



Persistent Women: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah Numbers 27:1-11

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Though in the modern era, we have matured, grown, advanced, and become more civilized than the ancient near-east societies like the people of Israel of our Old Testament texts, we are far from perfected as a people of faith or as a civilized nation. In our desire and hope to become more faithful, and in our corporate hope to live in a nation where all are seen as equal, we still have a great deal we can learn from the precedent of the Biblical text.

As we named last week, one way we maintain archaic rules, laws, and prejudices is by ignoring the stories that name the important and leading roles of those we would prefer to keep silenced. By ignoring the marginalized, by skipping over stories of God's favor for the weak, by silencing those with whom we disagree, we allow ourselves to maintain power and privilege over those we would rather ignore.

One of the areas in which we have much room for growth – both as a global church, and as a United States – is in how we see, treat, respect, and lift up women for their role in being faithful witnesses and leaders of God's kingdom. By ignoring the Biblical stories that name the importance of women in the faith, we allow ourselves to argue against female leadership and equality amidst humanity. Just earlier this year, an outspoken leader in the American Reformed Baptist church claimed that women shouldn't be teaching at the seminary level. He stated, and I quote, "the issue is whether women should be models, mentors, and teachers for those preparing for a role that is biblically designed for spiritual men."ⁱ Such a claim can only be furthered by ignoring the Biblical examples of women who were models, mentors, and teachers for the people of God.

To speak out against such maintained misogyny by the church and the community at large, we are looking at some of the stories of the Biblical text where women are found to be leaders – faithful witnesses who speak on behalf of God's justice and who set an example to be followed. We are calling them *Persistent Women of the Bible*. I'll name again, *persistence* is not a negative word. Persistence is defined as "standing firm in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition." Though designated as being of marginal significance – as women in a society where only men were seen of any substantial worth – the persistence of these women should *only* be seen as their faithful willingness to go against the powers of society that each may live in line with the eternal will of God.

Today we are learning about the story of Noah. No, not the man Noah who built the ark, but the woman Noah, and her four sisters – Mahlah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.

It's remarkable that we know so little if anything about these women. They are found in five different places in the Old Testament, including in three different books of the Bible. Perhaps we don't know their names well because they are not always named. They are, as one sadly must deal with in a society

ruled by men, in a story line told by men, and in a Biblical text that was canonized by men, often referred to by their relationship to the man in their lives. They are often referred to as nothing more than the daughters of Zelophehad.

These women and their father were part of the community of Israel during the time Israel was wandering the wilderness after escaping Egypt. As Israel was getting closer to the promised land, the leadership of the community – Moses, Eleazar the priest, and others – began to make plans for the structure of the community once they have reached the promised land. If we back up in the Biblical text just a chapter, we find in Numbers 26 that a census has been called to correctly identify who was a part of the community. Yes, in the book of Numbers, they are literally counting the numbers – they were trying to identify how to structure the allocation of land among the people once they reached the promised land. Each clan needed a sufficient amount of land to care for its people.

Keep in mind the context of the time. As Moses and the leadership were determining land ownership, their only focus was on the men of the clans. “In biblical law, not only were women never able to own property, women were treated like property, transferred from their father’s domain to their husband’s. As in most ancient civilizations, biblical landowners were the only ones with power in the society. If you did not own land, you were, at best, dependent on someone else and, at worst, their servant or slave.”ⁱⁱ

As we approach our text in Numbers 27, we have to read it amidst this “old boys club” mentality. Indeed, these five sisters were preparing themselves to go into a room that probably had a sign on the door that read, “Men Only.” But notice, they don’t actually go into the room – they know they are not allowed in. Verse 2 reads, “They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, *at the entrance of the tent of meeting.*” They didn’t go into the room – they are calling for the attention of the room from the threshold. They knew to enter the room would cause sure and certain punishment. These are vulnerable women, who are at the mercy of the men around them. Not only are they already at the low end of the society as females in a male driven community, they are five women who have no male to speak on their behalf. They are not married, and their father is dead. These women are among the most vulnerable in the whole of society.

From the entrance to the tent of meeting, they call out to the leaders who are plotting out land allocations, “Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Koran, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father’s brothers.”

Rabbi Silvia Chemen says these are smart women who know “their law and history ... They know that the continuity of family name depends on inheritance of land; and they realize that the current law is not adequate, for it does not take into account the unusual circumstance of a man without sons. They possess the acumen to recognize the omission in God’s law!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Their argument is interesting. By their voiced argument, they are not arguing on their own behalf in hopes that they may be protected and have land for themselves. Though, even in our own day, we

know land ownership is certainly a protection. Home ownership is tied in to economic stability, credit access, and wealth accumulation. But the women aren't arguing for *their* stability, their argument is that if they do not receive land, their father's family name will end. Remember, one's family name was tied in to their ownership of the land. These five sisters "are pictured as taking action for the sake of their fathers' name, not for the sake of their own opportunity to possess land."^{iv} They are speaking up on behalf of the vulnerable of the society, but they do so by naming it's benefit for the powerful of the society.

The request of the sisters to Moses and the male leadership presents a challenging decision. There was one law that claimed only men could inherit property. By this law, the women should have been turned away. But their argument was based on their father's name and their father's claim to land. This put the law of male land ownership up against another customary tradition that said land should remain in the same clan and tribe. To not allocate land to these women would most certainly mean the land would be transferred to another clan who had more men. Moses is unsure how to rule, and so he turns to God, bringing the case of the women before the Lord.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, "The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them."

One can only think that Ruth Bader Ginsburg would have been pleased with the legal wit of these women, who speaking before the almighty judge won their case on behalf of women's rights.

