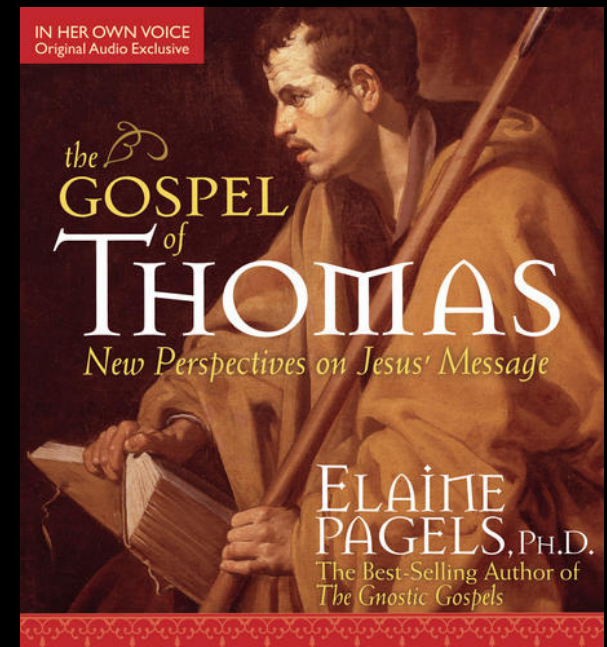
Early Church: 9th century

- ‘Theodora Episcopa’ = Bishopess Theodora
 - Church of Saint Prasseda, Rome
 - Built by Pope Pascal I towards the end of the 9th century to honor four holy women, including his mother



Example: A Woman's Death in the Greek Gnostic 'Gospel of Thomas'

- 114. Simon Peter said to them, “Make Mary leave us, for females don’t deserve life.” Jesus said, “Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.”
 - *Gospel of Thomas*, 2nd century



Example: A Woman's Death in Orthodox Christianity

- 'But when day came it was clear to me from what I saw that the coming day was the utmost limit of her life in the flesh, since the fever had consumed all her innate strength... Nor as yet was I reconciled to the thought of losing the common glory of our family... For that she did not even in her last breath find anything strange in the hope of the Resurrection, nor even shrink at the departure from this life, but with lofty mind continued to discuss up to her last breath the convictions she had formed from the beginning about this life – all this seemed to me more than human... Therefore I think she revealed to the bystanders that divine and pure love of the invisible bridegroom, which she kept hidden and nourished in the secret places of the soul, and she published abroad the secret disposition of her heart – her hurrying towards Him Whom she desired, that she might speedily be with Him...' (Gregory of Nyssa in 379 AD, *Life of Macrina*)



Negative Trends: Reaction to Montanism?

- Reaction to Montanism?
 - Sarah Coakley's theory
- Montanism:
 - Leaders: Montanus (male), Priscilla (female), Maximilla (female)
 - Ecstatic visions and prophecy, ascetic discipline
 - 'Paraclete' (Jn.14) = Montanus
 - 'New Jerusalem' (Rev.21 – 22) = two towns in Phrygia
 - Montanus provided salaries for those who preached his doctrine, whereas the catholic-orthodox church did not
 - Female bishops and presbyters (elders, priests)

Negative Trends: Greek View of Marriage

- Sex only permissible for procreation, even within marriage
 - 'Lust' or 'passion' seen as post-fall
 - A few viewed sex itself as post-fall (marriage and children not part of original creation!)
- Departed from the Jewish understanding of sex as also *for the couple*, not just for children
 - Proverbs 5:19
 - Song of Songs
 - 1 Corinthians 7:1 – 5

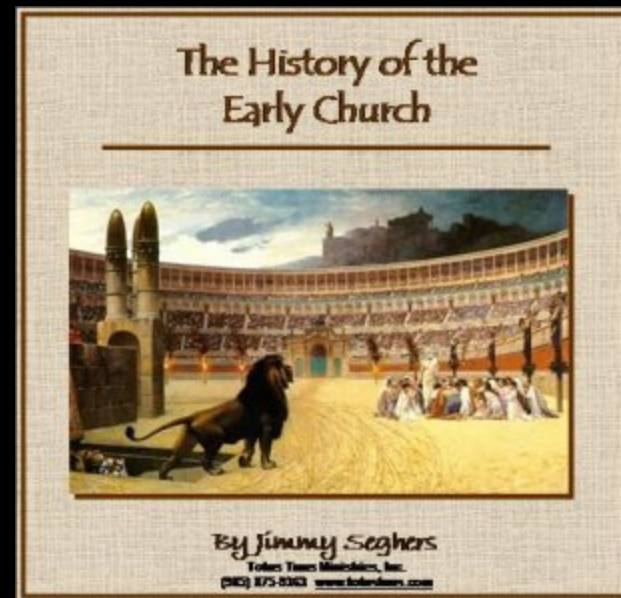
Negative Trends:

