

WOMEN TEACHERS AND PREACHERS IN MESSIANIC JEWISH CONGREGATIONS

by Michael Rudolph

The term "Bible difficulty" has come to mean a portion of Scripture which, when translated into a modern language, seems to say something contradictory, false or outlandish. Let us examine whether the following verses from two of Paul's letters, as translated into The New King James Version, pose such a "difficulty":

1 Co 14:34-35: "Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church." ¹

1 Ti 2:11-14: "Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression." ²

Paul appears to restrict women to a role of total silence in the assembled body of believers, thereby forbidding them from any activity, including teaching, which would require public speech. It would further appear from Paul's comment concerning women not having "authority over men," that his reason for requiring women to be silent is related to the presence of men.

The "difficulty" here is that the tone and substance of this prohibition is out of character for Paul who, in other places in Scripture, shows a high regard for women's abilities in ministry. On a practical level, if we misinterpret these verses of Scripture and, as a result, unnecessarily limit the ministry of gifted women, we deprive ourselves and God of a mighty resource, and frustrate the fulfillment of women in our midst who are called to preach and teach. Messianic Jewish congregations have, for the most part, adopted a conservative middle ground – that is, their women are permitted to speak and pray publicly, teach women and children, prophesy and, in some cases, serve in the office of "Deaconess." These same congregations usually prohibit women from holding the office of "pastor" (rabbi) or elder, and from teaching or preaching from the *bima* or pulpit when men are present to listen. This paper explores the validity of this last prohibition.

Definitions of "Teaching" and "Preaching"

Webster's Third New International Dictionary³ defines the regular verb "to teach" as follows:

¹ The New King James Version, The Holy Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1982).

² Ibid.

³ Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1976).

“1. show, guide, direct; 2a. to cause to know a subject; b. to cause to know how to do something; c. to accustom to some action or attitude; d. to make one know the disagreeable consequences of some action; 3. to direct as an instructor; guide the study of; conduct through a course of studies; give instruction to; 4a. to impart knowledge of; b. to present in a classroom lecture or discussion; c. to instruct in the rules, principles or practices of; 5a. to direct, instruct or train by precept, example or experience; b. to seek to make known and accepted; implant; preach; 6. to conduct instruction regularly.”

This same dictionary defines the regular verb "to preach" as follows:

“1. to proclaim the gospel; discourse publicly on a religious subject or from a text of Scripture; deliver a sermon; 2. to urge acceptance or abandonment of an idea or course of action; to exhort in an officious or tiresome manner.”

It is completely appropriate to seek a modern definition for teaching and preaching, since it is the modern practice of these activities which is being scrutinized. We may glean from the previous definitions as well as from our experience, that Biblical teaching and preaching are identical in most regards. In both cases there is a conveyance of purported truth regarding the Word of God, and in both cases (although perhaps more-so in preaching) there is exhortation to persuade the hearer to adopt and implement that which is preached (taught) in his or her life. We commonly associate "preaching" with exhortation from the pulpit, whereas it is more common to think of "teaching" as being conducted in a classroom setting.

In modern usage, teaching or preaching to adults does not generally cloak the speaker with governmental or personal authority over listening students; this was not, however, always the case; during Yeshua's life on earth and for many years thereafter, teachers were considered to have authority over their students:^{4,5} In this regard, consider this definition of “rabbi:”

"A *rab* or rabbi in the Judaism of the time of Christ had the task of expounding the torah and of giving rulings in matters of the law. He had pupils (*talmidim*) who studied his expositions and his rulings and were duty bound to respect and obey their teacher." ⁶

When Yeshua said to his disciples "*But you, do not be called `Rabbi`" (Matthew 23:8) and "do not be called teachers" (Matthew 23:10), he was speaking against the Pharisaic practice of self-exaltation – that is, presenting oneself as an authority.*

⁴ The *Mishnah* depicts the honor due one's teacher as above that due one's father (*M. Baba Metzia 2.11*).

⁵ Referring to the Greek word "*didasko*" as used in the New Testament: "it does not convey the idea of developing a person's abilities, but rather of instructing him in how to live; it also involves addressing him personally with commands based on the interpretation and declaration of God's will." D. Furst, "Teach", The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Colin Brown, Gen. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986, Vol. 3, p. 763).

⁶ D. Furst, *ibid.*, pp. 766-767.

Examples in Scripture of Women Speaking Publicly

Scripture is not lacking examples of Godly women speaking in public. Clearly, both men and women were praying together in the upper room as they awaited the promised comforter (Acts 1:13-14). Also, in explaining the first public occurrence of tongues, Peter quotes the prophet Joel:

Acts 2:17-18: "Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and on My menservants and on my maidservants I will pour out my Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy."

