

**THE STATUS AND ROLE
OF WOMEN
IN THE FIRST CENTURY
MESSIANIC COMMUNITY**

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

This study is focused on the question, “What was the status and role of women in the First Century Messianic Community?” Surely the issue must have been in the minds of thinking women since the church put them in their place by about the 3rd century. Church women since that time have been in bondage, severely limited in what they are permitted to do in male-dominated Christianity. What is the truth and what will we, men and women, do about it?

Y’shua said, “If you obey what I say, then you are really my talmidim, 32 you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” **Yochanan (John) 8:32 JNT**¹

We approach the study believing that the Word of YHVH (as recorded in the Scriptures) is true and every word has been breathed of God. As Rav Sha’ul (Apostle Paul) wrote to Timothy, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is valuable for teaching the truth, convicting of sin, correcting faults and training in right living; 17 thus anyone who belongs to G-d may be fully equipped for every good work.” **2 Timothy 3:16-17 JNT** Men may disagree over their understandings but the *Ruach HaKodesh* (Holy Spirit) is able to lead us into all the truth. **Yochanan (John) 16:13**

So if we believe and obey what Abba (our Heavenly Father) says in his word, as we are led by the *Ruach HaKodesh*, we can know the truth about the role and status of women in the first century Messianic community. This truth will set us free as fellow bondservants, fully equipped, for every good work, especially “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Messiah Y’shua.” **Ephesians 4:12**

A good starting point and a clue to our conclusion is the clear statement Rav Sha’ul wrote to the Messianic believers living in Galatia,

“For in union with the Messiah, you are all children of God through this trusting faithfulness; 27 because as many of you as were immersed into the Messiah have clothed yourselves with the Messiah, in whom 28 there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor freeman, neither male nor female; for in union with the Messiah Yeshua, you are all one. **Galatians 3:26-28 JNT**

Certainly there are differences between these groups. Jews, having a divine heritage of being called by YHVH to his Torah, certainly are different from the Gentiles, the *goyim*, the nations who have no such heritage. A slave is by definition the opposite of a freeman. And all of us know and appreciate the difference between male and female as YHVH has created us. But in the eyes of YHVH, all those who are brought together “in union with the Messiah” are his children and all one. In the midst of diversity YHVH sees unity and equality for he is not a respecter of persons based on nationality, status, or gender. And if YHVH is not, why should we be?

II. WOMEN IN THE TANAKH

An Overview

Before delving specifically into the role and status of women in the Tanakh (Torah, Prophets, Writing - “Old Testament”), this passage from the outstanding scholarship of the 19th century Messianic Jew, Alfred Edersheim, provides a wonderful introduction, an overview, a perspective that will enhance our understanding of what follow.²

“In order accurately to understand the position of women in Israel, it is only necessary carefully to peruse the New Testament. The picture of social life there presented gives a full view of the place which she held in private and in public life. Here we do not find that separation, so common among Orientals at all times, but a woman mingles freely with others both at home and abroad. So far from suffering under social inferiority, she takes influential and often leading parts in all movements, especially those of the religious character....

“St. Peter’s reference to “the holy women” “in the old time” (**1 Peter 3:5**) is thoroughly in accordance with the Talmudic views. Indeed, his quotation of **Genesis 18:12**, and its application: “Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord,” occur in precisely the same manner in Rabbinical writings (Tanch 28,6), where her respect and obedience are likewise set forth as a pattern to her daughters....

In what reverence “the four mothers,” as the Rabbis designate Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel, were held, and what influence they exercised in patriarchal history, no attentive reader of Scripture can fail to notice. And as we follow on the sacred story, Miriam, who had originally saved Moses, leads the song of deliverance on the other side of the flood, and her influence, though not always for good, continued till her death (compare **Micah 6:4**). Then “the women whose heart stirred them up in wisdom” contribute to the rearing of the Tabernacle; Deborah works deliverance, and judgeth in Israel; and the piety of Manoah’s wife is at least as conspicuous, and more intelligent, than her husband’s (**Judges 13:23**). So also is that of the mother of Samuel. In the times of the kings the praises of Israel’s maidens stir the jealousy of Saul; Abigail knows how to avert the danger of her husband’s folly; the wise woman of Tekoah is sent for to induce the King to fetch his banished home; and the conduct of a woman “in her wisdom” puts an end to the rebellion of Sheba. Later on, the constant mention of queen mothers, and their frequent interference in the government, shows their position. Such names as that of Huldah the prophetess, and the idyllic narrative of the Shunammite, will readily occur to the memory. The story of a woman’s devotion forms the subject of the Book of Ruth; that of her pure and faithful love, the theme or the imagery of the Song of Songs; that of her courage and devotion the groundwork of the Book of Esther: while her worth and virtues are enumerated in the closing chapter of the Book of Proverbs...