Greek View of Personhood and Reason

- 'Reason' (*logos*) elevated to being the highest principle of human being
 - Functional privileging of higher class, educated men
- Departed from Jewish understanding: Genesis 1:26 – 28 elevates personhood, relationality, and dominion over creation
 - Although Hellenistic Judaism already had these tendencies (Septuagint translation, Philo)

Two Vital Criteria

- Early Church History
- Scripture



Arguments Against Women in Church Leadership

- Israel's priests and kings were men
- Jesus was a man
- Jesus' twelve apostles were men
- Paul's elders were men
- Paul on headship

Some of My Sources

- Dr. Gordon Hugenberg
- Dr. Thomas F. Torrance
- Dr. Karl Barth

Arguments Against Women in Church Leadership

- Israel's priests and kings were men
- Jesus was a man
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Israel's Elders, Judges, Prophets

- Prior to priests and kings, Israel had
 - Elders
 - Judges
 - Prophets



Israel's Elders, Judges, Prophets

- ^{Ex.1:15} God, furthermore, said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations. ¹⁶ Go and gather the **elders** of Israel together...^{Ex.4:29} Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the **elders** of the sons of Israel...



Israel's Elders, Judges, Prophets

- Ex.18:13 It came about the next day that Moses **sat to judge** the people... ¹⁴ ...Moses' father-in-law...said, 'What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone **sit as judge** and all the people stand about you from morning until evening? ... ²¹ select out of all the people **able men who fear God, men of truth**, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.



Israel's Elders, Judges, Prophets

- Ex.18:22 Let them **judge** the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will **judge...** ²⁵ Moses chose able **men** out of all Israel... ²⁶ They **judged** the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would **judge...**
- Dt.16:18 You shall appoint for yourself **judges and officers in all your towns** which the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall **judge** the people with righteous judgment.



Israel's Elders, Judges, Prophets

- Dt.13:1 If a **prophet**... arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, ² ...saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' ³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams... ⁵ But that **prophet** or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because **he** has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God who brought you from the land of Egypt...



Israel's Elders, Judges, Prophets

- All these roles seem to be for men
- But Hebrew is a gendered language, like Spanish
 - In Spanish, 'el' and 'ella' are pronouns for 'him' and 'her.'
 - But 'el' can also mean 'person' generally, without restricting the meaning to men. This is the 'inclusive male tense.'
 - How do you tell whether 'el' refers to 'him' as specifically male or 'that person' generally? Context.
- In this case, what does the rest of Scripture say?

Israel's Elders, Judges, Prophets

- Jdg.4:4 Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was **judging** Israel at that time. ⁵ ...the sons of Israel came up to her for **judgment**. ⁶ Now she...summoned Barak...and said to him, 'Behold, the LORD...has commanded, 'Go and march to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men... ⁷ I will draw out to you Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army...and I will give him into your hand.'



Israel's Elders, Judges, Prophets

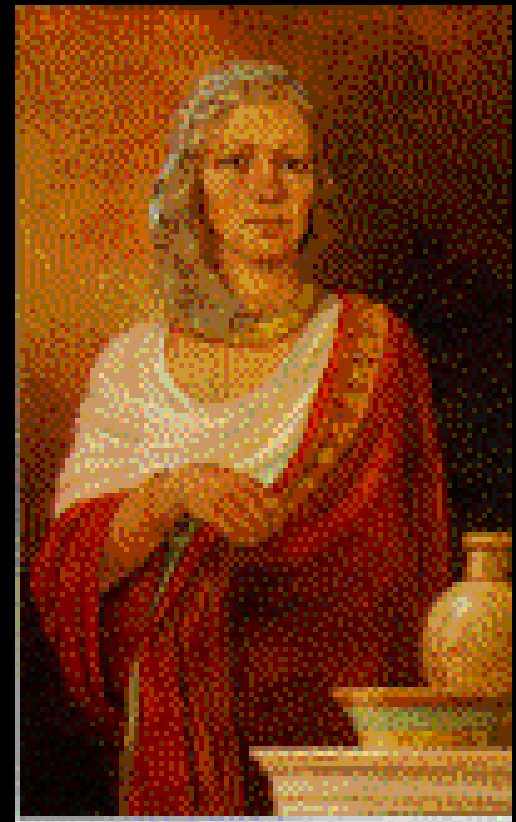
- Ex.15:20 Miriam the **prophetess**, Aaron's sister, took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dancing.



