

Book Review: *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church*

Gupta, Nijay K. 2023. *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic. xiii + 209 pp. ISBN 978-1-5140-0074-8. Approx. 433 ZAR (\$24 USD). Paperback.

1. Introduction

Nijay K. Gupta is a full professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary in the greater Chicago area; formerly he held the same position at Portland Seminary. He is well-known to the South African Theological Seminary (SATS) community, having offered Master Classes for SATS on 1 Thessalonians (2021) and Philemon (2022). He has published commentaries on 1-2 Thessalonians, in the New Covenant Commentary Series (Cascade Books, 2016), and on Galatians, in the Story of God Bible Commentary Series (Zondervan Academic, 2023). His monographs include *Paul and the Language of Faith* (Eerdmans, 2020) and *15 New Testament Words of Life: A New Testament Theology for Real Life* (Zondervan Academic, 2022). In *Tell Her Story*, Gupta examines some often-hidden figures—albeit hidden in plain sight—of women in ministry, as seen in the biblical texts. He starts with an examination of the era prior to the establishment of the Church, looking at key texts in the Old Testament

and in the Gospels as well as the general role and place of women in the world of the New Testament. He then proceeds to assess the known women leaders in the early Church. Next, he asks, “What About...?” and scrutinizes the common objections raised to women in ecclesial leadership. The book includes both a general index and a Scripture index. *Tell Her Story* has footnotes rather than endnotes, which the reader will find helpful.

2. Overview

Like many, Gupta’s Christian journey began in an ecclesial tradition in which only men were allowed to lead. Also like many, he simply accepted that things were the way they were and the way they should be. Unlike the Bereans, he did not examine whether his inherited theology and ecclesiology were grounded in Scripture. He was simply “content with the assumption that the church is for everyone to attend and participate in, but should be led by men, because that’s the way it has always been according to the Good Book” (p. 2). Fortunately for New Testament scholarship and for readers of this book, he moved beyond the views he had inherited and examined the evidence for himself.

2.1 Backgrounds: Part 1, "Before the woman leaders of the early Church"

In this section, Gupta highlights the background to his exploration of Christian women leaders which comprises the core of his book in the following section. In a section with four chapters, he explores four topics: “Deborah, Prophet, Judge, Mother over Israel,” “Going Back to the Beginning: Genesis 1–3,” “Women in the New Testament World,” and “The Women in Jesus’ Life and Ministry.”

Many who assume that the very idea of female leadership is inherently contrary to God’s created order go to great lengths to explain how Deborah’s

effective leadership was an exception that proved the rule of exclusive male leadership. They assert that Deborah's leadership was merely the result of her filling a vacuum caused by the failure of Israelite men to step up and lead. Gupta refutes those arguments largely by letting the testimony of Scripture speak for itself, observing that "Deborah is the only judge given extensive narration of whom nothing negative is said or implied" (p. 12). He shows her to be not just a secular magistrate and military advisor but a spiritual leader in the model of Moses and Joshua and as a type of Samuel who would follow.

Next, Gupta cogently argues that nothing in the Genesis creation account "clearly establishes headship, female submission, or unique male ruling authority" (p. 25). The disruption to human "harmonious partnership" that we see in Genesis 3 does not establish a biblical mandate for hierarchicalism; instead of hierarchy, the "way back" to "unity and harmony [is restored] through Jesus Christ" (p. 29).

In reviewing the social contexts of the Roman Empire in the first century, Gupta acknowledges that Roman society was patriarchal from top to bottom but carefully points out a more nuanced, and more historically accurate, picture. Women were not merely consigned to be "barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen" (in accordance with the modern hierarchical trope) but often had considerable agency and honor and exercised leadership and patronage in various contexts. Inscriptional evidence demonstrates that even in Jewish synagogues, "women sometimes held leadership titles" (p. 47). It should, therefore, come as no surprise that important early Christian "leaders like the apostle Paul not only acknowledged women leaders in Christian communities but also commended and praised them for their work" (p. 49).

In the fourth chapter, Gupta turns to the women of the Gospels, who were "often modeling and performing ministry faithfully" in ways that

show that "they were instrumental agents of the beginning of the gospel and the birth of the church" (p. 51). In a male-dominated world, the Gospels consistently highlight the concerns, contributions, and voices of women. Notably, it was a woman, Mary Magdalene, who was commissioned to preach the gospel of the resurrection to the Twelve.

