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MINISTRIES

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Answering Atheists: Does the Bible View Women as “Property”?

Atheists, radical feminists, and other critics of the Bible often claim that the Bible has misogynistic overtones. That is to say, the Bible is strongly prejudiced against women.

It is claimed that the human authors of the Bible regard women as mere property and of lesser value than men. And certain Bible passages are misinterpreted in such a way to support this claim.

Before we dive into this topic and answer this specific objection, if you haven’t yet watched our teaching, [Is the Bible Misogynistic?](#), we recommend starting there. In that teaching, we give a broad overview of the biblical view of women, which sets the foundation for our other teachings in this series.

The first passage we’ll cover in this teaching is actually the Tenth Commandment, “Do Not Covet.”

This commandment forbids one from yearning for what belongs to someone else. The commandment includes a list of examples, such as your neighbor’s house, servants, ox, donkey—and even their wife! Thus, it is argued that a wife is viewed as the property of her husband from the perspective of the biblical author since she appears to be in the same category as the husband’s animals and house. Is there any validity to this claim?

Let’s begin by looking at the passages in question:

Exodus 20:17

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your **neighbor’s wife**, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.

Also...

Deuteronomy 5:21

And you shall not covet your **neighbor’s wife**. And you shall not desire your neighbor’s house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your

neighbor's.

There are a few problems with this objection. For instance, just a few verses earlier, the Bible affirms the equal value and dignity of women in the Fifth commandment:

Exodus 20:12

Honor your **father and your mother**, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Mother *and* father are equally worthy of honor according to this passage and many others. That is to say, children are to respond to their mother and father equally. As we speak about in our teaching, [Is the Bible Misogynistic?](#), this is in stark contrast to other cultures in the Ancient Near East where the mother was actually controlled by her son.

Another way of understanding this passage, as scholar John Otwell has argued, is that the wife is actually listed as the first-named member of the household:

The wife here is the first-named member of the household. She is not listed as property, as is so often thought. The wife is named before the household in the Deuteronomic parallel (Deut. 5:21), a change that indicates her standing even more clearly.

-John H. Otwell, And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Woman in the Old Testament, p. 76

This understanding makes a lot more sense in light of the facts. We've already covered the fact that just a few verses earlier, the Bible affirms that the wife is worthy of honor equal to that of her husband in regard to their children. It wouldn't make sense for the biblical author to then immediately undermine his own teaching by saying that women are on the same level as houses and animals.

Another point worthy of consideration is that the Torah does not permit a wife to be sold like houses, oxen, or donkeys. In fact, the Bible explicitly forbids a husband from treating a woman as a slave and selling her—even if she was a war captive from another nation:

Deuteronomy 21:10-14

When you go to war against your enemies and the Lord your God delivers them into your hands and you take captives, if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife. Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails and put aside the clothes she was wearing when captured. After she has lived in your house and mourned for a full month, then you may go to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife. If you are not pleased with her, let her go wherever she wishes. **You must not sell her or treat her as a slave**, since you have dishonored her.

This might seem like a confusing and bizarre passage on the surface, but this law is ultimately designed for the protection of a female war captive. Here are some details to take notice of:

First, Israelite men are commanded not to treat these women as mere objects. Other nations' armies could simply rape female captives of war and throw them away like nothing. Such a thing was not allowed in the nation governed by God's Torah. Indeed, if a man desired one of these women, he couldn't just have sexual relations with her. He was explicitly commanded to give her the dignity of marriage.

Second, before the marriage could be consummated, female captives were to be allowed a month-long period of mourning. This is out of respect for the woman's emotional and psychological health seeing as how her family had probably died in the conquest. During this period of mourning, she is to shave her head and trim her nails.

Dr. Daniel Block explains the significance of this:

On the surface, for a warrior to marry a captive bride seems innocent. However, Moses realistically recognizes that the system is subject to abuse, as triumphant males exploit and take advantage of female captives. Having none of this, Moses instructs the Israelites how to respect the rights and dignity of wives whom they have captured. The captive bride must be allowed to express her pain at being torn from her people and forced to join an alien community. While having her shave her hair, trim her nails, and remove her native clothing appear to be insulting demands, these actions symbolize her change of status. When her hair and nails grow and she puts on new clothes, she emerges as a new person, with a new identity and new status; she hereby declares nonverbally what Ruth declared verbally to Naomi (Ruth 1:16). The actions also remind her new husband that he is not to treat her as an alien or a slave.

