

Globethics Repository



Eve at Ephesus

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Besançon Spencer, Aida
Publisher	Evangelical Theological Society
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-15 20:51:21
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/163290

EVE AT EPHESUS

(Should women be ordained as pastors according to the
First Letter to Timothy 2:11-15?)

AÍDA DINA BESANÇON SPENCER*

Should women be ordained as pastors according to the First Letter to Timothy 2:11-15? Scholars have traditionally interpreted this text in three ways: as applying at face value directly to women everywhere (thus they should not be ordained pastors); or as not applying to any women in the present age either because the text is not authoritative (Paul probably did not write it) or his imperative only refers to women in the first century (it was a cultural mandate). I would imagine that women and men who tend to favor the last two interpretations do so because the imperative in First Timothy seems inconsistent with the contemporary educational achievements of women or with the concept of a loving God. Yet if the text is interpreted as solely relevant to the first century,¹ have we not dismissed the author's references to the universal criteria of Adam and Eve (verses 13-14) in establishing models for ecclesiastical behavior? Also, could all of Scripture then be set aside as simply "cultural?"

Indeed this passage causes many serious readers to disclaim the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles. Many argue it is inconsistent with Paul's teachings and the gospel message. Often the following passages are cited as contradictory to I Timothy 2:11-15.

Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all. (Colossians 3:11)

For he (Christ) is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, (Ephesians 2:14)

In Ephesians he urges spouses to "be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ" (5:21), and the First Letter to the Corinthians states,

(Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.) (11:11-12)

Paul also assumed women would prophesy in the public meetings (I Corinthians 11:5). Galatians 3:28 is the text most often cited.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.²

It seems to me necessary, then, to explore this passage, one of the

*Adjunct Professor in campus ministry for the Cross Counter Urban Field Seminary of the New York Theological Seminary in Newark, New Jersey.

most critical verses for women who feel called to enter the "full gospel ministry," but who want to take our original Biblical records seriously. I Timothy 2:11-15 states:

¹¹Let a woman learn through instruction in silence in all submission (to the constituted authority.) ¹²But I am not allowing a woman to teach or to have authority over a man but to be in silence. ¹³For Adam first was formed, then Eve. ¹⁴And Adam was not deceived but the woman having been deceived became a transgressor. ¹⁵But she will be saved through the child-bearing, if they continue in faith and love and holiness with self-control.

The inclusion of this topic coming as suddenly as it does after the urging of prayers for officials in high positions since God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2:4) can probably best be understood when considered as part of Paul's intention for the entire epistle which is to warn against unorthodox teachings and to provide guidance for the administration of the local church in case he was delayed (3:14-15). The Epistle to Timothy is after all a letter of advice concerning a series of topics relevant to the church at Ephesus because it suffered from unorthodox teachings.³ To understand Paul's answer then (2:11-15), we need to seek the statement or question which prompted it. What such unorthodox teachings could there have been? Who could have been teaching them?

We see later that one of Paul's chief concerns involved the specific tendency of the Ephesian women toward unorthodox teaching.

... Avoid such people. For among them are those who make their way into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and swayed by various impulses, who will listen to anybody and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth. (II Timothy 3:5b-7).

The specific feminine term *gunaikaria* is used for the "weak women" who were deceived and who listened to the wrong persons (not the "constituted authority" in the First Letter to Timothy 2:11). In contrast the persons who did the deceiving were not referred to by specific masculine terms but by generic terms, *anthropoi* and *toutous*. Does this not suggest that at Ephesus women were involved both in learning and in propagating unorthodox teachings? Considering that the congregation was composed of "former" Jews and Gentiles, could the men have said the following? "Because of these teachings of Jesus we have allowed these women to attend all our services and even to teach others. But look at what they have done with their silly and destructive ideas! We should have known! These women at heart are transgressors. We need to continually keep them disciplined. They must not learn as we do. All women are like Eve. Eve was created second signifying she was inferior. Eve was a transgressor. All women are transgressors."

If indeed these are some of the thoughts at Ephesus which Paul addressed, his reply is very significant. First in verses 11-12 he reinforces his stand that the women be instructed. "Let a woman learn...." They, like the men, are to learn the truth of the gospel. When Paul stated that a woman learn through instruction in silence in all submission to the consti-

tuted authority, he was actually being quite radical for his time. In Deuteronomy 31:12 and Joshua 8:35 all people, including women, were exhorted to attend regularly the reading of the Law.

Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law,... (Deuteronomy 31:12).

However, despite these exhortations, in the first century A.D. the Jewish women were exempted from learning the Torah. This was due not so much to a belief that the women had less intellectual capacities than the men (the Jewish Rabbis differed widely on this), but more to a belief that the Jewish woman was destined to be a homemaker. In the book of 'Erubin in the Talmud Rabbi Hisda gives us one interpretation of the words, God took Adam's rib and "he made (it) into a woman" (Genesis 2:22).