2.2 *The data: Part 2, "The women leaders of the early Church"*

This section is the main course of the feast Gupta lays out before us. In these five chapters, he examines "The Early Churches," "Women Collaborers in Ministry Leadership," "Phoebe, Paul's Trusted Proxy," "Prisca, Strategic Church Leader and Expert Teacher," and "Junia, Venerated Apostle and Imprisoned Hero." Remarkably, out of 26 individuals whom Paul explicitly honored as church leaders in Romans 16, ten were women. "Paul was explicitly commending women's ministry and leadership" (p. 98). Gupta observes that the hosts of house churches "would have been the most natural choices for church overseers" given their preexisting skillsets. He acknowledges that the majority of such householders would have typically been the *paterfamilias*, but he goes on to note that in the New Testament period "women may have comprised up to 25 percent of the total householders" (p. 87). Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16), Nympha in Laodicea (Col 4), and Prisca (with her husband Aquila) in Ephesus are examples of these. Throughout his letters, Paul habitually honored "faithful Christian women leaders" (albeit, while not excluding men), frequently commending them "as coworkers" in ministry (p. 107; emphasis mine).

The New Testament documents portray early churches which "consciously rejected authoritarian systems that were prevalent in" the surrounding society (p. 78). For example, Paul identifies Phoebe, a woman, as a *diakonos* (minister) in Romans 16:1, a term elsewhere used of Jesus

(Rom 15:8). It is interesting that he uses “the generic masculine form of the word” rather than the feminine form (*diakonissa*) which we might translate as *deaconess* (p. 84). Elsewhere Paul uses this term to describe various leaders who “possess *authority*” (p. 118; emphasis mine). As Paul’s hand-selected letter carrier for the Romans, Phoebe additionally would have possessed “a kind of apostolic agency” as his official interpreter and commentator of his words, as someone whom Paul recognized as a peer (p. 122). Likewise, Prisca (also known as Priscilla) is highlighted by both Luke and Paul as not only a church leader but as one who, as “an advanced teacher” (p. 135), was commended for correcting the male church leader and evangelist Apollos. On this point, Gupta notes that Luke uses the same verb (*ektithēmi*) to describe her instruction of Apollos as he uses to describe the apostolic teaching of Peter (Acts 11:4; 28:23).

It is remarkable that today some people continue to insist that “maybe Junia was a man and not a woman” or that Paul was merely lauding her and Andronicus as people whom the actual (all male) apostles happened to know and thought well of. (Notably mistranslations of Rom 16:7 in versions like the NET and the popular ESV perpetuate the latter mistake; NIV–1984 recognized that the pair were *apostoloi* but incorrectly gave the masculine *Junias*; NIV–2011 gives *Junia*, acknowledging her sex.) The evidence that Junia was a woman and that she and her husband Andronicus were “*prominent*—noteworthy, distinguished, special—among the *apostoloi*” (p. 141) is incontrovertible. Even if not “big-A” Apostles (e.g., The Twelve plus Paul), they were clearly apostolic workers who exercised the full range of authoritative teaching and ministry in the churches. To correct continuing misconceptions to the contrary, Gupta helpfully summarizes the evidence on these points.

Gupta concludes part 2 by reflecting on five key themes:

- “God’s People Have Needed Wise, Faithful, and Brave Women from the Beginning”;
- “Women of All Kinds Encountered Jesus and His People”;
- “Paul Preached Harmony between Men and Women in the Home and the Church”;
- “Paul Relied on Numerous Women Leaders as Coworkers in the Gospel Mission”; and
- “Independently Powerful Women Existed in the Roman World—and in the Early Churches Too.”

Gupta cogently argues that the named women in Paul’s letters “were *ministers*”—within the leadership of the early church “women were there, when we so often imagine that they weren’t” (p. 156; emphasis mine).

2.3 Excursus: *What about...?*

This is Gupta’s “bonus section” (p. 6). Having examined the evidence of *How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church*, he moves to address the two most common *gotcha* questions raised both by hierarchalists and by those who have simply always been taught that “women can’t.” The questions are, what about Paul prohibiting women from teaching in the church in 1 Timothy 2, and what about the submission texts in the New Testament household codes? (p. 161).

