

## **Reading Numbers 27:1-11 in the Context of Vulnerability within Contemporary Feminism**

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### Abstract

The article poses as a response to neglect and marginalization of girl-child general welfare in present age. At the heart of all forms of family disputes within the contemporary existence lies a form of feministic marginalization or the other. For instance, prioritizing male-child education means a common practice in certain parts of the African continent. Many marriages have failed on account of producing only female children, as though it was the fault of the female spouse. In a rare situation where such marriage survived, in the event of the man's demise, the experience on the female children could be worse than slavery. In the book of Numbers 27, five daughters of Zelophehad found themselves in a similar situation. They launched a protest that contributed to combating the debacle of gender bias in the history of Israelites' culture. By means of exegetical study and application of Numbers 27:1-11, the article argued that gender bias and marginalization is anti- God. The findings show that feministic marginalization had been from time immemorial, it got manifested even in the Bible world. The article recommended for tolerance on gender equality, equity and justice in resource control and general enterprise in the present age.

## Introduction

In and around the globe, there is manifestation of marginalization of female gender in certain or particular aspects of life and general existence. Africa for instance is one of the global continents where the practice of female gender discrimination is common. For instance, in South-Eastern Nigeria to be homely, it means as though it all men's world alone. Female gender is seen and treated as less important. In a certain family setting, female children are treated as second class of family membership. In some more difficult instances, even the will of a dead man cannot change the perception about female gender discrimination. If a dead man's will takes the female-child into account, it may ignite an age-long war that is capable of claiming lives within the family setting. It is so bad a practice that cultural setting in some parts of the African continent treats the case of a man without a male child as though one without a biological child at all. In the event of demise of such a man, his daughters would be shut out of their father's property completely.

It becomes pertinent to note that biblical world also practiced female gender discrimination and instigation. By the nomenclature 'biblical world' reference is made to the geographical areas where Bible people lived and where events of the Bible took place. For instance, all the recorded census in the Bible (both OT & NT) were strictly men's business, excluding women and children. The Bible talks about situation that would empower a man to consider divorcing his wife, but there was no balance regarding the situation that would empower a woman to walk out on her marriage at will. Of all the recorded child promises in the Bible, none was a promise for a female child. It is as though female children are born by chance or by Divine interruption. An average Bible student would think that Jacob had but twelve (12) children. In fact, an average Bible student can easily recite the names of 12 sons of Jacob at the detriment of his only daughter's name. Not many Bible students do know or remember that Jacob had a daughter, let alone remembering her name. The designation as 'children' and

not 'sons' of Jacob leaves the uninformed with the risk of not discovering the girl-child.

In Numbers 27, the five (5) daughters of Zelophehad, a descendant of Manasseh, son of Joseph, found themselves in a similar circumstance of marginalization and discrimination. They were completely shut out of Israel landed property allocation. Their protest to Moses was not just because they were not given or allocated for any inheritance among their people. Rather, it was on the case of why such evil should be done on the account of their father not having a male child. For mere reason of not having male siblings, they became and were treated as foreigners amidst their own people. The article attempts exegetical analysis of Numbers 27:1-11 and draws the deductions to bear on the consolidation for campaign against feminism marginalization in the Twenty-first century.

#### An Exegetical Study of Numbers 27:1-11

#### The Book of Numbers at a Glance

The English title 'Numbers' is a derivative from the Greek word 'Arithmoi' and the Latin 'Numeri' as in the Vulgate. The latter, the same as the book is canter-titled in Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS, the Masoretic Text, the Hebrew Bible).<sup>227</sup> In the Hebrew tradition for naming or giving title to a book, as in the case with other Pentateuch books, a significant and/or introductory word or phrase is used as the name or title of the book. For instance, the first book of the Pentateuch corpus, Genesis, is so named or titled after the very first word that begins it, bere'shith, meaning 'in beginning.' The idea supposes the title as the thrust or main focus of the concept of the narratives as contain in the book. Head or tail, the traditional is observed as being violated in the naming of Numbers. The case would have been opposite had it been that verse two of the first chapter of the book is edited to become the first verse and vice-versa. Thus, the

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<sup>227</sup>D. T. Olson, Book of Numbers. In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2003), 611.

title 'Numbers' finds its tradition from the introductory words of verse two, a command for counting or to take census of the entire Israelite household.

Perhaps, it becomes so pluralized 'Numbers' owing to the two censuses that are recorded in the chapters 1 and 26 of the book. The one of chapter one, taking account of the people of Israel that left Egypt about two years after leaving. That of chapter 26, taken about 40 years after leaving Egypt, took account of the remnants after the generation that had doubted God, about whom God had sworn never to enter the Promised land, were believed to have all been wiped away. Hence, in the book's unique titling tradition, it becomes supposed the two censuses dominate its thesis. Positions abound with regards to what its title ought to signify or imply, had it been it followed after the common Hebrew tradition of naming a Bible book, especially the Pentateuch in its immediate context. It is observed that most general Scholars consensus favours 'in the wilderness' experience as the most suggested suitable title. The suggested title underscores the wilderness setting for the book as Israel travels away from a great civilized empire in Egypt to its Promised home in Canaan.<sup>228</sup> The forty years of wilderness wandering functions as a transitional interim between these two geographical centres as Israel is formed into a mobile community under a covenant with the Most High God.<sup>229</sup>

Authorship credit of the book is scholarly rather difficult. The book belongs to the first five Bible books whose authorship primitively had been designated as Mosaic corpus. Therefore, its authorship narrative follows the same Pentateuchal composition. The authorship of the first five books of the Bible had been credited to Moses undisputedly, not until critical scholarly questions started emanating. No serious

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<sup>228</sup>D. T. Olson, Book of Numbers. In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 611.

<sup>229</sup>*Ibid.*

Bible scholar would argue or doubt that Moses put some things down in written form for the future generations. In addition to his exposure to Egyptian wisdom and education, the Bible specifically recorded God's instructions to him regarding documentation of certain instructions both for the then and future generation. The scholarly argument regarding Pentateuch authorship had been against sole Mosaic authorship. Events of doublets, like Abraham lying about his relationship with his wife and the same about Isaac and Rebecca, in addition to the records of Moses' death had made it very difficult if impossible to defend Mosaic sole authorship of the Pentateuch. How could Moses had recorded the event about his death, there appear grounds to argue for more general means of composition than sole authorship. In agreement that Moses put certain down in written form, the final compilation of the Pentateuch is further viewed from the point of literary composition of later generation. In the view of Joe Sprinkle, Moses wrote down what God revealed to him (Num 1:1 ; 2:1 ; 3:5 ; 4:1) and recorded events of his day (Num 33:2), but this material from Moses had been edited and updated for a latter audience.<sup>230</sup> Sprinkle further argued that in addition to Mosaic materials, the editor utilized an ancient hymnbook called 'the book of the wars of the Lord' (Num 21:14), and an Amorite poem book (Num 21:27-30).<sup>231</sup>

Theologically, the Book of Numbers narrates an important transition in the history of Israelites' redemption as it records death of the first wilderness generation, the subject of the first twenty-five chapters, and its replacement by the second generation, chapters 26 to 36.<sup>232</sup> Consequently, the theological setting of the first part of the book becomes overshadowed by the people's grumbling, complaint, blasphemy and curse of Moses, the Man of God. Both layman and

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<sup>230</sup>Joe M. Sprinkle, *Leviticus and Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015), 187.

<sup>231</sup>Ibid.

<sup>232</sup>Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995), 88.

religious leaders of this period fell for the same unhealthy practice. In any rate. It becomes observed that God, in His infinite mercies, kept putting it up with the people until the incident involving the spy of the promised land. In the event where only two, Joshua and Caleb, believed that God who had started the good things in and with them, is able to bring it to perfection, the Lord declared to have had it enough with the people. Hence, in the word of the people, He ensured that none of them except Joshua and Caleb entered the promised land.

The theological setting of the second part of the book is better than the first. Thus, Dillard and Longman, while quoting D. T. Olson, concluded that second phase of the Book, chapters 26 – 36, is basically positive and hopeful. In their words, after all the deaths of the generation, not one death of a member of the second generation is recorded. Military engagements were successful (Num 28), potential crises were resolved (Num 32), and laws which look forward to the future life in the land of Canaan were promulgated (Num 34). Though the threat remains, nevertheless, promise of the future becomes the dominant note which is sounded at the end of the Book.<sup>233</sup> As conclusion is drawn on this section of the article, especially on the theological setting of the Book of Numbers, further suggestion of Olson as cited by Dillard and Longman III becomes worthy of mention. Olson is quoted as to have suggested that abiding significance of the Book of Numbers is its function as a paradigm for every succeeding generation of the God's people. It invites every generation to put itself in the place of the new generation.<sup>234</sup>

#### Brief Exegetical Analysis of Numbers 27:1-11

The census that was taken in Numbers chapter 1 was purely head count numbering. Perhaps, it was primarily for documenting the figure, number of the Israelites that left Egypt about two years on.

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<sup>233</sup>Dillard and Longman III, citing D. T. Olson, in *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch* (Chico: Scholars, 1985), 151.

<sup>234</sup>Ibid, 183.

Notwithstanding, that of chapter 26 appears as though beyond the purpose of head count, but family count. Most likely, in addition to numerical documentation of the people, whose faith and hope of entering the promised land was at the time stronger than when they first believed, the quest for division of the promised land was in sight. While lot casting was used for determining who takes what part, it is observed that size of the land allotted to a particular family is in proportion to the size of such family.

In Israel, under then existing law before revolt of the Zelophehad's daughters, land inheritance or redemption is generally by male relative, if a man dies without a male heir.<sup>235</sup> In general, women in the Ancient Near East were not able to inherit family property. The 'first born' of a man had specific privileges (Deut 21:15-17) even if he was born of a secondary wife.<sup>236</sup> If a man died without a son, levirate marriage was the rule. That is, the dead man's brother was required to take the widow and raise a son in the name of the deceased (Deut 25:5-10).<sup>237</sup> This practice keeps alive one of the fundamental principles of Hebrew society, ensuring that landed property shall not pass away from the family, it must continue with the tribe to which it belongs originally. This act is buttressed in the regulations concerning the Year of release (Lev 25). It ensures that landed property is reverted to its family of origin in the fiftieth year, in case of confiscation situation.<sup>238</sup> The proposed division of the Promised land came with it a special question of considerable importance to Israel as a nation. It becomes observed that Zelophehad of the tribe of Manasseh, and of the family of Gilead, had died, not in any special judgment, but along with the generation that had perished

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<sup>235</sup>John H. Walton and Victor H. Matthews, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1997), 206.

<sup>236</sup>J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Numbers*. In *New Bible Commentary* 3rd Ed. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1970), 193.

<sup>237</sup>Ibid.

<sup>238</sup>N. H. Snaith, *The Book of Numbers*. In *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1962), 266.

in the wilderness, leaving no heir for his landed property or inheritance.<sup>239</sup>

Just as with the measure to ensure the lineage continuation of every Israelite family, the implication of denying a family landed property implies that such family history had been blotted out of the genealogical history of Israel as a nation. Although Zelophehad had died leaving five daughters to survive him, the issue at hand had treated him as someone that left no human being to survive him. Since the land allotting was proposed to male family heads, the family and name of Zelophehad would have gone into extinction on account of not having a land within the tribe and people of Israel.<sup>240</sup> In an attempt to avoid this disaster, the anxious daughters of Zelophehad launched a protest and an appeal to Moses. It was not going to be an easy fit to accomplish. Their efforts meant they were calling for abolishment of a rule or practice that was older than Israel as a nation. Often times, people are discouraged or dissuaded to stand against a godly practice or tradition, just because they felt it has always been and will forever be.

It becomes very important to stress the manner at which the Zelophehad daughters made their claims known, they did not employ violence. They simply made a genuine claim to Moses. Often times, people have genuine reasons to stake their claims, but the approach to doing so can make or mar the whole thing. Zelophehad daughters' presentation of their case demonstrates God's impartial nature and concern for the female gender. Unlike paganism that viewed the female gender as sex objects and slaves to the male world, God looks upon humanity in general as joint heirs together of the grace of life (1Pet 3:7).<sup>241</sup> In wisdom, since there is no existing law or rule to

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<sup>239</sup>Alfred Edersheim, *Bible History Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 289.

<sup>240</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, The Book of Numbers. In *The Bible Background Commentary Old Testament* (Eastbourne: Victor 1983), 247.

<sup>241</sup>Harold L. Willmington, The Book of Numbers. In *King James Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 143.



tackle their case, Moses presented their case to God, the Supreme judge, and God directed Moses to grant their request. Their victory ushered in a statute of judgment in Israel. Such a juridical statute, that daughters or in their default, the nearest kinsmen, should enter upon the inheritance of those who died without leaving sons to survive them.<sup>242</sup>

Consequently, this ad hoc solution to the Zelophehad daughters' problem or case became translated into a permanent legal requirement for the nation of Israel.<sup>243</sup> The procedure seems to have been an alternative for levirate marriage. In either case, the property was retained in the family. Be that as it may, the law is differently presented in 36:1-9 where it is modified so as to prevent transfer of the inheritance should a woman gets married.<sup>244</sup> It appears the measure to check this was to prevent such daughters from marrying outside their fathers' clan.

#### Application of Exegetical Deductions from Numbers 27:1-11 to Contemporary Feminism

It is arguable that in the present world, certain rules and practices make the female gender vulnerable. Consequently, they become susceptible to rejection, marginalization, discrimination, stigmatization and so on. For instance, in the Continent of African in Nigeria to be homely, certain cultural beliefs and/or practices tend to render the female gender as a second class human. Borrowing a leaf from the Zelophehad daughters, the article encourages present generation female gender to remain unfazed to going and standing for and as eligible of every privilege that is opened to humanity. Provided that peaceful approach is adopted, every issue of unfair treatment to the female gender can be talked over. Undermining the female gender or violently campaigning for their privileges will do more harm than

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<sup>242</sup>Alfred Edersheim, 290.

<sup>243</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, 249.

<sup>244</sup>J. A. Thompson, 193.

good for progress, advancement and healthy inter-gender human relationship.

The rationale of Zelophehad daughter – Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah was apathetic. “Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan simply because he had no son”? Numbers 27:4. In other words, they wanted to know if there was more to the point that their father had no male child. If the event of a man not having a male child is not attached to any form of evil or sacrilege, why will a man be reduced to ‘nothing’ on account of something beyond his control? Since God is the giver of children and He determines the gender, since female child is not abomination to humanity, what then is the problem? One can imagine the appeal keep progressing. The step taken by these children of Zelophehad set the tone for actions of the contemporary generation. Their boldness in approaching the people’s leadership suggests they thought god and Moses would recognize that good of the clan, including themselves, should come before upholding customs of male-only inheritance.<sup>245</sup> They shared or rather understood the larger vision that God had for His chosen and holy People, and they were rewarded by God’s statement: “the daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying” Numbers 27:7.<sup>246</sup>

In essence, it was not such an easy moment for Moses. In credit to him, the way he handled the issue becomes a model of Christian leadership approach to handling critical and serious matters, present it to God first. Humility becomes the hallmark of Christian leadership. A proud leader would have responded to the case differently on the ground there is no base to treat such case. Notwithstanding, Moses in humility, presented their case to God and the outcome did not just solve the immediate concern but even in general and with posterity implication. At this point, the people’s

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<sup>245</sup>David L. Stubbs, Numbers. In *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 207.

<sup>246</sup>Ibid.

openness to change worthy of commendation. The issue with certain cultural practices that tend to render the female gender vulnerable is not that people do not know they are ungodly. Rather, there is a cold reception to change or paradigm shift. The syndrome of it had been this way and will continue to be this way is not healthy for human culture with change in the ever changing world. There should be measures of flexibility and dynamism in human cultural practices and societal engagements. Laws were made by man, and not the other way round. God rules in the affairs of man, His directive should be sought at all times for resolving critical issues of human valuation and appreciation. There is need to create a better atmosphere for promotion of equity, justice and egalitarianism in human relationship.

### Conclusion

In the beginning, God did not create two men, rather, He created one man but in two different human genders, male and female. There is no point to suggest that image of God in the two genders of a man is in varying degrees. In the Bible, God used certain women to accomplish dreadful and fearful tasks. The point that procreation requires and engages both genders speaks volume of the need to not marginalize each other. It is unhealthy argument trying to ascertain which gender is superior or more important, the point remains that humanity is one but in two different expressive genders. Male or female, all is human, a child is a child. The article has argued on the baseless point for female gender marginalization, using certain African culture as point of reference.

The article established that biblical world had related ungodly treatment to the female gender. In the sampled Bible passage, Zelophehad was treated as though he had no offspring to survive him, simply because he had but female children. On this account, he was denied a rightful inheritance among his brethren, but for the Theoradical approach of his daughters in addressing and resolving the issue. The victory was not just for Zelophehad children, rather, it became a victory for the defenseless, a voice for the voiceless. The

implication had an age long influence in the cultural affairs of the people of Israel. It concludes that failure is not failing in a course but failing to try out something worthwhile. People should be courageous to fight a noble fight. There is need for fairness in promoting children rights, interests and privileges. The female gender lives and interests matter too. It takes special grace of understanding to see how inter-dependently God structured humanity and general existence.

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