



Leadership Re-appropriated for 21st - century Women: A Reading of Deuteronomy 17:15–20

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Abstract

This article explores the Ancient Near East and Deuteronomy 17:15–20 from a feminist perspective in order to reappropriate the patriarchal recollections of failed male leadership and attempts to invertedly stifle female leadership. If one considers the aforementioned text by reflecting on its context, there is also an obligation to bear in mind gender sensitivities, feminism and complexity of the 21st century, but more importantly one needs to move beyond this toward the inclusiveness of women by the reappropriation of such texts (both from the Ancient Near East and Deuteronomy 17:15–20). Using a feminist lens, a combination of the sociological-historical and critical method will assist the reader in juxtaposing and navigating these two complex contexts. Literature relating to Hebrew culture predominately reinforces the status of male leadership to highlight their society's need for strong leaders. However, seldom was female leadership considered a viable alternative or what, if any, the shortcomings of such leaders might be. However, if 21st-century women are to reappropriate Deuteronomy 17 in order to prioritise female leadership, various levels of society could stand to benefit. Women leadership, if given a chance, has the potential to edify people's legal and political status.

Keywords: Deuteronomy 17, feminist interpretation, context, 21st century, female leadership, patriarchy.

Introduction

Compared to the 21st century, women in the Ancient Near East (ANE) had no standing or power in the community when it came to social and economic leadership and other human rights. As an illustrative text, James and Dillon (2012:26) explain: "If you prosper, found your household, love your wife with ardour, fill her belly, clothe her back, ointment soothes her limbs. Gladden her heart as long as you live! She is a field, good for her lord... keep her from power, restrain her."

In seeking to understand the Deuteronomistic (Hebrew: Devarim -"Words") context and reappropriate it for contemporary women, it is important to acknowledge that it may be considered unfair to judge "the negative plight of women" within an ANE context of more than 2,000 years ago. However, it is possible as an academic practice and is morally fair to judge ancient societies by our current knowledge and convictions about gender equality and not to just read ANE texts in and of themselves,

as though modern readers are not affected by them. Fiorenza (1999:28), who often deals with these



kinds of texts in terms of making sense of the “ethical consequences of the biblical text and its subsequent interpretations”, affirms this kind of reading to connect the 21st-century world and the ANE:

If scriptural texts have served – and still do – to support not only noble causes but also to legitimate war, to nurture anti-Judaism and misogyny, to justify the exploitation of slavery, [female disempowerment]¹, and to promote colonial dehumanisation, then biblical scholarship must take responsibility not only to interpret biblical texts in their historical contexts but also to evaluate the construction of their historical worlds and symbolic universes in terms of religious scale of values. If the Bible has become a classic of western culture, then the responsibility of the biblical scholar cannot be restricted to giving the readers of our time clear access to the original intentions of the biblical writers. It must also include the elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts and their interpretations.

To be critical in the above sense does not have to include questioning the inerrancy of Scripture. Rather, it means that the texts (ANE and Deuteronomistic texts) are under scrutiny based on the values they purport.

The fundamental ethical issue why women are discouraged from leading in both the ANE and Deuteronomistic context is because they are often seen as “bargaining chips” by men, not only just in the common societal frames, but also in the empires of this world (Greene, 1987:33). Women struggled to be seen as leaders because their everyday life was negatively narrated and many ANE texts were written by men (Washington et. al, 1999:138).

Methodology

I will use the work of Annalisa Azzoni (2013) to understand the theme of the lack of female leadership from a socio-economic lens, as well the writings of Phyllis Trible (1984) and her lens of identifying texts of terror. A close reading of the ANE and the Deuteronomistic texts shows that the lack of female leadership in a patriarchal society is a terror at least, but an indictment on male leadership at best. and that her story can also be counted as a text of terror. The work of these scholars allows me to put the different contexts (ANE, Deuteronomy and the 21st-century world) together as a tale of female disempowerment, lack of women leadership and how power was enforced by men with impunity, protected by a patriarchal culture (Pietersen, 2021:771a).

