

Women Who Travel for God: A Biblical Perspective

Jodi Detrick (MACM, 2010)

Life Coach, Freelance Writer, Author, Speaker

Old Testament Examples

With the rise of global mobility, some might view the reality of women traveling as an integral part of their service to the Lord a recent phenomenon. However, since the time Eve journeyed with Adam out of Eden, women have been on the move in response to what they believed God wanted for their lives.

Genesis 7:7 provides one of the earliest biblical accounts of a woman who left her home at God's prompting. At the urging of her husband, Noah's wife embarked on the first "cruise" without prior evidence that such a remarkable journey was necessary or even possible. One could even surmise that this courageous and obedient woman became the second mother of all humanity (since she was mother of Shem, Ham, and Japheth). In Genesis 8:16, God said to Noah, "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you."¹ When God said, "Go out," He was speaking to Noah's wife, as well as to Noah. She went, and, as a result, was part of the original fresh start.

Lot's wife, on the other hand, seemed to prefer to stay put in the wicked city of Sodom—even in light of imminent judgment—and suffered the consequences (Gen. 19:26).

Escaping from judgment was not the only reason women of the Old Testament were on the move. At the age of seventy-five, Abraham—accompanied by his wife—left Haran because of God's command. "Then Abram took Sarai his wife ... and all their possessions that they had gathered ... and they departed to go to the land of Canaan" (Gen. 12:5). Somehow, Abraham realized that God's promise—to bless all the families of the earth through him—involved partnering with his wife, Sarah (Gen. 17:15-16).

The narrative about Rebekah adds a new twist to the story of traveling women of the Old Testament. Up to this point, the record consists mostly of women who moved in conjunction with their husbands. But Rebekah illustrates the first single female who leaves her home to travel a great distance in response to God's unfolding plan. Apparently, she exercised personal volition regarding whether or not to go with the servant seeking a wife for Abraham's son, Isaac. "So they said, 'We will call the young woman and ask her personally.' Then they called Rebekah and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' And she said, 'I will go'" (Gen. 24:57-58).

Throughout the pages of the Old Testament, women continued to say, "I will go." When Miriam went to the water's edge to see what would become of her little brother who was floating in a basket on the Nile, she asked Pharaoh's daughter (who had drawn him out

of the water) if she should go find a Hebrew nurse. Exodus 2:8 says, “And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Go.” So the maiden went and called the child’s mother.” One might wonder if this small-scale rescue mission might have been preparation for Miriam’s much larger role as a leader in the exodus years later.

One of the weightier Old Testament accounts of a woman who traveled for God’s purposes is that of the great female leader, Deborah, who served as a judge over the nation of Israel prior to the establishment of the monarchy. At the time, Jabin, the Canaanite king, and his commander, Sisera, were oppressing the people of Israel. As a leader and prophet who spoke for God, Deborah instructed Barak to lead an army out against Sisera, promising him that God would grant victory. But even with this promise of success, Barak had a request of Deborah.

And Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go!” So she said, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless there will be no glory for you in the journey you are taking, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; he went up with ten thousand men under his command, and Deborah went up with him (Judges 4:4-10).

One can only imagine what faith and courage it must have taken for Deborah, likely the only woman among ten thousand men, to go riding out to face the Canaanite army with its fierce commander, Sisera. As Deborah predicted, Sisera met his end at the hands of a woman, Jael. Also of significance, Deborah, the wife of Lapidoth,

illustrates the first married woman and mother of Israel (Judg. 5:7) traveling on God’s mission in the company of a man who was not her husband. The successful quest defeated the armies of Jabin and granted Israel forty years of peace—all because one woman was willing to go—trusting God despite the risk of great personal loss.

A look at traveling women of faith in the Old Testament would not be complete without remembering Ruth, the Moabite, who left her native soil to travel with her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Israel. These two widows would face great jeopardy as they journeyed alone between Moab and Bethlehem. The seventy-five mile trip would likely take at least seven to ten days. Even when urged by her mother-in-law to turn back, Ruth was determined to follow Naomi on this precarious passage to a new homeland.