“The very terms by which woman is named in the Old Testament are significant. If the man is *Ish*, his wife is *Ishah*, simply his equal; if the husband is *Gever*, the ruler, the woman is, in her own domain, *Gevirah* and *Gevereth*, the mistress (as frequently in the history of Sara and other passages), or else *the dweller at home* (*Nevath bayith*, **Psalms 26:12**).” [End Edersheim]

Biblically, the woman was always seen as an equal partner. Her rights and privileges were guaranteed by the Torah. Her position was better within the Biblical community than in any other contemporary community.³

Women in the Tabernacle, Temple and Synagogues

Much can be learned about the role and status of women by investigating their access to the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple), and the synagogues in the times before, during and after Y’shua’s life, until the destruction of the Second *Beit HaMikdash* in 70 C.E.

“Women served at the tent of meeting in the desert (**Exo. 38:8**), and at the Tabernacle at Shiloh (**1 Sam. 2:22**). We find them listed as Temple musicians (**1 Chron. 25:5-6**) and members of the choir (**2 Chron. 35:25**). Women could bring sacrifices as well as men, make religious vows, and attend all feasts and festivals if desired, but they were not obligated as their familial duties took precedence and were considered as equally sacred. However, every seven years, all the people – men, women, and children – had to ‘appear before the Lord’ as commanded in **Deut. 31:10-13**.”⁴

The Torah indicates women as well as men could bring their sacrifices to the Tabernacle. (**Vayikra (Lev) 1:2** “When any man of you brings an offering to YHVH...” The Hebrew word translated as “man” is *adam* meaning mankind, not just a male; it was not *ish* meaning a male. The offeror laid his or her hands on the head of the animal and cut its throat. (**Vayikra (Lev) 1:4-5**) So if a woman brought her own offering, she would be the one to lay her hands on the head of the animal and then cut its throat. Then the male priests would place the sacrifice on the altar.

“Women, like men, also brought voluntary sacrifices as signs of thanksgiving. When Hannah weans Samuel and brings him to Shiloh to devote him to service in the Tabernacle, she brings along bulls, flour and wine for an offering (**1 Sam. 1: 24-25**).”⁵

Other women were also present at the Tabernacle at Shiloh and included women who sang and danced at festivals, such as the feast of the Lord described in **Shoftim (Jud) 21:19-23**, and women who assembled and served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.⁶

In the Herodian Temple, standing at the time of Y’shua, there was a segregated area called *Ezrat Nashim* (Women’s Court). The Torah does not make any distinction of this court and it was given no special status in Jewish practice. There were no prohibitions regarding the women moving from

this court or restricting them only to this court. Only later rabbinic literature imposes such restrictions.⁷ But no references have been found to a Women's Court in the First Temple or the pre-Herodian Second Temple.⁸ Coupled with the fact that the Torah does not mention such a court, it seems this court may have been imposed by King Herod when he remodeled the Second Temple beginning in about 20 B.C.E. Perhaps under the Greco-Roman influence, King Herod intended for women to have a second-class status, something they did not have in Biblical practice.

Like men, women offered their sacrifices at the altar in the Priests' Court, passing through the Israelites' Court (the men's court) to reach the altar. A *baraita* says: "A woman was not seen in the [Priests'] Court unless she was bringing a sacrifice." From this it is evident that when women offered their sacrifices in the Temple, they *did* enter the Priests' Court. If, for instance, a woman offered a wave offering such as first fruits, she went up to the altar, waved the offering, and placed it beside the altar... The Nazirite's sacrifice was also waved in the Priests' Court (**Bamidar (Num) 6:1-21**), and rabbinic literature discusses theoretical *and actual* cases of women who were Nazirites.⁹