Women in the Hebrew Bible lived in a traditional culture in which the highest authority in the family was the father or husband, where leadership and power were only ascribed to men, and could not be questioned. Women were never given an opportunity to see whether they were able to do better. Male power in the ANE family sphere was exerted in the life of a girl who remained under the authority of her father until the day of her marriage when she became the property of her husband. This happened to illustrate many things, including that the recognised kinship was through the lineage of the father, with sons continuing the family name (patrilineage), so that only male names are listed in Hebrew genealogy. This skews the reader’s perception of leadership. Also, from an economic standpoint, women were sold off as collateral for their husband’s debt (Stol, 2016:313). According to Azzoni (2013:5), these form part of many examples to illustrate what men thought of women, not only in leadership, but in many ways that would negatively influence women leadership and power:

The documents [ANE] found consist of private and official letters, legal documents, literary compositions, and administrative and other miscellaneous

¹ My insertion to highlight the issue of female disempowerment is also seen as part of this list.



texts. Other documents found that would be of much importance to our current endeavour included legal history of two families, including most notably marriage contracts, sales or gifts of immovable property, loans, and a testamentary manumission.

It is clear that power and leadership for women were withheld with the intention to keep them disempowered. This is still the case today in many African patriarchal societies. Power resides in men and are fiercely kept for them as though there are no other alternatives. According to Fuchs (2003:98), “Power is invested in and exercised through her who speaks. Given the long history of the patriarchal silencing of women, it is crucial that [we] women speak out for ourselves and occupy resistant subject positions, while men work to deconstruct masculinity and its part in the exercising of patriarchal power”.

Background to the issue of male dominance

I am persuaded that this text pertaining to the theme of a lack of women leadership recalls the time when Moses was giving his second address to the Israelites as they were about to enter the Promised Land. The lack of women leadership given in this pericope may be said to be an “unfair judgement” because the claim suggests that Israel, similar to other ANE societies, was structured differently from the world of today. Human rights, within the setting of a capitalist, Western, individualistic, egalitarian society, were non-existent. The claim asserts that the ancients were dyadic personalities, not individuals. Everyone was imbedded in a group or society and the role one played was determined by one’s family’s honour-shame claim, one’s sex, one’s occupation, the size of one’s land and flocks, etc. The biggest challenge in life was the survival of the group. For every category of life, there were well-established rules of conduct and terms of treatment to maintain “shalom” within the family and the group in order to secure their survival. The fact that rules and terms differed between the sexes did not mean some people were “second-class” citizens. No, Ancient Near Eastern society dismissed the notion of equality, since they did not perceive the world around them as a world where all things were equal even though major deities were females - Ashteroth, Astarte etc. Their societies were hierarchical by nature and to maintain this hierarchical structure was not only a virtue, but almost a case of life and death for the group. This view is acknowledged to some degree in my argument above.

However, my conviction is based on verse 14, in which Moses addresses the Israelites as they are about to enter the Promised Land. The book claims itself to be the words of Moses (McConville, 2002:27), and it gives the impression that Moses is a demi-god, and that this role could not have been ascribed to a capable woman or that he could not possibly collaborate with women or entertain the notion of female leadership. It could be claimed that Moses was the best candidate for leadership, but I would argue this was not necessarily the case because the text only confirms that he is a strong, but in no way perfect leader. Later on, Moses’ angry outburst prevents him from entering God’s Promised Land, which to my mind can only be ascribed to questionable leadership. Gerson (2020), a sociologist who analyses Moses’ leadership style, makes the point that perhaps even as a strong male leader, Moses missed the mark by not engaging with his own sense of “feeling”. Kissileff (2020) affirms this notion: “In my reading of the text, Moses’ very refusal of feminine traits, starting with his rejection of having any desire to carry, nurse and bear the people that resulted in his being removed from his position. Let us hope that the example of Moses can let more parts of the world learn to value the feminine leadership traits that are clearly shown to be so incredibly successful.”

Furthermore, as shall be discussed, it is concerning that the words and roles of a king referred to in this Scripture reinforce the idea of a male patriarchy: “be sure to appoint over you a king the LORD your God chooses” (Deuteronomy17:15). To my mind, the context of Deuteronomy coincides with Moses’ broader failed male leadership so well that it is hard to imagine it being a cut-and-paste job later.



Deuteronomy 17:14–20 falls within the section of the book (chapters 12 to 26) where Moses can be

said to be applying the Ten Commandments. He has sketched for the Israelites specific contexts they will find themselves once they have entered the land. It makes literary sense, given the more immediate context, that the subject of the king is expounded at this point because of the diversity of people groups that Moses refers to in this section of the text. He addresses the people in general in the first verse of Deuteronomy 17 and the process to be followed in court cases (Deuteronomy 17:8); the Levitical priests (Deuteronomy 18:1); the subject of the prophet after him (Deuteronomy 18:14) and warriors (Deuteronomy 20:1). More particularly, he seems to have grouped the offices of power together: king, priest and prophet (Deuteronomy 17:4 to Deuteronomy 18:22) (Scheffler, 2007:776–777).

This makes this section stand out as the highest order of instruction in terms of rule in Israel, according to Moses' application of the law from a patriarchal point of view, not taking into consideration the feelings of his female subjects (Kissileff, 2020). Scheffler (2007:784) carefully exegetes Deuteronomy 17 to understand political power. He challenges the idea of male leadership and says gender equality in the ANE context can only be achieved when the following occurs:

ordinary citizens increasingly come to the realisation that political leaders (unless otherwise proved) cannot be trusted and followed blindly. If Deuteronomy 17:14–20 was internalised in western thinking, this lesson could have been learned earlier. It is noteworthy that the text (cf. vv. 14–15) is not addressed to the king itself nor the people as a group, but to the individual who should see to it that the king complies with the conditions for kingship. The challenge of Deuteronomy 17:14–20 to the ordinary individual is that one should not understand patriotism as a blind obedience to the demands of political leaders. Especially in the apartheid era, such blind loyalty was expected from white² South Africans. Political power should be regarded and criticised in terms of religious values (as contained in Deuteronomy 17:14–20) and further expressed in the rest of the Torah.

All of these references have in common the assumption that Israel anticipates that male leadership is desired by the people in the form of either Moses or a king (v14). But instead of warning them against wanting a king at all, Moses cautions them against desiring the *wrong kind* of king who represents, among other things, failed narcissistic male leadership. This comes in the absence of prioritising collaborative female leadership in order to explain what God's king/queen ought to look like.

Deuteronomy 17:15–20 and the Ancient Near Eastern World

The “כי” at the beginning of verse 14 indicates the conditionality of the clauses that follow from verse 15 through to verse 20. This is because the instructions that follow are based on the three *weqatal*'s listed in verse 14:

וְיָרְשֶׁתָּהּ

וְיִשְׁבְּתָהּ בָּהּ

וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲשִׁימָהּ

Moses, as Israel's prophet, takes it for granted as the male leader of his people that the Israelites will inhabit the land. Moreover, the fallibility of male leadership is to avoid introspection and draw later on

² It was often white Afrikaner men who were deemed to be fit leaders under apartheid, which is another indictment on 21st-century male leadership influences still prevalent in our world.



more chauvinistic tendencies which will ultimately take the form of a selfish king.

Because the infinitive absolute is placed before the cognate in the construction **שׁוֹמֵר תְּשׁוּבָה**, we can clearly see that Moses wants to fervently stress the idea that the king of Israel, first and foremost, must be a king and nothing else – in other words, not entertaining the notion of female leadership or collaborative leadership. This comes from the imperative force which is not uncommon for an infinitive absolute to convey (Athas & Young, 2013: 243–245). The fact that instructions are then directed to Israel for how to select a king for themselves is demonstrative of Moses contradicting himself (Craigie, 1976: 38). The complementary instructions that the king must be a brother Israelite and that he must not be a foreigner are emphasised to leave no room for doubt as to who can stand as a candidate for

election as king of Israel. This gives the impression that every other kind of leadership “would be likely to endanger Israel’s distinctive nationality” (Driver, 1902: 2011). Yet the biblical story of Abigail³ shows what the unique and redemptive ways in which a nation would benefit if women leaders were given a chance. Smith (2005:59) affirms this notion when she writes: “After her husband insults David, she is able to mediate a peaceful outcome to the situation that benefits the majority of her household, David, and Israel. Her actions are approved by the other characters, impress David, and are blessed by Yahweh.”

The nation of David is saved, and disaster is averted because of Abigail’s female leadership. Women leadership can do what many men in the Old Testament could not achieve. This included building a strong alliance with other nations by marrying their men (Wafawanaka, 2021:83).

On the other hand, the impression from the divine is seen as glorious in power because he defeated the mighty pharaoh and his chariots in order to lead his people to freedom. But verse 16 says that Israel’s king must not rely on the power of his own strength through coveting the battle strategies of Egypt and other nations by accumulating a great number of horses to bolster his military strength, as though Israel is without the LORD. This injunction shows that in order for leaders to succeed in Yahweh’s eyes, they must be bold and powerful, a quality that a number of strong female leaders in the Old Testament like Deborah possess.

The king must be of humble means presumably, so that he does not become so glorious in wealth that he stands above Israel in conceit and pride, that he doesn’t extort his people and charge them high taxes like other nations and impoverish his brothers, so that the LORD can be clearly seen as Israel’s true Suzerain (Wazana, 2022:170). This is another reason why women leadership may have succeeded if it had been considered.

The infinitive **“כָּשַׁבְתּוּ”** is con-committal and so draws attention to what the king must do upon assuming office. That the king is to write (the weqatal **“וְכָתַב”** carries the infinitive force of this section) a copy of this **“הַזֵּאת”** law probably establishes that there was a written original which he had to copy or have someone (such as a priest or scribe) copy for him. Thus, Moses is probably referring to books of the Pentateuch that are written and the parts of Deuteronomy that are written at the time of his speech and the rest of Deuteronomy once it is complete. The reason I’m persuaded of this is that we know from the New Testament that the Jews refer to the Pentateuch as the “Law” and not just the Ten Commandments or their wider application by Moses. The added stress that it’s for himself **“לְוִי”** (literally “to him”) shows that the law ought to be close to the king’s heart, he ought to soak and entrench himself in it. Wafawanaka (2021:825) summarises by saying: “...biblical women who serve justice in the world without being interpreted as toxic male leaders to illustrate that feminist biblical interpreters

³ See the story of 1 Sam 25:30.



do not need to read women characters as strong-man characters. It demonstrates how to read the selected biblical women characters without reinforcing the toxic strong-man leadership model.”

This view of female leadership offers endless possibilities and is a valid alternative to the idealisation of “strong male” leadership that is limited to only the abuse of power.

There are a number of infinitives in this passage for the purpose of indicating what the king must do with the law. These infinitives demonstrate the emphasis with which the king ought to make God’s law a part of him. The key element to notice with these imperatives is the order: “וְקָרָא” is followed by “לְמַעַן לִירְאֵה לְיְהוָה” and then by “לְשִׁמְרָה” and finally by “לַעֲשׂוֹתָם”. Having written the law, he is to read it in order to learn to fear God, to keep the law and to do it. Law keeping and law doing come about as a result of fearing the law which occurs as a result of meditating on His law. That he must not stray to the left or

to the right of God’s commandments shows the seriousness with which he is to uphold the law. The construction “לְבִלְתִּירְוַחַמְלֵבֹבוֹ” which I have translated “and he is not to exalt himself” carries the force of not considering yourself, in your innermost being, more than you ought. The king is an Israelite and a

servant of God, just as all Israelites are. He is not above the law. He must obey the law and so be exemplary. In his devotion to God’s law, he is to be one with his brothers and so lead them from within their midst to worship God and not consider himself above the law and lord it over them. This kind of responsibility is assumed to only be ascribed to men. Why not women as queens? The male leadership in the form of a king comes in a hierarchical mode which prevents any woman from assuming this kind of role. Peled (2017:144) argues: “Let only a prince of the first rank, a son, become king! If there is no first-rank prince, then whoever is a son of the second rank – let this one become king! If there is no prince, no male heir, then whoever is a first-rank daughter – let them take a husband for her and let him become king!”.