-Daniel Block, NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy, p. 698

As a side note, while we agree with Daniel Block's overall conclusion on this topic, Daniel Block seems to indicate that Moses wrote this because he thought it was a good idea or a good thing to do. But Moses didn't write the Torah, YHWH wrote the Torah. So Moses is simply writing what is God's word.

The third point, which is most relevant to our current study, is the fact that this law amazingly protects the rights of the woman in cases of divorce as well as marriage. It shouldn't be assumed that the phrase "if you are not pleased with her" entails something trivial since God's Law takes marriage very seriously. The point is that if, for whatever reason, the couple gets divorced, the man is not to treat her as a slave or sell her. She is free to go "wherever she wishes."

As you can see, the Torah goes to great lengths to highlight the value and personhood of a wife. Both in marriage and divorce, she is not to be treated as an object that can be thrown away or sold. When we read the Tenth Commandment in light of these facts, it's easy to see that YHWH did not consider women to be the mere property of their husbands.

In regards to this objection, another topic is often brought up, and that is the custom in the Bible known as the "bride price." Critics of the Bible assert that men could simply buy women like they could buy anything else—horses, oxen, grain, whatever.

"Men could just buy women like property," feminist critics shriek, "Therefore, the Bible is sexist and degrading towards women!"

In reality, the bride price is better translated as "a marriage present." It could perhaps be compared to our modern tradition of an engagement ring in the sense that one of the main points of the bride price was to demonstrate a man's intentions toward his wife-to-be.

In biblical times, the husband-to-be's father gave some form of wealth such as money or property to the family of the wife-to-be. This was designed to bring the two families together as well as compensate the family of the wife-to-be for the work their daughter would otherwise have contributed to the family.

The bride price also provided a form of security for the wife in case her husband died or they got divorced. As scholar Timothy D. Terrell states in his article, “Recovering the Bride Price”:

The wisdom of the bride price is completely lost on modern Westerners, who generally regard it as antiquated and pointless. Yet bride prices had a significant economic purpose: they provided a trust fund to protect the wife and her children against the possible infidelity or incompetence of the husband.

-Timothy D. Terrell, “Recovering the Bride Price”

So ultimately the bride price didn’t belong to the bride’s father, but to the bride. Terrell continues:

Normally the father of the bride would keep the bride price in trust for his daughter and her children, investing it wisely for their benefit. After his death the fund would go to the daughter for her to manage. Laban’s behavior with Rachel and Leah’s wealth provides a good example of a breach of that trust (Gen. 31:14-16).

-Timothy D. Terrell, “Recovering the Bride Price”

As we can see, asserting that a man can simply buy a woman like property based on the biblical idea of a bride price is a complete distortion of the facts. It wasn’t about “buying” a wife, but about demonstrating the serious intentions on the part of the groom-to-be, a way to involve and strengthen the ties between both families, and also provide security and financial-protection to the bride.

Isn’t it interesting how all of the passages and biblical customs that are brought up to show the alleged sexist nature of the Bible actually prove the exact opposite? Let’s continue.

Another passage that is often brought up in support of this objection is Deuteronomy 20:13-14.

Deuteronomy 20:13-14

And when the Lord (YHWH) your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword, but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord (YHWH) your God has given you.

This passage is dealing with protocol for when Israel as a nation went to war. We’ll be unpacking the general topic of biblical warfare in more depth in a future teaching. For now, let’s focus on how this passage seems to be saying that captured women and children are basically the spoils of war that Israelite soldiers can do what they wish with, including perhaps raping the women! (At least that’s what critics will argue.)

Remember, these instructions weren’t given in a vacuum, but as part of a constitution by which the nation of Israel would be governed. Therefore, we need to read this verse in light of everything else the Torah says on this topic.