Many interpreters assume that the passage in 1 Timothy 2 teaches “that women ought to play no executive function in the church because they are gullible and hasty by nature, and their proper place is caring for family in the home” (p. 164). Gupta successfully refutes this misinterpretation, looking

at the entire narrative scope of the New Testament instead of at a handful of proof texts. Likewise, many ardently believe that submission language directed towards women in the household codes can be summarized merely as *women should be submissive (often to the point of subjugation) in the home and women are absolutely forbidden to be anything other than silent in the church*. Gupta acknowledges that during his “early years of Christian faith,” he was unable to reconcile “these submission texts with any perspective that allowed women to exercise authority in the church.” But as he studied these passages—both “what they say” and what they “don’t say”—and their contexts more deeply, he realized that those passages are not the prohibitory texts they are taken to be (p. 182). Upon examination, these codes, though borrowed from surrounding Greco-Roman culture, have been thoroughly Christianized. In them, Paul introduces a “reciprocity and partnership” between husbands and wives that emphasizes “mutual care and unity” (p. 189) and a “radical mutuality within existing relationship systems” (p. 194), such as we see in the broader exhortation to mutual submission between all believers, men and women together, in Ephesians 5:21. In light of what we know from Paul’s own writings “women could and did serve in powerful roles in ministry leadership,” and Gupta sees “no reason why the household codes would have prevented women from serving in ministry” (p. 199).

3. Evaluation

Throughout this book, Gupta is careful to avoid historical revisionism. He admits, for example, that “we don’t know whether women served as *episkopoi* in the early churches,” noting that no one, either man or woman, is explicitly named as an overseer of the Church in the New Testament (p. 85). This may serve to disappoint some egalitarians even as it encourages any hierarchalists who may have read so far. Instead, this book can be

characterized as “an exercise in *amplification*” (p. 3; emphasis mine), simply highlighting the evidence that has been there all along. Gupta’s handling of biblical texts, including controversial ones, is consistently responsible. He does not pretend to have explained away “all the confusing bits” of texts like 1 Timothy 2:8–15 (p. 177), and he writes with epistemic humility. Because of his engaging writing style, this book is accessible to ordinary readers. Because of his responsible scholarship, academic readers can be directed to key primary and secondary sources in the footnotes. In spite of ancient (and contemporary!) expectations to the contrary, the New Testament documents treat “women as strong, productive, trustworthy, and wise co-leaders in ministry” (p. 197).

I found little to criticize in *Tell Her Story*, beyond a single typographical error (p. 104, footnote 27). Readers who approach the book with a dogmatic commitment to gender hierarchicalism are unlikely to be convinced to change their position by Gupta’s argument. Even if they grant the evidence that Junia was both a woman and an apostle, for example, they are likely to deny that her ministry role is exemplary for the current day. Readers, whether egalitarian or complementarian, who approach the proffered evidence with an open mind stand to gain much.

The book’s primary limitation is one necessitated by its scope. I would have appreciated an examination of extrabiblical documents and other evidence from Early Christianity, such as the corpus of the Apostolic Fathers and various second-century texts. What do 1 Clement, Ignatius’s letters, and the Didache have to say about the role of women? What might a careful study of the New Testament apocryphal writings reveal? While those writings contain many hagiographical elements that are clearly fictive, what, for example, do the stories of Thecla tell us about the role of women in leading, teaching, and ministering in the early Church? Gupta, however,

has limited his scope to the canonical New Testament documents, though this suits his intended purpose. Finally, the value of this book would have been enhanced by the inclusion of a full bibliography. Gupta does provide a select list of suggested further reading as a “Postscript”; this is helpful, but for his sources, readers must peruse the footnotes.

4. Conclusion

Gupta confesses that in the past he had “neglected the stories” of women leaders in the Bible, treating “the Bible as a man’s world” in which “women were just supporting characters” (p. 154). Having hidden these women from himself, he eventually hid them from others as well. But now he takes responsibility for that error and encourages us to join him in repudiating this practice. Doing so will help us all to “become better theological cartographers” (p. 160). I highly recommend this text for established scholars, younger students, and laity alike. Those strongly opposed to ministry roles for women should carefully consider the evidence and argumentation that Gupta presents. Others will find that predilections for women in ministry are not unprecedented but have apostolic roots. In the

words of Beth Allison Barr in the Foreword, “God has always seen women” and “in *Tell Her Story*,” Gupta “helps us see them too” (p. xi).

Joshua Robert Barron¹

Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA)

joshua.robert.barron@gmail.com

¹ Mr. Joshua Robert Barron has lived with his wife and family in Kenya since 2007, where they have served together as curriculum developers and teachers, working primarily with Maasai churches. God has blessed them with six children. He has had previous ministry experience in Papua New Guinea and India. He has been active in theological and ministerial education in South Africa, the USA, and Kenya, and served as a Bible translation consultant for The Bible Society of Kenya. He currently serves on the staff of the Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA).