



Book Review: “The Making of Biblical Womanhood” by Beth Allison Barr



The

book: “The Making of Biblical Womanhood” by Beth Allison Barr has been on my “to read” list for quite a while. I know several female churchgoers who say it finally puts the issue of women in Church leadership to rest.

Having read it, I had to write a review.

The book rests primarily on two things: (1) a **major** historical error and (2) a line of reasoning based on that error. We’ll look at the error right after a quick look at the author, because she claims to be a historical expert.

The author

From the blurb on her own website, bethallisonbarr.com:

Beth Allison Barr (PhD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) is **associate professor of history** and **associate dean of the Graduate School at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where she specializes in medieval history, women's history, and church history**. She is the president of the Conference on Faith and History and is a member of Christians for Biblical Equality. Barr has written for *Christianity Today*, the *Washington Post*, and Religion News Service, and is a regular contributor to *The Anxious Bench*, the popular Patheos website on Christian history.

The author is a historian, and that's part of her claim to fame. She often references her teaching experiences in the book and claims to know women's history and church history extremely well. She also repeatedly reminds the reader that she's a historian, though she's not annoying about it:

- “As a historian...” (p. 6)
- “Listen not just to my experiences but also to the evidence I present as a historian” (p. 9).
- “Even from my early years training as a historian...” (p. 12)
- “Here I was, a professor with a PhD from a major research university...” (p. 56)
- “Because I am a historian...” (p. 56)
- “So as a historian...” (p. 60)
- “Instead, I taught the narrative I had learned from my training as a historian...” (p. 107).
- “My training as a historian...” (p. 107)
- “My medieval history-trained eyes...” (p. 125)
- “But as a historian...” (p. 127)
- “As a medieval historian who specializes in English sermons...” (p. 132)
- “Yet, as a medieval historian...” (p. 133)
- “So let me tell you what I know as a historian...” (p. 133)
- “As a historian who studies manuscript tradition...” (p. 143)
- “To my women's history-trained ears...” (p. 171)
- “As a medieval historian...” (p. 183)
- “As a church historian...” (p. 194)
- “At least to my historian's mind...” (p. 197)
- “I am a historian...” (p. 205)

Given this and her claimed specialization on women's history and church history, I thought that she would actually do her homework on women's history in the 1st century, when the church started.

She didn't.

The major historical error

On pages 47-50, the author spends some time “proving” that 1st century Rome was patriarchal and therefore they supposedly oppressed women. She includes some quotes by Aristotle (*a Greek philosopher*) to prove what Romans thought of women. **The problem? Aristotle died in 322 BC.** That's more than **350 years** before Jesus died and the epistles were written.

Quoting from Aristotle 350+ years earlier to 'prove' that 1st century Roman culture was patriarchal is like quoting an author from 1671 to 'prove' what something is like in 2021.

(And actually, since Greece was a different country than Rome, it would be like quoting an Englishman from 1671 to 'prove' something about America in 2021; that's pretty far apart.)

She should've done her homework.

Now, the early Roman Empire was indeed patriarchal. However, this had changed by the 1st century.

By the late Hellenistic Age, this had resulted in a metamorphosis in the position of women. Equality for women extended beyond politics into economic life, and in some occupations such as plumbing they came to dominate. The rate of divorce increased enormously, and the power "of the paterfamilias was shaken to its foundations and eventually swept away altogether." "The meek and henpecked Roman husband was already a stock comedy figure in the great days of the Second Punic War." This changing relationship led Cato the Censor to protest bitterly, "All other men rule over women; but we Romans, who rule all men, are ruled by our women." Equality had progressed to the point that by the late Empire a woman who married retained her property, "and, legally, the man had not even the right to enjoy the income from it."

"Egalitarianism and Empire" by William F. Marina [here](#).

Let me repeat that quote in the middle so no one misses it.

"All other men rule over women; but **we Romans**, who rule all men, **are ruled by our women**"

Hopefully the quote above by a Roman Historian ([Cato the Elder](#)/Censor, died 149 B.C.) will prove that Barr is off the edge of the map when it comes to the historical facts about women in 1st century Rome.