"Tannaitic material records that women often brought sacrifices to the Temple, for example, one dove as an offering for each bodily flux or miscarriage that they had experienced since their last visit. A woman, therefore, might have had to bring a number of doves as sacrifices... Women who brought animal sacrifices were, at least sometimes, allowed to participate in the ritual surrounding offering of the sacrifice. An eyewitness is reported to have seen women laying their hands on their animals to perform *smikhah* [slaughter] (TB Hag. 16b...) Women also brought sacrifices after the completion of a period of naziriteship. Like men, women could devote themselves to God through a Nazirite vow."¹⁰

"In ancient times the Synagogue (*beit ha-knesset* or, as it is also called in the sources, *beit ha-'edah*) constituted a center for the Jewish community. Here the Jewish congregation assembled, not only for worship of God but also for a wide variety of public activities. This congregation included men, women, and children."¹¹

"In various contexts, the sources repeatedly mention that the women in the community functioned in the synagogue and found their place within it. According to the Book of Acts, even while the Temple stood, Paul, when he was still called Saul of Tarsus, expected to find women among the congregants when he anticipated visiting the synagogue in Damascus to uncover those who were sinning, erring, and believing in the forbidden new church. [**Acts 9:2**] Later, as a follower of Jesus, Paul visited a synagogue in Salonika in modern day Greece where he drew the attention of the women with his sermons. [**Acts 17:1-4**] Important women were among the multitude that heard him preach. In all cases, it is clear to the author of Acts that it was natural for women to be found in the synagogue. The presence of women did not arouse any amazement or surprise."¹²

In this time frame, historical Judaism expected a woman to pray daily the prayer known as the *Shemoneh Esrei* (Eighteen Blessings) at least privately if not in a congregational setting, usually at the synagogue. When this prayer was recited publicly, ten individuals were required to create the prayer quorum called a *minyan*. Women **could** be counted as part of the ten comprising the *minyan*. The requirement of the *minyan* being **only males** did not occur until at least 500 CE.¹³ This was 500 years after the birth of Y'shua, 400 years after the last book of the Brit Chadashah (New Covenant Scriptures) was written. This rule was created and imposed by rabbinical Judaism over 350 years after the dispersion from *Eretz Yisrael* after Judaism had been influenced by the *goyim* (nations) among whom they had been scattered, particularly the Greek-influenced Roman Empire. There the man was king of his home and had the power of life or death over his wife and children who were but property to him.

Rabbinic literature contains many stories about women going to the Synagogue. They were permitted to say "Amen" in response to the priestly blessing. Especially on Shabbat, women and children attended the Synagogue. In the book of Acts, Rav Sha'ul met women in synagogues. Women attended synagogues to learn at the *beit midrash*, the house of study. She was excluded from the Synagogue only during the days of her menstruation and otherwise participated just as fully as the men.¹⁴

From statements in scholarly literature and from the presence of balconies in some ancient synagogues, arguments have been made that women were separated in the synagogues. However, rabbinic sources never make a connection between the physical structures of the synagogues and the separation of women. "Many ancient synagogues did not even have a second room or a balcony where women could be isolated." Scores of inscriptions have been found on synagogue entrances, gates, mosaic floors, and courtyards. Some even list the architectural components. "No inscription has come to light that mentions a woman's gallery." Furthermore, the earliest church buildings "have no structures that indicate a separation between men and women. ... It is likely that Jewish practice determined Christian practice."¹⁵

The Proverbs 31 Woman

One of my favorite scriptures, in honor of my beloved Mother and my dear wife, should be one of every believer's favorite scriptures - **Proverbs 31** - for it is such a liberating message from our loving Father to his children, both men and women.