Although Ruth’s words are often quoted in present-day wedding ceremonies, her story marks one of the first times a woman travels with a person of the same gender out of pure devotion, affection, and loyalty. “But Ruth replied, ‘Don’t ask me to leave you and turn back. I will go wherever you go and live wherever you live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God’” (Ruth 1:16, NLT). For Ruth to claim Naomi’s God as her own suggests that Naomi exercised a strong spiritual influence on Naomi. For this woman and for this God, Ruth was willing to go anywhere.

Throughout the Old Testament, numerous women illustrate how life, faith, and travel intersected. Some women, like Esther and the little captive girl in service to the wife of Naaman, the Syrian leper, were taken to unfamiliar places, likely against their will. Still they managed to make a positive, life-

giving difference in their strange, new settings.

New Testament Examples

When it comes to the New Testament, some people attempt to build a biblical case against women who travel for ministry purposes based on Titus 2:4-5, which says, “Admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed.” The King James Version of that verse uses the phrase, “keepers at home” which some people interpret to mean that women should be kept at home. However, not all Christian women were, or are, wives or mothers. In fact, Paul encouraged celibacy for young virgin women living under the distress of persecution. This verse cannot be taken as a universal command for all women believers to be stay-at-home homemakers. The evidences in the New Testament that women were not only allowed, but sometimes called, to travel as an expression of their faith and obedience to God are plentiful.

Many New Testament women were travelers. Mary, the young, unwed mother of the unborn Jesus, felt compelled to leave home and make the two-hundred mile round trip to see her older cousin, Elizabeth, because the angel had revealed that she, too, was with child. Somehow, Mary’s expression of trust in what God had disclosed prompted her to go and connect with her mentor and encourager, Elizabeth, instead of staying home and waiting for Jesus to be born.

As Jesus grew into manhood and began His own public ministry, both male and female disciples traveled with him. Luke 8:1-3 (NIV) makes that clear:

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

How encouraging for women whose ministry call requires travel to know that Jesus included women in His traveling ministry. He and the twelve relied on them and accepted the help of their presence, as well as their financial assistance. Several of these women had a sordid past—they were formerly broken in character, spirit, and/or body, but He had made them whole and now they journeyed with Him. Some must have been financially well off to be able to “support them out of their own means.” Joanna would have been a woman of some social standing, being married to the manager of Herod’s household. Married and single, outcast and prominent, rich and poor—the women in Jesus’ ministry entourage represented the whole spectrum of the social strata. He welcomed each of them to be a participant of His itinerant ministry throughout Judea.

In the Early Church, other women used their mobility as a means of service to God. Priscilla, who was likely the more prominent leader, traveled with her husband, Aquila, and together they accompanied Paul on at least one leg of a missionary journey (Acts 18:1). Priscilla was not just a wise teacher of the gospel and a house church leader; she was also one who would journey for that same gospel.

Phoebe, a deacon/minister in the Early Church, was called upon to travel for ministry. In their book, *God's Women Then and Now*, Deborah Gill and Barbara Cavaness state, "Phoebe was the letter carrier of the epistle to the Romans. As such she was given great responsibility—as Paul's forerunner to Rome."² Indeed, it was no small thing to be given the task of extensive travel for the purpose of delivering a letter to a church where Paul had never been—a letter which would later become part of the canon of Scripture.

In 1 Corinthians 9:5, Paul defends his apostleship by asking: "Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?" From this, we can infer it was the norm, not the exception, for the wives of the apostles to travel with them in ministry.

Even with the weight of biblical precedence for women who traveled in response to their faith in God, it took some time for most missionary societies in the nineteenth century to approve the sending of single females as missionaries in their own right. Valorie Griffiths writes:

Most missionary societies were still strongly opposed to sending single women out alone. In 1834, most unmarried women in Britain had to live under the protection of their families until they were married, and it was unthinkable that they should live alone overseas; ... If a woman felt called to go overseas, the only solution was to find a husband similarly called. ... There was a further difficulty: at that time "missionaries" were by definition men, and mostly ordained men. Women could not be missionaries, even if, when their

husbands died, they continued their work for several decades afterwards.³

Yet many women of that era persisted in responding to God's call to missionary service, which included dangerous overseas travel, often fulfilling the role without a title. In China alone, the effect of these women who journeyed for God was very significant. Griffiths says, "By 1900 there were two missionary women in China for every man, and their work among Chinese women was crucial for the growth of the church. In the process, these Western women were liberated from Victorian customs and expectation; they found themselves gifted for work in teaching and evangelism which would have been impossible in their churches at home."⁴

Cautions Regarding Women in Ministry Traveling

Notwithstanding the solid biblical basis for women who travel for God's purposes, Scripture and historical evidence provides cautions about the matter that should not be ignored.

Not every traveling woman in the Bible was on a noble mission. Jezebel's journeys (1 Kings 18-2 Kings 9, selected verses) purposed to destroy the true prophets of God. In describing a harlot, Solomon writes, "She was loud and rebellious; her feet would not stay at home" (Prov. 7:11). In the New Testament, Paul writes about a tendency among some of the younger widows supported by the church: "And besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not (1 Tim. 5:13)." Being a gadabout was not godly journeying.

Further, there were *dangers associated with travel*, even for a married woman who was accompanying her husband. Sarah found that out when she caught the eye of the local king, Abimelech, as they were passing through his territory. He took her to be one of his wives until God intervened and delivered her from sexual assault (Gen. 20:2-18). Likewise, Boaz told Ruth to stay close to his own workers in the field to protect her from attack (Ruth 2:21-22).

The *danger of sexual temptation* is also a hazard that must not be ignored, especially considering those times when both genders travel together for ministry. Among Early Church women and medieval Christians, *syneisaktism* (i.e. virginity for the purpose of freedom to travel in ministry) was often practiced. Many devout young women chose singleness in order to be free to travel and perform acts of charity because they felt God's calling to do so.

In some forms, *syneisaktism* also meant that celibate couples could cohabit (even to the point of sharing the same bed) in a "spiritual marriage" or "chaste marriage" that excluded sexual intimacy as an ascetic discipline. Needless to say, this practice, which was denounced by most Early Church fathers, often led to the exact opposite of its intended result and was disapproved by many church councils. Bullough and Brundage write, "The arrangement seems often to have degenerated into a form of clerical concubinage, a cause for scandal and sin."⁵

In more modern times, some itinerant female ministers have also fallen prey to sexual temptation. At the turn of the twentieth century, it is hard to imagine anyone who was more popular with the masses and who did more traveling for ministry than Foursquare Church founder

and evangelist, Aimee Semple McPherson. She and her mother were the first women to drive across the continental United States in a 1912 Packard, unaccompanied by a male. Her Spirit-filled messages, though often dramatic and flamboyant, were solidly biblical, and her works of charity were undeniable. She was a woman of broad influence, both in the church world and in society in general. Yet she spent many of the last years of her ministry under the cloud of sexual scandal when it was charged she faked a kidnapping (at first she was thought to have drowned) in order to have time for an adulterous tryst with her married lover, Kenneth G. Ormiston.

Traveling Women: Some Practical Advice

Still, the preponderance of evidence shows it is possible for women to maintain their integrity while traveling in ministry, whether they do it with or without male counterparts. Kathryn Cory, a minister to college students states:

By creating an oversensitivity to one's interactions with the opposite sex because of the potential for temptation, each member of the opposite sex is viewed as a possible source of sexual sin and effectively objectified.

Consequently, as every interaction with the opposite sex is sexualized, the temptation to sin is actually increased, engendering the behavior that the current system of boundaries is designed to restrict. Furthermore, if sexual sin does occur, the reaction is often to enact more boundaries, rather than an addressing of the true heart of the matter: blind-spots regarding gender, sex, and sexuality. This is neither healthy for anyone nor fair to women.⁶

Kathryn goes on to give some great practical advice on this matter. She suggests instead

of creating rigid boundaries (like never ride in a car with a person of the opposite sex who is not your spouse or relative), each person and each potential interaction must be considered in a unique context. There is no “one-size-fits-all” in this matter. While she cautions against private meetings with unstable people, she encourages both male and female ministers to intentionally engage in appropriate interaction with the opposite sex while actively guarding themselves through transparency and accountability.

Thankfully, one need not look far to find examples of godly women travelers who display a stellar track record when it comes to both ministry and personal integrity. Early female Pentecostal missionaries like Lillian Trasher, Alice Luce, and Anna Richards-Scoble were pioneers, paving the way for women who would receive a calling to missions. In the middle to late twentieth century, women like Corrie ten Boom and Joni Earkeckson Tada traveled extensively, bringing a message of hope to hundreds of thousands of men and women around the globe.

More recently, God has raised up an army of female travelers who regularly leave their homes to minister for Him. Some of their names are well-known in the wider body of Christ: Joyce Meyer, Beth Moore, Ruth Graham Lotz, and Jennifer Rothschild. Others within the Assemblies of God include Beth Grant, Carolyn Tennant, Deborah Gill, and Alicia Chole. These women serve as role models for thousands

of young women who offer their mobility, along with their hearts, in service to God.

Conclusion

The question of women traveling for God became very personal for me when a well-meaning pastor’s wife told my daughter, Jana, that she should stay home and not pursue ministry until she found a husband. Thankfully, because Jana knows the Word of God and has examples like the ones mentioned above, she disregarded this counsel. She is now a twenty-six-year-old ordained Assemblies of God minister who has touched many lives for Jesus as a result of her willingness to go wherever God calls her, which includes a great deal of travel. She serves alongside her male colleagues, both single and married, in a healthy setting where her voice is respected and her ministry valued.

As I think about all those who have journeyed for God down through the centuries, I wonder what it would have been like to hear the song of the returning travelers, Deborah and Barak, as they sang of triumph in Judges 5. To me, their ballad represents the beautiful and powerful duet produced when both genders are willing to go forth and minister together in harmony. Each mile traversed this way is music to a hurting world’s ears.

This article was originally submitted to Dr. Deborah Gill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an AGTS MACM course, BTH 640 “Theology of Women in Ministry.”

SOURCES CONSULTED

Blumhofer, Edith L. *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody’s Sister*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

- Bullough, Vern and James Brundage, eds. *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality: A Book of Essays*. New York: Routledge, 1996.,
- Cory, Kathryn. "Moving Beyond the Current Culture of Boundaries: Developing Healthy, Appropriate, and Biblical Relationships with the Opposite Sex." Ministry Direct. http://www.ministrydirect.com/md_articleDetail.aspx?id=1124&tId=186&cId=6437&topic=Miscellaneous (accessed October 13, 2009).
- Cross, F. L., and E. A. Livingstone, eds. *Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997.
- Dunn, James D. G. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Fee, Gordon D. *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.
- . *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
- Gill, Deborah, and Barbara Cavenass. *God's Women Then and Now*. Springfield, MO: Grace and Truth, 2004.
- Griffiths, Valerie. *Not Less Than Everything: The Courageous Women Who Carried the Gospel to China*. Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2004.
- Hassey, Janette. *No Time for Silence: Evangelical Women in Public Ministry around the Turn of the Century*. Minneapolis: Christians for Biblical Equality, 1986.
- Ladd, George Eldon. *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

¹All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the King James Version.

²Deborah Gill and Barbara Cavenass, *God's Women Then and Now* (Springfield, MO: Grace & Truth, 2004), 111.

³Valerie Griffiths, *Not Less Than Everything: The Courageous Women Who Carried the Christian Gospel to China* (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2004), 16.

⁴*Ibid.*, 10.

⁵Vern Bullough and James Brundage, eds., *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality: A Book of Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 105.

⁶Kathryn Cory, "Moving Beyond the Current Culture of Boundaries: Developing Healthy, Appropriate, and Biblical Relationships with the Opposite Sex," Ministry Direct, http://www.ministrydirect.com/md_articleDetail.aspx?id=1124&tId=186&cId=6437&topic=Miscellaneous (accessed October 13, 2009).