What did we learn from the passage we read earlier in Deuteronomy 21:10-14? We learned that Israelite soldiers were explicitly forbidden from having their way with captives of war. If a soldier desired a foreign woman who was captured in war, he was commanded to give her the dignity of marriage!

Thus, when all evidence is considered, it's clear that the Torah prohibits treating women as property, and warfare was certainly no exception to this rule.

Again, especially compared to the other nations surrounding ancient Israel, in which women were in fact treated like property, the Torah was especially concerned with protecting the dignity and personhood of women. Before the Torah, this was basically unheard of in the ancient world. As scholar John Wenham writes,

In a world where there are wars, and therefore prisoners of war, such regulations in fact set a high standard of conduct.

-John W. Wenham, "The Goodness of God," p. 96

Another thing that's often brought up in support of the idea that the Bible views women as property is polygamy—that is, the practice by which a man has multiple wives. It is argued that this practice degrades women and treats them like they are of less value than men.

We would actually agree that polygamy degrades women, but we disagree that the Bible endorses this practice. In fact, we argue that polygamy is a clear deviation from God's original design for marriage as established in Creation. We also argue that the Torah prohibits polygamy and that it's discouraged throughout the Bible. For more information, see our teaching, [Does the Bible Endorse Polygamy?](#)

But what about the idea that women could be sentenced to death for not being a virgin? Doesn't Deuteronomy 22:13-21 teach that a woman is to be stoned to death once it's found out that she wasn't a virgin on her wedding night? Doesn't that seem sexist and wrong, basically saying a woman is only as good as her virginity?

Actually, that's not what that passage teaches at all, as we demonstrate in detail in our teaching, **The Virginity Test (Deuteronomy 22)**.

In short, the law in Deuteronomy 22 is actually designed to protect a woman from being slandered within the community. Furthermore, if the woman is proven guilty in the legal court proceedings, premarital sex is not the sin that warrants the death penalty according to the passage. It's actually the element of deceit in her actions that makes a non-capital offense a capital offense.

We know this because premarital sex does not warrant the death penalty in other passages in the Torah even though it's still a sin for both men and women to engage in it. Lastly, there's no record of a death sentence being carried out in accordance with this law throughout all of Israel's history. Therefore, this hypothetical scenario has likely never occurred when you take into account all of the criteria that had to be met for it to be carried out. Again, see our teaching, **The Virginity Test (Deuteronomy 22)**, for more information.

Perhaps one other thing that is sometimes mentioned in regards to this objection is the accusation that rape was allowed in the Bible, specifically in Deuteronomy 22. In fact, it's argued that rape victims were commanded to marry their rapists.

Actually, this is false, and is based on a complete misunderstanding of the biblical passage. The Bible condemns rape. In Deuteronomy 22, it actually specifically says that rapists are to be put to death. Moreover, the passage nowhere says that a rape victim is required to marry the man who raped her.

The passage that this misunderstanding is based on is actually referring to consensual, premarital sex between a young man and woman. Ironically, this law is, again, designed to protect the dignity of the young woman. Men were not permitted to just seduce and use women like sex objects. Sex, as God intended it, is only to be enjoyed within the safety and commitment of marriage. And if a young couple engages in this act outside of marriage, the young man had to provide the safety and commitment to her by marrying her. And if the young man is actually likely going to be a poor choice for a husband, to say it nicely, the passage itself says that the young woman was not “forced” to marry him, but that in either case the young man had to pay the bride price.

Suggesting that the Torah forces rape victims to marry their rapists is an unsympathetic misrepresentation of the text. No honest reader of the passage could possibly insist that the passage says such a thing. For more information on this topic, see our teaching, [Marrying a Rapist](#).

In conclusion, when we look at the evidence honestly, what emerges is what we’ve already made clear in many other teachings, especially the first part of this series, [Is the Bible Misogynistic?](#). That is, women are not considered property in the Bible, but are fully equal to men in value and purpose as God’s image bearers. They are partners with men in God’s plan. And the Bible never—not once—paints women as less valuable or inferior to men.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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