

Changing Our Narratives

Lessons From The Daughters Of Zelophehad *Numbers 11:1-27*

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According to God's original decree, the promised land was to be apportioned according to the "number of names" of members of the second generation; since only men were counted in the census, Zelophehad's five daughters would be left without an inheritance. When they appeal this regulation, God agrees to implement their proposal.

The story of the five daughters of Zelophehad provides legitimation of a limited right of Israelite women to inherit land. It also places specific marriage restrictions upon any women who inherit under this right. The story celebrates women's boldness and at the same time offers comfort for men who have the misfortune (from the Bible's androcentric point of view) to have no sons.

Zelophehad had died without a son. When his daughters realized that their father's name would be excluded when the land was given out because there was no male heir, they did an extraordinary thing that had not been heard of before. They asked Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chiefs and the whole assembly for their right to inherit their father's property. He sees them as perfectly capable of owning and managing land.

In humility, Moses brought the matter to God. God responded that the plea of the daughters was just, and that they should be granted their father's inheritance.

GOD IS JUST AND FAIR AND DOES NOT WANT WOMEN TO BE DISADVANTAGED

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Zelophehad has five daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah; he has no sons. Zelophehad is part of the generation of Israelites

WHO WERE THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD?

The daughters of Zelophehad were the direct descendants of Joseph, specifically from the tribe of Manasseh. Their father, Zelophehad, had died while Israel was wandering in the wilderness and left behind five daughters: Malah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. He had no sons.

Since land was passed on from the fathers to sons, these five women found themselves in a conundrum. When Israel would enter the promised land and land was distributed among all the tribes.

As with the other nations of that day, Israel was a strongly masculine society, and fathers left their property to their sons. The eldest son received two-thirds of the inheritance and the other sons divided the remaining one-third (*Deut 21:15-17*). If a man didn't have a son, he left his estate to his nearest male relative, but not to a daughter. When a daughter was married, she received a dowry from her father and would no longer live in the family home. The dowry was her inheritance.

To the Jews in Canaan, possessing land was the foundation for building a family, earning an income, and having security and the necessities of life. The prophets frequently denounced wealthy people who amassed great estates by stealing land from the poor (*Isa 5:8-10; Mic 2:1-3; Hab 2:9-12*). The ideal life for an Old Testament Jew was to own his own land and be able to sit under his own fig tree and enjoy his family and the fruit of his labor (*1 Kings 4:25; Mic 4:4*).

and its people, they would not receive anything. As a result, their father's name would disappear from the clan since there was no son to carry the name on. It would also threaten his daughters' economic well-being since wealth was tied to the land. The women, probably in consultation with each other, decide to do something about it.

WHAT BOLD ACTIONS DID THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD TAKE?

Remember that at this time the people of Israel are nomads. They have been wandering the wilderness for 40 years. Therefore, important meetings were held in front of the tent of meeting. These meetings would be comprised of Moses, the high priest, and the chiefs of each clan. Now, each of the 12 tribes had several clans. That was about 55 clans in total.

For all intents and purposes, this was the seat of government. And it was during one of these meetings that Malah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah decided to go before these 57 men who hold the power within Israel. The text mentions that the congregation was also present

It would be intimidating enough to go before the MINISTER and all the Elders of a church, but what these women did was more courageous than that. It is akin to them approaching the US President after the state of the union address in front of the entire congress while it is broadcasting on live TV. It was no small feat.

Land was also tied to lineage. The intention behind inheritance rules was for the land to remain within families and its generations that would follow. Since Zelophehad did not have any sons, his family name, per se, would be lost.

who departed from Egypt under Moses' leadership and died during the forty years in the wilderness. His five daughters belong to the new generation that would enter and possess the promised land. (Their mother is never mentioned.)

According to God's decree, the promised land is to be apportioned according to the "number of names" of members of the second generation counted in the census recorded in Numbers 26 (see 26:5z-56). Since only men were counted in the census, however, Zelophehad's daughters would be left without an inheritance.

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah come forward to appeal this regulation, stating their case in front of the sacred tent of meeting in the presence of Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and indeed the whole community (Num 27:2). They argue that their father's name (lineage) should not be cut off from his clan just because he had no son and that they should be permitted to inherit his land portion (v. 4) in order to avoid this potential injustice to their father's name (and property).

The story presumes a culture that recognizes a connection between landholding and preservation of a male name in a family lineage.

Moses consults God, and God announces the decision to Moses: the proposal of the daughters of Zelophehad is to be implemented (vv. 5–7, Joshua). The text then moves beyond the particular case to report God's further generalized regulation for order of inheritance: when there are no sons, daughters shall have first inheritance rights, followed by other male relatives in a set sequence (vv. 8–11).

This agreement is similar to the story of Achsah, who asks for and receives some of her family's land and water resources (**1 Chron. 2:49, Joshua 15:16-19, Judges 1:9-15**). Later, the male relatives of the Manassite clan to which Zelophehad belonged recognize what to them appears to be a large loophole in this ruling. Their appeal to Moses is recorded in Numbers 36.

The male relatives point out that when the daughters of Zelophehad get married, the land that they have inherited will go with them to the clans of their husbands. (The possibility that a man might change clans in such a case was presumably beyond Israel's imagining.)

The relatives are concerned that the marriage of any of the daughters outside their own tribe will lead to diminution of the Manassite landholdings. Moses announces that God does not intend any moving of land from tribe to tribe. As insurance against such movement, the daughters of Zelophehad (and any other daughters who inherit land) must marry within the clan of their father's tribe. The daughters do marry within their clan (*Num. 36:10-12*) and eventually receive their inheritance (*Josh 17:3-6*).

LESSONS

COURAGE AND DETERMINATION

DAUGHTERS PRESENT CASE TO MOSES AND THE PRIEST.

BRAVERY

THEY POSSES THEIR POSSESSION

THEY PRESERVE THEIR FATHER'S NAMES

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