

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

WOMEN WHO TRAVEL FOR GOD: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

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With mobility on the rise globally, some might think that women who consider travel an integral part of their service to the Lord only a recent phenomenon. But almost from 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.

In Genesis 7:7, one of the earliest biblical accounts is given of a woman who left her home at God's prompting. Likely at the urging of her husband, Noah's wife was willing to go on the first "cruise" without prior evidence that such a remarkable journey was necessary, or even possible. Because of her courage and obedience, one could surmise she became the second mother of all humanity (since she was the 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 when judgment was imminent, and suffered the consequences (Gen. 19:26).

Escaping from judgment was not the only reason women of the Old Testament were on the move. Abraham was seventy-five years old when he left Haran because of God's command, but he did not go alone. Genesis 12:5 says, "Then Abram took Sarai his wife...and all their possessions that they had gathered...and they departed to go to the land of Canaan." Somehow Abraham realized God's promise of blessing all the families of the earth through him involved partnering with his wife, Sarah. God confirmed that in Genesis 17:15-16 when He said, "As for

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

Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her.”

The story of Rebekah adds a new twist to the traveling women of the Old Testament. Up until her story is told, the record consists mostly of wives who were trekking with their husbands. Rebekah is the first single female who leaves her home to travel a great distance in response to God’s unfolding plan. Another unique thing in this account is the apparent volition she had regarding whether or not to go with the servant who was seeking a wife for Abraham’s son, Isaac. Genesis 24:57-58 says, “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.’”

Women continued to say “I will go” throughout the pages of the Old Testament. 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. Genesis 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 smaller scale rescue mission which required Miriam to go might have been preparation for her much larger role of going 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 of the great female leader, Deborah, who served as a judge over the nation of Israel prior to the time of its becoming a monarchy. In the fourth chapter of Judges, Israel is being oppressed by the Canaanite king, Jabin, and his commander, Sisera. In her role as leader and the prophet who spoke for God, Deborah instructed Barak to lead an army out against Sisera,

promising him God would grant victory. But even with this promise of success, Barak had a request of Deborah. Judges 4:4-10 gives the details:

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.

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, he met his end at the hands of a woman, Jael.)

Another noteworthy factor in this story is this is the first time we see a married woman (Deborah was the wife of Lapidoth), who also identified herself as a mother in Israel (Judg. 5:7), traveling on God's mission in the company of a man who was not her husband. The quest was a great success and the armies of Jabin were defeated granting 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 Moabitess, who left native soil to travel with her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Israel. These two widows would incur great jeopardy as they journeyed alone between Moab and Bethlehem. The trip, which was approximately seventy-five miles, would likely take them at least seven to ten days. Even when urged by her mother-in-law to turn back (as her sister-in-law, Orpah, had done), Ruth was determined to follow Naomi on this precarious passage to a new homeland.

Though Ruth's words are often quoted in present-day wedding ceremonies, her story marks one of the first times we see a woman traveling out of pure devotion, affection, and

loyalty to another of the same gender. “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 the strong spiritual influence her mother-in-law must have had on her. For this woman, and for this God, Ruth was willing to go anywhere.

There are numerous other Old Testament women for whom life, faith, and travel intersected. Some, like Esther and the little captive servant girl 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.

When it comes to the New Testament, there are those who have tried to make a biblical case against women who travel for ministry purposes from 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 have taken to mean 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.

Starting with Mary, many New Testament women were travelers. 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 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 just 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 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 of these women 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, outcasts and prominent, rich and poor...the women in Jesus' ministry entourage were from across the whole social strata. He welcomed each of them to be a participant of His itinerant ministry throughout Judea.

In the Early Church, there are more examples of women who used their mobility as a means of service to God. Priscilla (who was likely the more prominent leader of this couple) traveled with her husband, Aquila, and together they accompanied Paul on at least one leg of a missionary journey (see 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*, authors 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, Paul is making a defense of his apostleship when he makes this statement in verse 5: “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, that the wives of the apostles traveled 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 wearing the title. In China alone, the effect of these women who were willing to journey for God was very significant. Griffiths says, “By 1900 there were two missionary women in China for every man,

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

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

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

Notwithstanding the solid biblical basis for women who travel for God’s purposes, there are also cautions about the matter, both from scripture and history, which 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) were for the purpose of destroying 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* (which is virginity for the purpose of freedom to

⁴Ibid., 10.

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. In her day (the early 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.

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.

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

Kathryn Cory, a minister to college students through Chi Alpha addresses some very important gender and ministry issues in an article for the Ministry Direct website. She writes:

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. But while she cautions against private meetings with those who are unstable, 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, we do not have to look far to find examples of godly women travelers who have 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.

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).

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 our own ranks in the Assemblies of God, like Beth Grant, Carolyn Tennant, Deborah Gill, and Alicia Chole, are role models for thousands of young women who offer their mobility, along with their hearts, in service to God.

This gets very personal for me when I think of the advice given to my own daughter a few years back. Jana, who had just completed college and earned her ministry degree, was told by a well-meaning pastor's wife 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 26 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 the fifth chapter of Judges. To me, their ballad represents the beautiful and powerful duet produced when both genders are willing to go forth and minister together in harmony. I think each mile traversed this way is music to a hurting world's ears.

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