- Jdg.4:4 Now Deborah, a **prophetess**, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time.

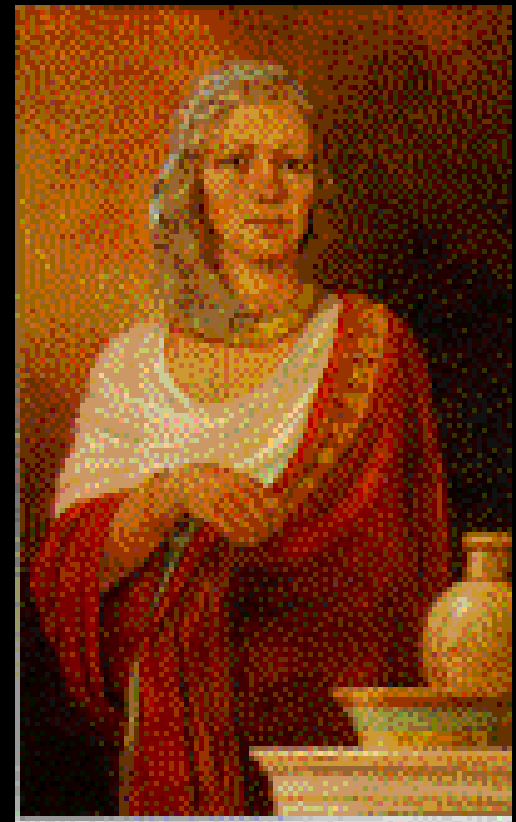
Israel's Elders, Judges, Prophets

- Isa.8:3 So I approached the **prophetess**, and she conceived and gave birth to a son.
- 2 Ki.24:14 So Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to Huldah the **prophetess**, the wife of Shallum... and they spoke to her. ¹⁵ She said to them, 'Thus says the LORD God of Israel...'
- Neh.6:14 Noadiah the **prophetess** and the rest of the prophets



Israel's Elders, Judges, Prophets

- Huldah (2 Kings 22:14 – 20):
 - A prophetess who said 'Thus says the LORD God' (22:15, 18)
 - Sought by King Josiah, the best king of Judah for a long time, and his leading male advisors
 - Authoritatively interpreted the book of the Torah that they had rediscovered in the Temple
 - Was believed by King Josiah
 - Led to covenant renewal and spiritual revival in Judah (23:1 – 25)



Israel's Elders, Judges, Prophets

- The Old Testament writers viewed Israel's roles of elder, judge, and prophet as open to women, not just to men. (Gordon Hugenberger, "Women in church office: hermeneutics or exegesis? A survey of 1 Timothy 2:8-15." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (Summer 1992), pp. 341-360.)
- See also the divorce legislation of Deuteronomy 24:1 – 4. Phrased for husbands, but applied to wives. Jesus thought so in Mark 10:12.

The Foundation for Female Leaders: Marriage over Family of Origin

- Gen.2:24 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.
 - Sociologically, for women to have leadership roles in society, the power of the extended family must be limited and checked
 - Each married couple enters society equal with all the other households
 - But in traditional cultures, the wife becomes the lowest ranking member of her husband's family and has little to no standing – that is true patriarchy
 - Who wrote Genesis 2? Humans alone?