This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, built Eve in the shape of a storehouse. As a storehouse is (made) wide below and narrow above so that it may contain the produce, so was (the womb of) a woman (made) wide below and narrow above so that it may contain the embryo.

A woman was so much defined as a homemaker that even her body came to be perceived as constructed for this role! The Talmud, (Kiddushin), states that men are liable and women are exempt from "all affirmative precepts limited to time." In other words, women were exempt from mandates which necessitated their leaving the home for any period of time. Rabbi Aha b. Jacob in the Kiddushin brings to our mind Exodus 13:9,

And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that the Torah of the Lord may be in thy mouth: hence the whole Torah is compared to phylacteries:....

With this Scripture, Rabbi Aha b. Jacob concludes that the Torah is to be compared with phylacteries, which are little leather boxes containing Scripture verses worn on the head and left arm during prayer. Both are applicable only to people who travel about in their daily life. A woman had in their place the *mezuzah* which was on the doorpost at home. Therefore, under the assumption that women are primarily homemakers, women were exempted even from the Torah. In addition, if she spent her time in study of the Jewish Law, it was feared, her care of the household would suffer. As one Rabbi said to Rabbi Hiyya,

Whereby do women earn merit? By making their children go to the synagogue to learn Scripture and their husbands to the Beth Hamidrash (School of the Rabbis) to learn Mishnah, and waiting for their husbands till they return from the Beth Hamidrash (Berakoth).

Moreover, women normally had no part in the synagogue service. They usually remained in a back lobby when they came for religious festivals. It

was assumed then that the men came to learn, the women came to hear (not to study it fully) (Kiddushin). The woman's only sphere was the home.

Further, only wise people of superior birth were to learn "in silence." The command to learn in silence was not a derogatory comment such as we, regrettably, might address to children, "Shut up and listen to what the teacher says!" As Simon, the son of Rabban Gamaliel, explained,

All my days I grew up among the sages, and I have found nothing better for a person than silence. Study is not the most important thing, but deed; whoever indulges in too many words brings about sin. (Mishnah 17, Aboth).

His words echo numerous Old Testament passages such as Proverbs 17:27-28.

He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.

Rabbi Abbahu in the Kiddushin urges a father to find a wife for his unmarried son by going "after the peaceful" (literally, silence). Further, he informs Rabbi Judah,

As the Palestinians make a test: When two quarrel, they see which becomes silent first and say, This one is of superior birth.

Considered thus in its time, it is incredible that Paul, a zealous student of Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), came to assume that women were to learn "in silence" the gospel, "to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2:4). This was a return to the original Deuteronomic injunction.

Second, Paul addresses the Ephesians in verse 14 by emphasizing that the woman (Eve) "became" a transgressor because of her deception. He implies that she had not been created a transgressor. He assumes Eve as well as all women are not morally unfit to learn religious Law.

If women are by nature inferior, transgressors and not able to grow in wisdom, it makes perfect sense that they not be taught. Why bother? Aristotle, a good representative of popular Greek thought, regarded the inferiority of women as inherent in their sex. Greek women, for instance, had to be self-taught if they were to be well educated. Or, if women are by nature solely homemakers and procreators, it also makes sense that they not be taught. As we previously stated, the Jews feared that if a woman spent her time in study her care of the household would suffer. On the other hand, if by nature women are not transgressors and if they are not homemakers, it makes perfect sense that they are to be taught. Paul assumed two radical presuppositions about women. Rather than simply to hear they were to learn as the men, and their role as homemakers did not fulfill the ultimate priority for which they were created. Indeed Paul was following Jesus' example when he praised Mary for listening to his teaching instead of helping Martha in her household duties (Luke 10:38-42). The most radical action Paul could command was to order the men to teach the women at Ephesus the Christian "Law." This very well may be one of the reasons that Paul re-emphasizes his appointment as a preacher,

apostle, and teacher in faith and truth (verse 7) shortly before the passage in question. It would then be a matter of time before the women also would become authoritative teachers.⁴