For more evidence, look into [Hortensia](#). In 42 BC she **publicly** argued down the ruling Roman triumvirate (*Caesar Augustus, Mark Anthony, and Marcus Lepidus*) in the Forum Romanum. She was protesting a **tax on women** that they wanted to institute. The tax wasn't going to be on their husbands; it was going to be on the women themselves. Again: "*Equality had progressed to the point that by the late Empire a woman who married retained her property, "and, legally, the man had not even the right to enjoy the income from it."*

There's also [Fulvia](#).

She died in 40 BC and (*in succession*) was the wife of three great Romans, the best known of which is Mark Anthony. According to the Roman historian Cassius Dio, at one point Fulvia controlled the politics of Rome. Dio wrote:

“The following year Publius Servilius and Lucius Antonius nominally became consuls, but in reality it was Antonius and **Fulvia**. **She**, the mother-in-law of Octavian and wife of Antony, had no respect for Lepidus because of his slothfulness, and **managed affairs herself, so that neither the senate nor the people transacted any business contrary to her pleasure.**“

To be clear: a **woman** was basically ruling Rome.

That’s certainly not the picture of patriarchal oppression that Barr paints in *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*.

If you really want to know what gender roles and marriage were like in 1st century Rome, I’d recommend the book [“Sex and Culture” by J.D. Unwin](#). (the link is to a PDF version of the book; it was published in the 1930s and thus has entered public domain) He tracks the marriage and sexual custom of 80+ societies throughout history, and includes a large section on Rome.

The point?

Barr completely fails to accurately portray the position of women in 1st century Rome.

She gets it dead wrong.

Worse, she bases much of her book on the premise that Rome was patriarchal in the 1st century.

She argues that modern Christian ideals about gender roles didn’t come from the Bible, but instead came from “patriarchal” 1st Century Rome. However, they clearly didn’t come from 1st century Rome.

If Barr can’t be trusted to get such a huge fact about 1st century Rome right – while claiming to be a historical expert and speaking about what is supposed to be her area of expertise – then why should I trust her other historical claims?

(This goes double because there are many more stories with accuracy problems. More on that next.)

I can forgive people who make mistakes, even ‘expert’ historians. Consider though: her area of expertise is supposed to be “women’s history” and “church history” and yet she makes an impressively large error concerning both.

That does a lot of damage to her credibility.

But that’s just the largest error. There are many more smaller ones.

Other Historical errors

I wouldn’t be so hard on Barr for historical errors if she didn’t claim to be such a knowledgeable historian. I noticed several errors while reading through, and other reviewers of the book found many,

many more:

As a work purporting to be serious history, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* contains more than a few historical oddities. I don't know that any other historian has ever referred to John Calvin and John Knox as "radical Puritan translators" (p. 145), given that the term "Puritan" began as a term of derision in the Church of England and barely existed before Calvin and Knox died. Likewise, Barr mistakenly claims that the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion was "the first American Calvinist denomination" to emerge from the evangelical revivals (p. 177), when, in fact, the Anglican breakaway group was English not American. Barr also evinces an amateurish view of the Arian controversy, equating the error of eternal subordination with the teachings of Arius (when someone like Origen would have been more accurate) and stating incorrectly, "When everyone else in the Christian world got wind of what Arius was teaching, they reacted with horror" (p. 194). This is hardly an accurate reading of the back-and-forth theological and geopolitical debate that ensued after Nicea and prompted the council in the first place.

...

Or take the example of Genovefa of Paris, whom Barr calls the "defacto ecclesiastical leader of Paris" (p. 88). ...is it fair to say Genovefa was the "defacto ecclesiastical leader," when she did not ordain anyone, did not administer the sacraments, did not hold ecclesiastical office, and did not preach in the church?

([Source.](#))

That's just a sample; there are many more examples like it in his review. If you read it, you'll see under the heading "3. *Dealing Fairly with the Historical Evidence*" many more examples where Barr seems to... "adjust" historical stories to fit her narrative. I would actually recommend reading that section, as it'll put her historical "fussing" in stark relief.