A reference to women prophesying in public may also be found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 11:5: "But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, --"

Examples in Scripture of Women Teaching Men

In Acts 18:24-26 we read the plainly written account of how Aquila and his wife Priscilla taught Apollos:

".. the way of God more accurately."

Then, in Psalms 68:12 (H 68:11), we read:

"The Lord gave (happy) tidings: they are published by the female messengers, a numerous host." ⁷

"The Lord giveth the word; the women that proclaim the tidings are a great host." ⁸

"The Lord gives a command; the women who bring the news are a great host." ⁹

The English translations quoted above correctly render the Hebrew as being female messengers or proclaimers of the Word(s) of the Lord.

As further examples of women teaching men, one may recall the examples of women prophesying in public which were cited in the previous section of this paper. Prophecy is informative, instructive and/or corrective, and therefore its public proclamation constitutes public "teaching". Finally, who can deny that when God created woman to be a helper to man (Genesis 2:18-24), part of her role was to give her husband verbal help? And what is verbal help but a mode of teaching?

⁷ Isaac Leeser, translator, The Holy Bible (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1845).

⁸ The Holy Scriptures, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1955.

⁹ The Writings, (A new translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic text), The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1982.

A Probable Explanation of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14

Strictly speaking, providing an alternative explanation for 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 is not necessary in order to show that Paul did not relegate women to silence in all public situations; it is only necessary to show (and the previous sections have shown) that other Scriptures exist which unambiguously show otherwise. Nevertheless, a probable and logical explanation for 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 does exist, and adds to the strength of this paper's conclusions.

To begin with, notice that 1 Corinthians 14:35 begins with:

".. let them ask their OWN husbands at home;" (NKJ, emphasis provided)

This verse of Scripture refers, not to ANY husbands, but to "their OWN husbands". The obvious implication here is that the women referred to by Paul were all married, and that their public inquiries were objectionable because they were addressed to the husbands of other women.¹¹ Quite likely, this constituted a public disgrace to their own husbands, who were expected to maintain their wives' confidence in them sufficiently for them to be able to teach their wives at home.^{12,13}

Consistent with this view, Kenneth Hagin writes that in New Testament Greek, the word "gyne" is used to mean either "women" or "wives".¹⁴ The fact is, the root Greek word for "woman" or "wife", appearing in its various forms throughout the New Testament Scriptures is "gune." Similarly, the root Greek word for "man" or "husband" is "aner." Since the context alone determines which meaning is intended, A. S. Worrell's translation renders the pertinent portions of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 as follows:¹⁵

"Let the wives keep silence in the assemblies; .. let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is a shame for a wife to speak in an assembly."

Similarly, 1 Timothy 2:11-12 may be rendered as follows:

"Let a wife learn in silence (in the assemblies) with all submission (to her husband). And I do not permit a wife to teach or have authority over (another woman's) husband .."
(Extracted and amplified from the NKJ)

¹¹ Meg. 23a - "Our Rabbis taught: All are qualified to be among the seven (who read), even a minor and a woman, only the sages said that a woman should not read in the Torah out of respect for the congregation." (The Soncino Talmud, Seder Moed, Vol. 4, p. 140, The Soncino Press, 1938).

¹² S. B. Clark, Man and Woman in Christ, Servant Books, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1980, pp. 187-189.

¹³ Note that Corinthians 13:18 contains a similar exhortation: "Wives, submit to your OWN husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" (NKJ, emphasis provided).

¹⁴ K. E. Hagin, The Woman Question, pp. 28-30, Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1983.

¹⁵ A. S. Worrell, translator, The Worrell New Testament, Gospel Publishing House, Springfield, Missouri, 1904, republished 1980.

Consider also that Paul's remarks that follow in verses 13-14 refer to the relationship of Adam and Eve, the world's first husband-wife couple.

Conclusion

Galatians 3:26-28 makes clear the spiritual equality of men and women. Nevertheless, the weight of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation teaches a subordinate and submissive role for wives, both in the context of their family lives as well as in public. Scripture wisely does not permit a change of roles when married women appear publically with their husbands.¹⁶ It would seem, therefore, that a wife cannot teach her own husband or any other husband in a circumstance that would require her to exercise governmental or personal authority over him. On the other hand, Scripture does not prohibit a woman from teaching men in a non-authoritative way, especially when supported and overseen by her husband, unless the manner or substance of her teaching would bring disgrace upon husbands who are assembled to hear. A single woman would necessarily be released from needing a husband's oversight, however, most single women have the potential for marriage, and so it is important to maintain the appearance of propriety by not applying a confusing dual standard. To ensure this, a single woman should be overseen in her public ministry by mature men who are in congregational leadership.

If adequate precautions are taken, our vast resources of anointed women may be released to powerful preaching and teaching ministries. If done properly, our congregations will benefit greatly, both from their good fruit, and from the witness of maintaining a right spiritual order.

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¹⁶ Clark, pp. 183 ff