Paul had dared to tell the Galatians that even the most primary division of God's creation, the division between the sexes, is overcome in Christ (Galatians 3:28).⁵ As the parallel incident with Cephas shows (Galatians 2:11-14), Paul did not like to see a gap between theory and practice. Yet it appears that here in Ephesus Paul slowed down the process which led to a genuine full and equal participation between women and men. Before people are "liberated" in Christ they need to recognize and understand the nature of that liberation. Otherwise they might strive after a pseudo-liberation which would terminate as slavery. Instruction in the faith had to precede a living out of that faith. Paul saw something happening at Ephesus which happened once before. A woman or women at Ephesus had certain unorthodox teachings or beliefs. Could it have been preoccupation with "different doctrine" or "myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations" (1:3, 4)? Could they have desired "to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions" (1:7)? Paul was aware that this woman (or these women) was (were) teaching a body of heretical beliefs to others, teaching it to them in an authoritative way, submitted to unorthodox teachers. The woman in Ephesus was reminiscent of the woman in Eden. Eve had in her time been deceived into believing certain "unorthodox" teachings. If she touched the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil she would become like Elohim (God) yet she would not die. She authoritatively taught this to Adam. Unfortunately, he learned. Both ate of this fruit. The story of our Earth is the disastrous aftermath of their actions, enslavement to sin and death.

Paul wanted to break a similar sequence at Ephesus. The church at Ephesus could be destroyed just as Adam and Eve destroyed themselves in Eden. It is at this point that Paul as their own apostle and teacher (2:7), using his personal judgment (verse 12), gave the Ephesians a particular guideline. Note that Paul does not say "I will never allow or permit," but instead he says "I am not allowing or permitting." He wrote in the present active indicative tense.

Let a woman learn through instruction in silence in all submission (to the constituted authority). But I am not allowing a woman to teach or to have authority over a man but to be in silence.⁶

I think that the "but" might be significant, since *de* normally is translated as an adversative particle signifying "but, however, yet, on the other hand."⁷ Paul indubitably knew that the preceding two injunctions would eventually be contradictory. Yet at this time Paul wanted to restrain the women at Ephesus from teaching the men until they themselves were well instructed.

Furthermore, this injunction seems to refer solely to the women at Ephesus. At approximately that same time Phoebe was designated by Paul in the letter to the Romans *prostatis* (16:2), indicating she had been called to a position of authority in the church. In Koine Greek the work

means "one who presides; the chief of a party; a president, ruler, foreman, superintendent."⁸ Phoebe had been praised by Paul in her position of authority while the women at Ephesus had been restrained.

Paul closes this small section of his letter to Timothy reminding the male instructor(s) and reassuring the female student(s) that the salvation of the woman is never to be questioned (verse 15). The use of the singular article would suggest that "the child-bearing" refers to the one most significant child-bearing for Christians. It was through Eve that transgression entered this Earth. It was through another woman, Mary, that salvation came. The deception of Eve led to transgression. But if the women at Ephesus were properly instructed the fruit for both the student and her teacher would be salvation,

if they continue in faith and love and holiness with self-control.

Thus Paul seems to be saying in this passage, on the basis of his personal judgment, that in their similarity to Eve women at Ephesus should neither teach nor have authority over men, but they should learn in submission to the constituted authority, the officials and regulations of the church. After stating this he again declared so that no one would misunderstand that the woman will be saved through the child-bearing, probably meaning the Child born to Mary. Paul had employed an analogy between Eve and the women at Ephesus who were both easily misled. When women anywhere, including Ephesus, grow beyond a resemblance to Eve in this respect, then the analogy no longer is valid. Ultimately Paul was teaching equality through Christ who humbles all. The difficulty has been that women everywhere have been compared with women at Ephesus. But Paul himself obviously did not make this generalization when referring to Phoebe as a female *prostatís* of the church.

A young man once told me about his background. He told me that his ancestors prior to his grandfather were in the mining business. It was his great-grandfather who recognized that this was an oppressive system under which to work. Even though he himself could no longer leave the mines he made it possible for his son to learn to become a carpenter. And for the son, carpentry signified liberation and freedom from the dangers of mining. The next son remained in the business because it was all he knew. It was a decision from habit and routine, one about which he gave little thought. Yet when the fourth generation, the young man with whom I spoke, was forced to enter the carpentry trade, for him carpentry had come to symbolize oppression. The norm which the great-grandfather wished to foster was not carpentry but freedom. It was misunderstood to be carpentry. Likewise, the norm which Paul wished to foster was liberation. For the first century women at Ephesus, learning the knowledge of God's truth from the appropriate persons was liberating. But more than 1900 years later simply learning in submission and never teaching men still is with many persons the norm to follow. The passage of the First Letter to Timothy 2:11-15 does not suggest opposition by Paul to the ordination of women. If anything, the development of Paul's work at Ephesus should culminate in the authoritative leadership of schooled orthodox women today. Paul never meant for women to remain at the beginning stage of growth exemplified by women at Ephesus. It was his

design to have them mature as heirs according to God's promise (Galatians 3:26-29). Thus, he would rejoice to see Galatians 3:28 become a reality in our actions.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

NOTES

¹For instance, William Barclay in *The Daily Study Bible, The Letters to Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (pp. 77-78) points out that in contrast to the *Melissae* priestess, "The respectable Greek woman led a very confined life. She lived in her own quarters into which no one but her husband came. She did not even appear at meals. She never at any time appeared on the street alone; she never went to any public assembly, still less did she ever speak or take any active part in such an assembly. The fact is that if in a Greek town Christian women had taken an active and a speaking and a teaching part in the work of the Christian Church, the Church would inevitably have gained the reputation of being the resort of loose and immoral women. The plain fact of the situation was that in any Greek society no other regulations than these could have been laid down."

²After much study I have adopted the position of the Pauline authorship of the Epistles to Timothy. The external evidence adequately supports the Apostle Paul's authorship. The quotation of the Pastoral Epistles as the work of Paul begins with Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria. The Muratorian Canon included the Pastoral Epistles. Polycarp and Clement of Rome, for instance, allude to several verses in the Letter to Timothy. Within the letter, of course, Paul's name (1:1) is used as the author. Many of the arguments against the Pauline authorship revolve around the internal evidence. Nevertheless the Epistles do not appear to be parallel to pseudonymous apocalypses since none of the known forged epistles begin to approach in tone and quality the Pastoral Epistles. Other factors which lead some scholars to question whether the letters as they now stand were written personally by Paul, outside of possible thematic inconsistencies in I Timothy 2:11-15, are: Paul's travels described in the Pastorals do not fit into the account in Acts, which closes with Paul in prison; the differences in style, vocabulary, and point of view between Pastoral and other Pauline letters; condemned false doctrines seem to belong to a later period; the church organization and the attitude toward the various ministries seem also to belong to a later period; the letter does not really convey anything that would not already have been known in Ephesus; the tension of Christian existence in the new eschatological situation had been abandoned in favor of a Christian adjustment to this world. Several factors caused me to see these criticisms as less important than the counter evidence. Paul expected to be released (e.g. Philemon 22) and to go to Spain (Romans 15:24, 28). Eusebius and the Muratorian Canon believed he had been there. Although we can not say for sure Paul did ever go to Spain, it is plausible to believe he was released. He wrote the Pastoral Epistles during such extensive traveling. Even W. Marxsen, who disbelieves the Pauline authorship, states "... the Pastorals can have been written by Paul only if he was set free again after a first Roman imprisonment" (*Introduction to the New Testament*, translated by G. Buswell, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970, p. 211). The differences in style and vocabulary could spring from the differences in circumstances, needs, and purposes of the letters and/or greater part played by a contemporary amanuensis in their composition. I am not ready to take some differences of vocabulary seriously, when the ideas expressed are similar, until I am shown by valid research methods that the vocabulary of an individual does not change with different age or circumstances. The heresies condemned in I Timothy seem in many respects similar to the errors attacked in the Letter to the Colossians written earlier. The Letter to Timothy as a manual of instruction was intended to supplement the counsel given orally at the time of Paul's departure, since his return to Ephesus might be delayed (3:14-15; 4:13). The letters are actually very ambiguous as to the function and status of an elder or a bishop. In contrast, in 111-117 A.D., in a letter of Ignatius of Antioch, the church is highly organized. Also it is quite incredible that anyone writing in the name of Paul would give Timothy the simple, homely advice to drink a little wine for the sake of his health (5:23). Therefore, it seems to make most sense in assigning the Letter to Timothy to Paul the Apostle, possibly written near the end of his life.

³I Timothy 1:3, 10; 3:15; 4:1, 6, 16; 6:3 and following, 20-21; II Timothy 1:13-14; 2:2, 15-18; 4:3-4.

⁴I have employed an hermeneutical principle which Krister Stendahl has suggested in *The Bible and The Role of Women* (pp. 35-36). "It should not be such a strange idea for us that the full consequences of the new life in Christ are not immediately drawn and applied.... If the actual stage of implementation in the first century becomes the standard for what is authoritative, then those elements which point toward future implementation become neutralized and absorbed in a static 'biblical view.' We know how a similar type of thinking operated in the question of slavery. Since the new 'neither slave nor free' had not worked itself out into social practice within the time span of the New Testament canon, it appeared to many good Christians that the emancipation of slaves was against the Scriptures. The actual description of the first-century church, when treated as normative, gave them irrefutable biblical arguments for such a view."

⁵Herein Paul shows that the law of Moses has been transcended through Christ at the following areas: the wall between Jews and Greeks, the wall between slave and free, and the wall between male and female. The use of the technical term "male and female" points directly back to Genesis 1:27. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶The translation of I Timothy 2:11-15 is the author's literal rendition. All other biblical quotations are taken from The Revised Standard Version of *The Holy Bible*.

⁷H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. 244.

⁸Russell C. Prohl, *Woman in the Church*, p. 70.