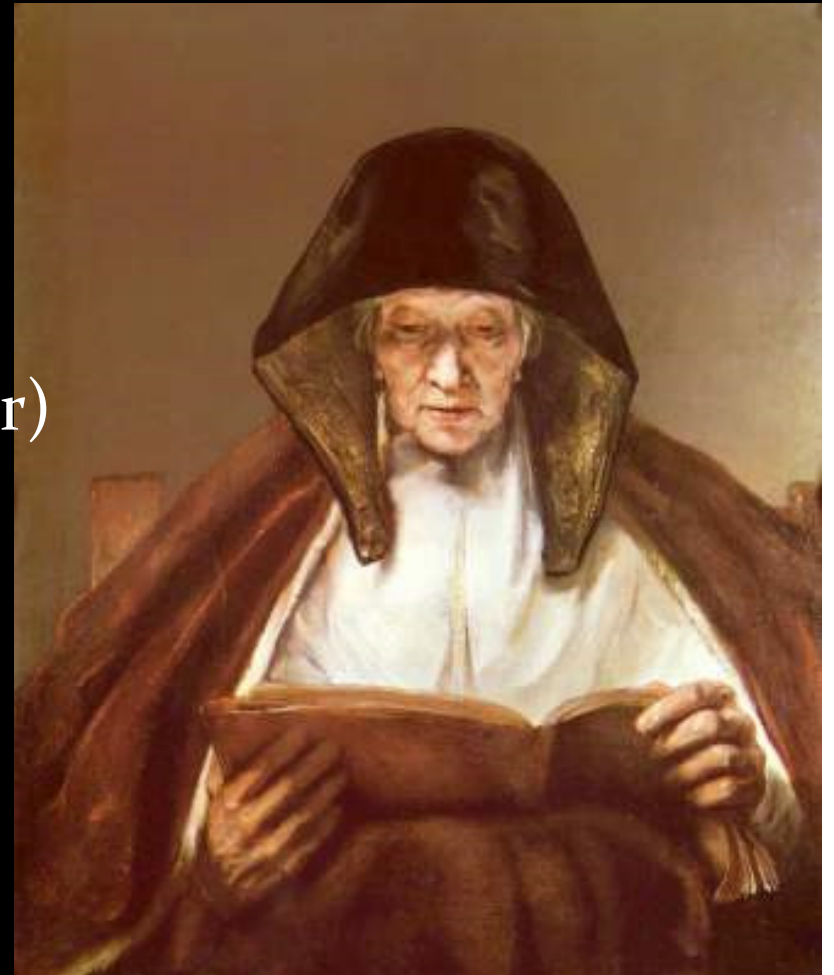
Women Speaking in Israel: As Mothers in the Family

- Pr.1:8 Hear, my son, your father's instruction and do not forsake **your mother's teaching**
 - **God's wisdom is from creation:** Pr.8:22 The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. ²³ From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth... ³² Now therefore, O sons, listen to me, for blessed are they who keep my ways.
 - **Both men and women were to repeat God's commission and speak God's wisdom:** Gen.1:27 God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them



Women Speaking in Israel: As Human Authors of Scripture

- Miriam (Ex.15:20)
- Deborah (Jdg.4 – 5)
- Hannah (1 Sam.2)
- Probably Ruth (book of Ruth)
- King Lemuel's mother (Pr.31)
- Probably Esther (book of Esther)
- Mary (Luke 1)