These sisters took a risky chance to speak before the male council; they took an unpopular stance and argued for a change in the law that had been given by God regarding who could rightfully own land. United Methodist Pastor, Rev. Eric Falker offers, "It was not wrong for Israel to say that the men would receive the inheritance. It was simply how their culture operated. But it turned out, that custom could not address every situation. These women addressed the injustice in the custom, and [with God's ruling] the leadership changed."^v

The women's bold willingness to risk their safety even more so than it was already at risk as unwed women with no living father is perhaps sufficient in and of itself to name the significance of these women in the Biblical story as those who should be modeled in faithful witness. They spoke on the side of justice, advocated for change, and their daring step of faith does indeed change God's own named law of land ownership. When the question is posed, God always comes down on the side of justice, and these five sisters were right to call for a change to unjust customs and laws.

But they are not among our *Persistent Women* simply because they advocated for a change in the face of opposition ... opposition which was inherent for women speaking for their own rights in a time when only men were seen as having rights. To see the full story of their persistence, we have to keep reading, because these women do come back into the story.

In Numbers 36, the marriage of these women comes into question. With the change in the laws, they will be rightful land owners when they reach the promised land. But what happens if they marry? As

was customary of the time, it would be expected that the land of the women would become the property of their husband, should they marry. This possibility brings up a concern that if they marry outside their own tribe, their land would then become the property of their husband, and would then belong to another tribe. As we have already named, one of the customs was that land should not be transferred from one tribe or clan to another – the intention was to keep land within its own tribe.

To maintain the land allocation, Moses rules on behalf of God, saying, “Let them marry whom they think best; only it must be into a clan of their father’s tribe that they are married, so that no inheritance of the Israelites shall be transferred from one tribe to another.” ... Notice, the women, land owning members of the community, are given permission to marry whom they think best. Unlike most women of the time who were taken as wives by men, or given as wives by their fathers, these women have a power as land owners that most women do not have. Should we repeat the importance and power that comes with land ownership? ... The only stipulation is that, to maintain land allocation among the tribes, they have to marry within their own tribe, which they do. Each of the sisters, Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Noah each married the sons of their father’s brothers. (Don’t you love how the scriptural text makes it sound better than just saying, “they married their first cousins.”)

Now that they are married, the custom of the time would have argued that the sisters’ rights to land and their claims to inheritance was reliant upon their husbands’ rights to land or claims to inheritance. They now have men to take care of them. Our understanding of the ancient near-east societies claims men were to be the sole providers for health and sustenance. Mistakenly, our 21st Century take on women from this ancient society is that women were to be passive and focused on domestic duties. Built upon this faulty reality, even in many religious households today, women are still expected to be fully submissive to their husbands, to raise the kids, and to keep the house in order. Just as mistaken as our claim that only men are called to leadership is our belief in this submissive and obedient perspective of women, as these sisters will prove.

Even though they are married, these women will not be silent or rely on their husbands as the sole provider of their households. We just have to keep reading.

In Joshua 17, we have our final encounter with the sisters. Things have changed significantly since our last interaction. The people of Israel have finally reached the promised land. They are settling in to their new homeland after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. As they are making final land arrangements, we see that Eleazar the priest, and Joshua (the current ruling elder), are determining land allocations. In their land allocation, Eleazar and Joshua had divided land among the tribes without taking into account the sisters. The sisters were married, and as such were now seen by the culture as the property of their husbands. Because of this cultural expectation, they were not taken into consideration for land allocation.

The sisters once again come before the male leadership and claim, “The Lord commanded Moses to give us an inheritance along with our male kin.” They will not take their role as wife to be a limiting role on their individual person. They refuse to allow the men in charge to try and write them out of property ownership. They will not shy away from speaking truthfully about what is right and just. They will not be quiet as others try, with malicious intent or not, to marginalize them. They have been

promised inheritance by God, and they will claim their inheritance as women who believe in the full reign and will of God.

As they make their claim, as they speak up and claim the promise of God, they are given an inheritance among their kinsman and their clan receives twice the land it had been apportioned previously because each of the sisters received her allocation of land.

We can try to silence those on the margins, we can try to ignore those with whom we disagree, and we can try to write out of our history of faith those who challenged authority and took power away from those who have long held power, but such an attempt is a failure of Biblical obedience. These five women teach us to dig deeply and argue persistently from within a shared biblical tradition because some of our customs, practices, and laws need to be overturned to create new possibilities in the social and economic relationships between God's created humanity.^{vi}

Like Susan B Anthony who fought for women to have a vote, like Rosa Parks who sparked the fight to remove unjust Jim Crow laws, like Mildred Loving whose marriage wrote the legality of interracial marriage into Virginia's law books, like Maud Jensen who was the first woman to receive full clergy rights in the Methodist Church, like Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah who spoke up for women's right to own land in ancient Israel, we must claim and tell the stories of the women who have come before us and declare their witness as models, as mentors, and as leaders who have exemplified faithfulness to God's continuing work for justice. May we claim the inheritance of God, who has promised us new life, life modeling the image of God in which we were all created (both men and women), that all persons may be the benefactors of God's justice, and live in the knowledge of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

For the glory of God, may we live as the persistent women before us, who stand up and speak on behalf of the vulnerable that God's justice may endure. Amen.

ⁱ John Piper. desiringgod.com. Retrieved September 11, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Abigail B. Weinberg. myjewishlearning.com. Retrieved September 11, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Silvia Chemen. myjewishlearning.com. Retrieved September 11, 2018.

^{iv} *The Women's Bible Commentary*. Eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

^v Eric Falker. *A Daughter's Inheritance*. bellairecumc.org. Retrieved September 11, 2018.

^{vi} Dennis T. Olson. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Numbers*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.