To this end, it may seem as though a stranger was preferred more than “a daughter of the king” (Osei-Sarpong, 2021). This illustrates that female leaders could never dream of ascending to the throne: this was something only a man could dare to aspire to.

21st-century Women Engagement on Leadership

As seen above, it would seem that in the ANE world (including the Deuteronomistic context), women had to make the best of their less-than-ideal situation. In contemporary language, we would say that the world tended to favour men: it was a “man’s world”. And even though women in the 21st century are “better off” than women of that world, one cannot ignore the continued oppression and disempowerment of women in the world today.

It must be added that women do have agency to change their circumstances; they are not voiceless. However, if the odds are stacked against women, how can they positively lead change? And what are the obstacles they face? In an attempt to answer this question and to understand what women in the 21st century is up against, Singh-Johal (2021) asserts:

Women and girls across the world should not have to live in fear of violence; they deserve to live healthy, safe and empowered lives. Gender equity and equality is not only a matter of human rights, justice and fairness, but a matter of global prosperity and security. The prevention of gender-based violence results in inclusive economic growth; advances peace and security; contributes to the resolution of conflicts; and enables all of us to more effectively address global challenges such as the climate crisis, forced displacement, the HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 pandemics, and resulting economic and social disruptions.



Women today need to reappropriate power from the period of the exploited ancient world to influence our future for the better, as Kessler (2014:4) posits:

Women use their power to the benefit of all. They want to include everyone, which often leads to a high degree of satisfaction amongst employees. When conflicts arise between ranks, women generally show more thoughtfulness because it involves relationships. They prefer to establish hierarchy as a result of discussion.

No one would disagree to a large extent that the 21st century is one of the most advanced and powerful eras when it comes to “democracy, technology, warfare and socio-economic presence”⁴ and yet much needs to be done to elevate women into positions of leadership. Brower (2021) affirms this by asserting the following:

Sociologically speaking, the primary way we learn is through watching, listening and experiencing others around us. This means each woman’s choices and behaviours have a powerful effect on those around her. Women can help other women and all genders, supporting them and contributing to cultures and systems where there is a high level of respect, value and inclusion for all kinds of differences. We can also contribute to the systemic and structural elements that foster success for women – creating policies and programmes for all phases of life and employment from attraction, hiring and promotion to caregiving and flexible work – empowering and enabling women for career growth and advancement.

Women leadership needs to be elevated because their capability and effectiveness is unquestionable. However, despite advancing to positions of power globally in government, business and non-profit organisations, women are still largely overlooked because of the perception in many cultures that their value is inferior to that of men. Even in the Western world, women struggle to advance because of the opposition they encounter in patriarchal societies that do not permit them to break through the “glass ceiling” of male leaders’ outsized egos (Pietersen, 2022:6b). Sexual stereotyping of women is pitiful and ultimately leads to resistance to women’s leadership and yet some of the greatest political leaders in the modern world, have been women such as for example Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the recent Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel. Both are examples of many women who have led and lead with great dedication.

Conclusion

I have dealt with female leadership as a theme in framing the central text from Deuteronomy 17 and used it to examine the values of the ANE world, which favoured men and offered them more opportunities than women. This research contains both internal evidence and provides a reasonable basis to explain external evidence as to the period described, in which women’s leadership giftings were often ignored and denied.

From a 21st-century context, it is imperative that women are given priority as leaders. This will in turn have a positive influence on society, as female leaders are known to display a high degree of care toward others. For this to happen, women need to be given equal opportunity without being shamed or looked down upon (Osei-Sarpong, 2021:15). A feminist role that is caring in society is critically important for the cause of equality and justice to prevail.

⁴ See Most Powerful Countries, [Available online at worldpopulationreview.com]



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