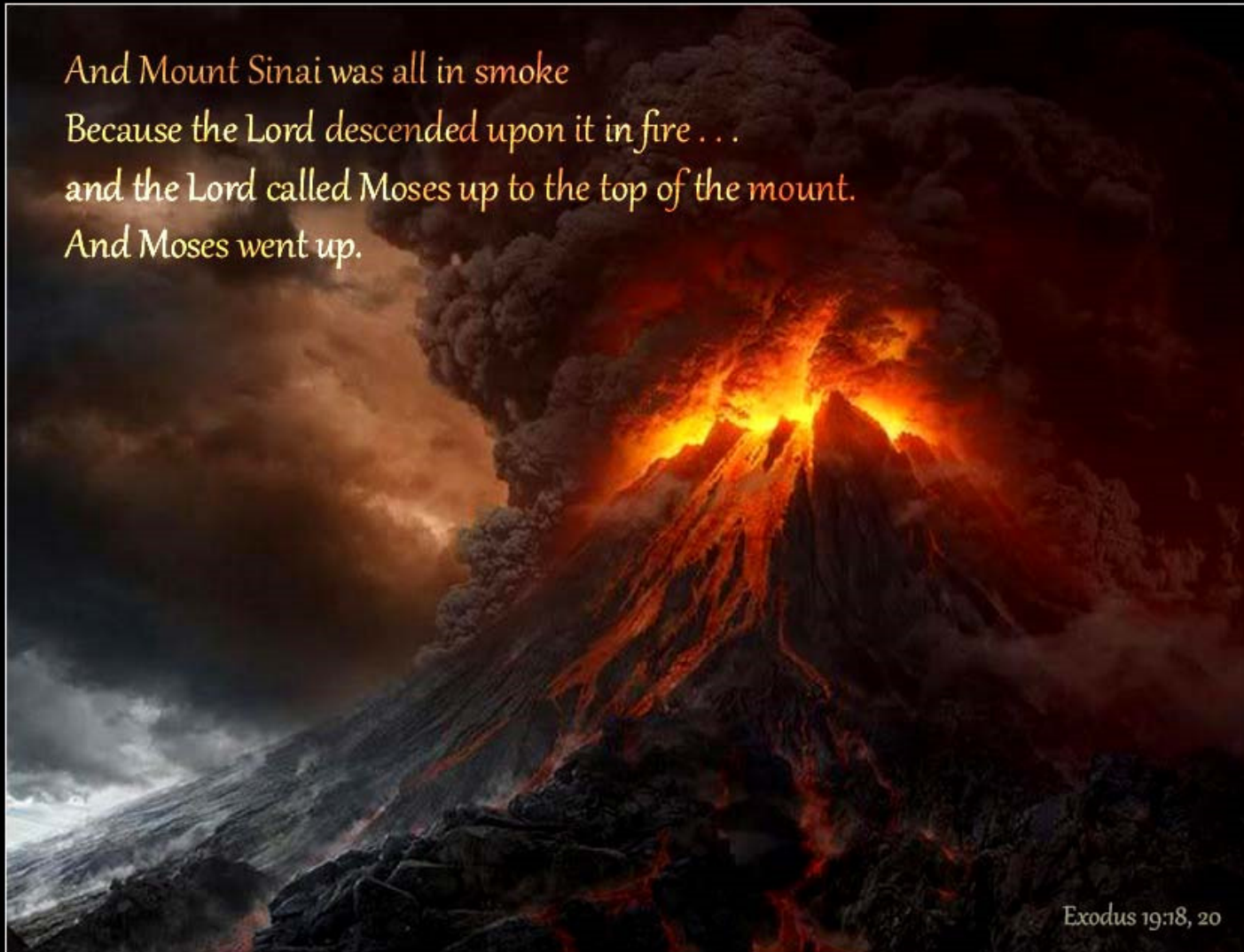
Women Speaking in Israel: In the Restoration of True Humanness

- 2:28 It will come about after this
That I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind;
And your sons and **daughters** will prophesy,
Your old men will dream dreams,
Your young men will see visions.
29 Even on the male and **female** servants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days. (Joel 2:28 – 29)
- This passage is quoted by Simon Peter in Acts 2, as programmatic for the church.



Priests Were Plan B

*And Mount Sinai was all in smoke
Because the Lord descended upon it in fire . . .
and the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount.
And Moses went up.*



Exodus 19:18, 20

Priests Were Plan B

- **Priests** mediate the distance between God and people through sacrifices
 - Ex.19:5 Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; ⁶ and you shall be to Me **a kingdom of priests and a holy nation**'... ¹³ When **the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain**'... ¹⁶ So it came about on the third day...that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and **a very loud trumpet sound**...¹⁷ ...and they stood **at the foot of the mountain**.

Priests Were Plan B

- Israel's failure to come up the mountain and meet with God face to face leads to their distance from God, God coming veiled (in the Tabernacle) rather than relating face to face, and priests who mediate that distance through sacrifices. (John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*)
 - Ex.19:19 When **the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder**, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder.
20 The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. Ex.20:18 ...they trembled and **stood at a distance...** 21 So the people **stood at a distance ...**

Kings Were Plan B

- ¹ Sam.8:7 The LORD said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but **they have rejected Me from being king over them.** ⁸ Like all the deeds which they have done...they have forsaken Me and served other gods – so they are doing to you also. ⁹ ...you shall solemnly warn them and tell them of the procedure of the king who will reign over them.'



So What About Priests and Kings?

- Priests and kings were two levels of leadership added on because of Israel's disobedience; God did not want them originally.



So What About Priests and Kings?

- Jesus fulfilled the role of **priest**
 - By bearing the burden of sin and carrying it to God to consume (Hebrews; Romans 3:21 – 26; Galatians 3 – 4)
- Jesus fulfilled the role of **king**
 - By being the true heir of King David (Four Gospels, Acts, Romans, Ephesians, Colossians)



So What About Priests and Kings?

- Jesus appears to have returned God's people to that part of Israel's original story where their leadership involved elders, judges, and prophets. Women occupied these roles.
 - Catholic and Orthodox Christians later reinstituted male 'priests' who offer the 'sacrifice' of communion.
 - Protestants (excepting Anglicans) reject the reinstitution of a priesthood.