Misquoting her theological opponents

Somewhat related, Barr states on page 36: "Even John Piper admitted in 1984 that he can't figure out what to do with Deborah and Huldah". Except that's not what he said. Here's the full quote: (*he was responding to Alvera and Berkeley Micklesen*)

I admit that Deborah and Huldah do not fit neatly into my view. I wish Berkeley and Alvera would do the same about 1 Timothy 2:8-15 (etc!). Perhaps it is no fluke that Deborah and Huldah did not put themselves forward but were sought out because of their wisdom and revelation (Judges 4:5; 2 Kings 22:14). I argued in March (pp. 30-32) that the issue (in 1 Cor. 11:20:16) is *how* a woman should prophesy, not whether she should. **Are Deborah and Huldah examples of *how* to "prophesy" and "judge" in a way that affirms and honors the**

normal headship of men?

([Source](#).)

That hardly sounds like Piper is stumped, does it? Rather, it sounds like he's responding to a strong argument with his understanding. This sort of mis-characterization isn't rare in the book either; she does it with quotes (*as you just saw*) and historical facts. I'll only cite one more example next, and this one is frankly horrifying.

One example that's horrifying

Barr has a chapter on "our selective medieval memory" where she argues that we've forgotten the great women of faith throughout church history. She asserts that these are "women who broke free from marriage to serve God" (page 78) and provides several example stories, including the one below on page 79:

I wondered what the speaker would think of women like **Saint Paula, who abandoned her children for the higher purpose of God's call on her life. Paula's story tells of how she set sail for Jerusalem** – after the death of her husband – on a pilgrimage, **leaving three of her children alone, crying on the shore**. Maybe the speaker would've claimed that Paula was not following biblical womanhood, as she did not exemplify Titus 2. But Paula seemed to believe that she was practicing Biblical womanhood, drawing strength from Jesus' statement that "whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37). Saint Jerome, her biographer, tells us that **as the ship drew away from the shore, Paula "held her eyes to heaven . . . ignoring her children and putting her trust in God . . . In that rejoicing**, her courage coveted the love of her children as the greatest of its kind, yet she left them all for the love of God."

(She then goes on to list Paula's deeds afterward, which comes across as gushing praise.)

Barr paints what I consider to be a pretty horrifying picture. A mother literally abandoning her children to sail away from them as they cry on the shore wanting her to come back. She ignores them and then rejoices in this.

Barr appears to think this is a good thing.

It's pretty horrifying stuff...

...except it's not quite right historically speaking.

If you [do some research on Paula](#), you'll find out that her children weren't necessarily as young as the impression that Barr gives. One was married *to a senator* and she took one of her daughters with her. **So which is it?** Did Barr think they were crying young children or grown? **Why not mention that she took a daughter with her?** Barr's narrative in *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* makes it *seem* like they were young children. History paints a more complicated picture.

- Did Barr know these things?
- If so, did she intentionally leave them out to paint a more dramatic picture?
- If she didn't know it, then aren't her historical credentials called into question? (*yet again*)

Regardless of what she knew, **why does Barr seem to glorify the book's narrative of a mother abandoning her seemingly young children, ignoring their cries as she resolutely sails away rejoicing?** Why should that be glorified under *any* context? Paula – as portrayed and glorified by Barr – makes me think of the Greek word “????????” ([astorgos](#)), which means:

From a (as a negative particle) and a presumed derivative of stergo (to cherish affectionately); **hard-hearted towards kindred — without natural affection.**

It's used as a pejorative in Romans 1:31 and 2 Timothy 3:3 as indicator of ungodliness. Not exactly something you want to laud the way Barr does... at least not according to the narrative in the book.

The book's premise

Barr has two major competing themes in *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*:

1. Women were always able to preach and teach men, so they **should** be now
2. Women were always oppressed by the patriarchy, so they **shouldn't** be now.

That is the bulk of her argument, and **I don't think she realizes the inherent contradiction of those two competing premises.** That is, she says that two things have been going on a long time, then uses the “long time” as a justification for ending the one, while simultaneously using it as a justification for continuing the other.

She spends much of the book giving examples of women who preached and taught men throughout church history. That's not a good way to determine doctrine, even assuming she's right (*the large number of errors and 'adjustments' makes me skeptical*). Doctrine should be built on scripture, and she doesn't do that.

Barr freely admits (though seemingly unknowingly) that she didn't come to her current understanding through scripture, but through personal experience and church history. She mentions her husband being fired for not agreeing with their church's views on gender roles several times throughout the book. Near the end (*pages 201-204*) she talks about a terrible experience with a boyfriend, and then says:

This experience, along with my husband's firing, frames how I think about

complementarianism today.

I do feel bad for her about the boyfriend experience, and even her church experience if it's accurate. However, that still doesn't make personal trauma a good place to look for church doctrine. I would certainly like to abide by Proverbs 18:17 (*about hearing both sides of a case*) and hear her church's side of the story concerning the firing, especially given her frequent tendency towards historical revisionism.

Regardless, it never seems like scripture forms the primary basis for her beliefs. In several places she mentions struggling to reconcile "Biblical womanhood" with what she knows about women in history and her own personal experiences, and how that opened her eyes. Noticeably absent is any story about scripture changing her beliefs.

She does gloss the scripture slightly, which we'll look at next.

Ironically, she always calls the traditional "man leads, woman submits" arrangement that she seems to despise "biblical womanhood". She never calls it anything else. I find that curious. Not a detraction, just... curious. I kept waiting for her to redefine "biblical womanhood" to mean egalitarian.

She never does.

She clearly espouses egalitarian views. Yet she always calls the "man leads, woman submits" arrangement that she so detests "Biblical womanhood", just as someone would if they believed it really was Biblical (*which she apparently doesn't*).

Again, I find that... interesting.

Barr's treatment of Biblical passages

Noticeably absent from the book is an in-depth treatment of the various biblical passages dealing with authority and submission in the Bible. She does touch a few of them, which we'll look at in a moment. Two things first though.

First, she seems to exclusively blame Paul for submission teachings, but seems to forget 1 Peter 3. (*And don't forget Peter was married.*)

Second, she argues that Mary Magdalene telling the disciples about the resurrection of Jesus was her preaching the gospel to them and teaching them. She says this makes her an "apostle to the apostles", apparently with extra special authority over them. I don't think I need to explain what a huge stretch that is.

Barr's treatment of Ephesians 5

Barr's treatment of Ephesians 5 is on pages 50-52. She says in part:

Likewise, Ephesians 5 can be read as a resistance narrative to Roman patriarchy. Many scholars argue that Paul subordinates his entire discussion of the household codes under verse 21 "Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ." When this verse is read at the beginning of the Ephesians household codes, it changes everything.

Well, actually...

First, it **can't** be a resistance narrative against something which effectively didn't exist. (1st century Roman patriarchy) Setting that aside, the original Greek tells a different story. Now, Barr doesn't claim to be a linguist, so I understand her making an error here. However, if she knew Greek she'd know that the above quote is categorically false.

Verse 21 is part of a sentence that begins back in verse 18, which includes a list of participles (verbal adjectives) as a description of things believers should be doing on an ongoing basis. (You can confirm this and what follows by looking at [Ephesians 5 in an interlinear Bible](#).)

Here are those verses with the participles highlighted to make them easier to see: (my own translation, which you can double-check with the link above.)

Ephesians 5:18-21

18 And don't be drunk with wine, which is wasteful excess, but be filled by *the* Spirit:

19 **speaking** to each other in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, **singing** and **making music** to the Lord in your heart,

20 always **giving thanks** to *our* God and Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

21 **and men submitting** themselves **to one another** in reverent fear of Christ.

Here's the thing: "men submitting themselves to one another" is two words in Greek. The first is "?????????" ([hupotassó](#)), inflected here as a masculine plural participle ("men submitting themselves"). The second word is "?????????" ([allélón](#)), a reciprocal pronoun ("to one another") also inflected here as masculine plural. Since *both* the participle and reciprocal pronoun are masculine, men are being told to submit to "one another", meaning other men.

I have a footnote in my physical NASB95 Bible which states that we know Hebrews was written by a man because of this kind of thing: he refers to himself with a masculine participle in Hebrews 11:32 (which you can confirm [here](#)). Plus, don't forget that the **reciprocal** pronoun "one another" in verse 21 is also masculine. Women aren't mentioned in verse 21 at all, so Barr's argument is categorically false.

Her (*almost non-existent*) treatment of verse 22 is equally wrong

She later argues that it's significant that Paul addressed women before men in Ephesians 5. That is, Barr says that even addressing women was a major "narrative flip" on the supposedly patriarchal 1st century Rome. She says addressing women before men makes this even more significant. The problem with that is twofold.

First:

Even if she's 100% right, the command is still "*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.*" (NKJV). She never denies this, never explains this away, and never even *attempts* to explain why this verse means something other than the plain meaning. She also never tries to explain how this verse fits with her egalitarian worldview.

Second:

The evidence actually points to women **not** being addressed at all. That is, it should read "wives must submit themselves" with the command being **about** women, not "wives, submit yourselves" with the command being **to** women. The evidence is actually pretty concrete. For more information, [this article](#) is easier and shorter if you're not familiar with Textual Criticism, or this [scholarly article on the Ephesians 5:22 textual variant](#) on Cambridge.org is very complete.

(Also, I have a [Textual Criticism 101 article](#) if you have trouble following either article, or simply want to learn more about how scholars reconstruct the New Testament from existing manuscripts.)

To summarize: the 3rd person command ("*they must submit themselves*") is the most widely attested among early manuscripts, and has the best internal evidence as well. The 2nd person ("*you must submit yourselves*") doesn't show up until **centuries** later.

Thus, the instruction was given **about** women, not **to** women. Further, the textual evidence for 3rd person gets enormous support from the construction of Ephesians 5:33. (*You can almost always see this even in a gender neutral translation.*)

Ephesians 5:33

33 Nevertheless, **each individual among you** also is to love his own wife even as himself, and **the wife** must see to it that **she** respects her husband.

Notice that men are directly addressed with "you", and women are talked about with "she". Paul – under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – gave the commands **about** women here, not **to** women.

(*This is actually very normal in the Bible. [This article](#) from bible-researcher.com under the heading "The patriarchal Bible problem" makes this fact abundantly clear. For why this is a good thing for women, see my article: [How Crucial are Women to a Biblical Household? Very!](#))*

Thus Barr's ideas about a "narrative flip" in Ephesians 5:22 are completely wrong.

Barr's treatment of 1 Corinthians 14

The Making of Biblical Womanhood's narrative is this: Paul quotes Roman ideas in verses 34-35 in order to repudiate them in verse 36, and thus to allow women to speak in church. (However, don't forget that 1st century Rome wasn't patriarchal, so this argument already fails quite spectacularly.)

In her own words:

What if Paul was so concerned that Christians in Corinth were imposing their own cultural restrictions on women that he called them on it? He quoted the bad practice, which Corinthians men were trying to drag from their Roman world into their Christian world, and then he countered it.

...

The Revised Standard Version lends support to the idea that this is what Paul was doing. Paul first lays out the cultural restrictions: "As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." (1 Corinthians 14:33-35) And then he counters it: "36 What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached?"

...

I often do this as a classroom exercise. I have a student read from their own translation, usually ESV or NIV. Then I will read from the RSV, inflecting words appropriately. When I proclaim "What! Did the word of God originate with you?" I can usually hear their gasp, their collective intake of breath. Once a student exclaimed out loud, "Dr. Barr! That changes it completely!" Yes, I told her, it does.

Notice that I highlighted the word "what" in the quotation of the passage? Well that's because it's not there in the Greek. The RSV translators added "what!" completely without textual basis. You can confirm that [in an interlinear Bible if you like](#).

Her argument completely falls apart without that word being added.

(And it's pretty weak even with it present.)

She also doesn't comment on verse 37, where Paul specifically repudiates her idea that the preceding verses are cultural, calling them a direct command from God.

1 Corinthians 14:37

37 If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that **the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment.**

Kind of seems like an important verse to deal with, doesn't it? However, she makes no attempt to. None whatsoever.

Further, Barr won't even touch 1 Timothy 2, which also speaks on the same topic. She conveniently ignores this passage in *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, mentioning it only in passing and never quoting it nor providing an explanation of how her views line up with it.

Getting Linguistics Wrong

Now, I don't want to be too hard on Barr in this section because she never claims to be a linguist. However, she does make a lot of errors

For starters, she makes two basic claims:

1. There have always been gender-neutral English Bibles (*so there still should be*)
2. Most Bibles were/are translated to highlight men and conceal women

She actually makes a reasonable case for the first point, but that doesn't really prove anything. The whole premise of the book is that something which – according to her – has been going on since the beginning of history (*patriarchy*) must end. So the whole “it's always been done so we should keep doing it” argument falls completely flat.

Point #2 is completely false though.

Actually, the opposite is true.

The Bible has always – in every English translation that I've ever seen – been consistently translated to make it **less** masculine and more gender neutral. We examine this closely in the section on gender in my article: [“What's the Best Bible Translation? And More Importantly, Why?”](#). Because of that, I'll just hit the highlights here:

- Greek definite article + participle combinations (*when they match gender, case, and number*) are sometimes correctly translated in the masculine singular as “he who ___”, but **more often are neutered** to “the one who ___” or something similar. Further, they are almost always **incorrectly** translated in the masculine plural as “those who ___” instead of “the men who ___”. **This neuters the masculine verb (participle) in favor of gender-neutral “those” in 99%+ of cases.** Conversely, feminine article + participle combinations are almost always translated correctly as “She who ___” in the singular and “The women who ___” in the plural.
- Nearly every single Bible translation takes the Old Testament phrase “the sons of Israel” and incorrectly translates it as “the people of Israel” or “children of Israel” thus neutering the

masculine word.

- Modern translations usually conceal that the Bible addresses men even when women are present. Consider Acts 1:16 ([interlinear link so you can confirm](#)), where Peter opens his address with (*literally*) “Males, brothers”, even though the women are explicitly stated to be present in verse 14. Nearly every translation only has “brothers”, and some “brothers and sisters”.

There are many more examples, but that should suffice for now.

Modern translations do not hide women; they hide the masculine focus.

(And again, see my article [How Crucial are Women to a Biblical Household? Very!](#) for more on why this masculine focus exists, and why it's actually a good thing for women.)

Likewise she complains about the words “?????” ([adam](#)) and “?????????” ([Anthropos](#)) being translated “man” when Barr says that they actually mean “human”. Again, I go into great detail about this in [my article on Bible translations](#), so I'll only brush it here.

In Genesis 5:1-2, God named the entire human race – including both men and women – “?????” ([adam](#)) or “man”. That's the name God himself chose. Thus in the Old Testament, “adam” (*which means “man”*) is correct. In the New Testament, there is a Greek word that means “human”. it's “?????????????” ([anthrópinos](#)) and it's only used 7 times. God could've inspired “human” if He wanted to, but He didn't. He inspired “?????????????” ([anthropos](#)), which means “man”.

Barr gets nearly everything else about linguistics wrong too, but I think that gets the point across.

Now, as to her specific charges concerning Phoebe in Romans 16:1 and Junia in Romans 16:7.

First of all, the accusation that Phoebe *should* be described as a deacon is essentially baseless. The Greek word “?????????????” ([diakonos](#)) is only translated “deacon” three times; twice in 1 Timothy 3 and once in Philippians 1:1. Everywhere else it's translated “servant” or in some translations “minister”, so translating it “deacon” with Phoebe would be highly unusual. Further, three men are mentioned in a similar context to Phoebe with the same word and it's *never* translated “deacon” with them either. (*Col 1:7, 4:7, and Eph 6:21*)

As to Junia, there's an ongoing debate about that verse. The Greek evidence points to Junia being known “by” the apostles, not being “among” the apostles. One of the most respected Greek scholars of our day wrote a lengthy treatment of the Greek, which you can read [here](#). This scholar *literally* wrote the book on advanced Greek Grammar (“*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*” by Daniel Wallace .)

Contradicting herself?

On pages 34-35 of *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, Barr makes an argument that the rise of agriculture led to a decrease in the power and authority of women. Then we read:

It is striking to me, as a scholar and as a Christian, that when God told Eve she would be under her husband's power, **God simultaneously told Adam that agricultural labor would be necessary for human survival. Patriarchy**, according to both the Bible and historical record, **emerged alongside the emergence of agricultural communities.**

Rather than patriarchy being God-ordained, history suggests that **patriarchy had a human origin**: civilization itself.

Um...

Huh?

So let me get this straight. **According to Barr herself, God said that humans would need agriculture to survive, and that patriarchy always comes with agriculture.... yet patriarchy has a "human origin"?** Really? I mean, did no one catch this in editing? She spends a whole page making an argument which she completely contradicts with the first sentence of the next paragraph.

If you accept her premise that agriculture leads to patriarchy, and that God instituted agriculture, this is actually a pretty strong argument that patriarchy was instituted by God. **If** you accept her premise, this one single argument *for* patriarchy is debatably stronger than all of her arguments *against* it.

Two other things

First, at several points, Barr links patriarchy with racism and "systemic oppression". Perhaps Barr is unaware, but those are straight out Social Justice/Critical Race Theory (CRT) talking points guidebook. I can't be sure from the brief mentions in the book, but it certainly seems like she leans that way. That's troubling because I doubt she knows where those ideas come from (*few do*). CRT is explicitly Marxist/Socialist/Communist in nature, and I go into some detail about it in my article [What are Social Justice and Critical Race Theory \(CRT\), and are they Biblical?](#)

Second, on pages 183-184, she talks about Saint Cecilia and praises her by calling her "rebellious and insubordinate". She uses these descriptors as praiseworthy, despite Samuel's explicit words to Saul:

1 Samuel 15:22-23

22 Samuel said,

"Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices

As in obeying the voice of the LORD?

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,

And to heed than the fat of rams.

23 "For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry.

Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,

He has also rejected you from being king.”

It is interesting what Barr chooses to praise, such as Paula abandoning her children, women “throwing off the bonds of marriage” (page 78), and both rebellion and insubordination. I don’t see God ever praise those things. In fact, He does quite the opposite.

Conclusion

In *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, Barr – the woman who prides herself on being a *historian* – makes a **major** historical error. She then compounds that with a whole host of smaller historical errors, re-framing history to fit her narrative. She contradicts herself (*accidentally making a case for patriarchy*), gets nearly everything about language wrong, and – most disappointingly – makes almost no attempt to engage with the scriptures.

The few times she does, she’s patently wrong. She won’t even engage on the more difficult passages like 1 Timothy 2 or 1 Corinthians 11. She also fails to show why Ephesians 5:22 means anything other than what it plainly states, even if everything else that she says is correct

Also concerning is what she praises. Her narrative about Paula (*who rejoiced at abandoning her children according to Barr’s narrative*), and the story of Cecilia, (*who she praises for being rebellious and insubordinate*) and the idea of “throwing off the bonds of marriage” all appear to be laudable in her eyes.

On the positive side, the book is easy to read. Her writing is clear and she does have some humorous moments. The story about the woman who was accidentally ordained as Bishop because someone read the wrong ‘holy orders’ made me laugh out loud. Of course, it did ruin her earlier argument that women should be allowed to become bishops because it had already happened once. (*She left out the accidental part in earlier mentions.*)

Ultimately, it’s a disappointing book.

She completely fails to engage with the scriptures to bring any meaningful change to how we should understand them. Her few attempts to explain away passages that don’t fit her theology fall completely flat if the reader has only a little understanding of historical context and/or Greek. Further, **the entire book is based on a faulty premise about patriarchy in 1st century Rome.**

Final verdict: “**Caveat Emptor**” (*Latin for “let the buyer beware”.*)