Who can find a virtuous woman? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts in her, so he shall have need of nothing. She will do him good, not evil, all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works willingly with her hands. She is like the merchants' ships; she brings food from afar. She rises also while it is night, and gives meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens. She considers a field, and buys it: with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She girds her loins with strength, and strengthens her arms. She perceives that her merchandise is good: her candle does not go out at night. She puts her hands to the

spindle, and she holds her hands to the distaff. She stretches out her hand to the poor; and also to the needy she reaches out. She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household is clothed with scarlet. She makes herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land. She makes fine linen, and sells it; and delivers belts to the merchants. Strength and honor are her clothing; she shall rejoice in the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. She looks well to the ways of her household, and eats not the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her. Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all. Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman who fears the L-RD, she shall be praised. Give her the fruit of her labors; and let her works praise her at the gates. **Proverbs 31:10-31**
NAU

What a liberated and empowered woman she was! What diverse capabilities she displayed in the management of her household and her business affairs. Her husband safely trusted her for he had need of nothing. She had everything under control with total authority for the proper management of all domestic affairs for the benefit of her family. She was an independent businesswoman, selling the item she produced to local merchants. She actively participated in real estate and supervised her agricultural workers. Her thrift and wisdom assured the family would be provided for during hard times. As a result of her tremendous capabilities and empowering by her G-d and her husband, her family call her blessed and her husband praised her as excelling above all other women. She was a woman who feared YHVH and served him and his people, particularly her family. What more could a modern woman want? What more could a modern husband want in his wife?

Sometimes we are under the impression that this woman was a king's wife. We seem to believe the picture painted by the passage is an anomaly only found among the wealthy but we are wrong.

“Nowhere within the vast trove of Jewish Biblical commentary is there any exception taken to the picture herein painted of the woman and her activities. Indeed, this passage has been held up for centuries as the ideal to which Jewish women should aspire. It is evident from their history that the ‘Woman of Valor,’ far from being an isolated instance, was indeed the norm throughout the generations.”¹⁶

“Thus we have an authoritative portrait of the Biblical Woman which goes counter to many notions held today as to what the proper role of the woman was – and ought to be – according to Biblical traditions. Far from being subjugated or having her husband ‘in authority’ over her, she stood proudly at his side as his equal, as together they worked to live their lives in accordance with G-d’s will.”¹⁷

Some families have established a wonderful family tradition. The husband embraces his wife every *Erev Shabbat* (Friday evening as Sabbath begins), covering her with his *tallit* (prayer shawl, a symbol of your tent home and your prayer closet), as they together read or recite Proverbs 31. Doing so has had a tremendous positive influence in our home. I commend this tradition to all

Torah observant couples who want a strengthened marriage and family. Men, if you are not doing so, you, your wife and your children are missing a tremendous blessing from our loving Father.

Prophets and Judges

Forty-eight men and seven women prophets are mentioned in the Tanakh. The Hebrew word *nabi-ah* meaning prophetess is used in connection with three of them: Miryam (**Sh'mot (Exo) 15:20**), Devorah (**Shoftim (Jud) 4:4**) and Huldah (**2 Kings 22:14**). Sarah, Hannah, Abigail and Esther were added by the rabbis as prophets.

Miryam was used by YHVH to lead Yisrael during the exodus (**Micah 6:4**) and she became the first worship leader, singing and dancing with a tambourine. Miryam led the women of *Bnei Yisrael* (Children of Israel) in dancing and the entire nation in singing the praises of YHVH after the miraculous deliverance of Yisrael and the divine judgment upon Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea.¹⁸ (**Sh'mot (Exo) 15:20-21**)

“Devorah served her people as a prophetess, judge, and military commander. Abigail acted independently of her husband in aiding David and, when she was widowed, contracted her own marriage. Huldah was a prophetess and an adviser to King Josiah... Queen Esther saved her people from destruction and instituted ‘with full authority’ the observance of *Purim*, which is still celebrated by Jews today.”¹⁹

Hannah, with her prayer passion, intercession, dedication of her son and sacrifice of him to the service of YHVH, brought to Yisrael Shmu'el, the great judge and prophet.²⁰

Sarah made a prophetic statement by divine inspiration, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Yitzchak.” (**B'reshit (Gen) 21:10**) It was quoted by Rav Sha'ul in the Brit Chadashah in **Galatians 4:30 JNT** Nevertheless, what does the Tanakh say? “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for by no means will the son of the slave woman inherit along with the son of the free woman!”²¹

The Woman's Exemption

Throughout the Tanakh, the primary role of a Torah observant woman was as a wife and mother, the keeper of the home. Historical Judaism had great respect for the importance of that role. As a result, women were exempted from the “positive” commands (“you shall” commands) that were to be performed at a specific time of the day or year. The woman's duties as wife and mother were more important and could not be postponed. Surely a woman would not be expected to drop a crying baby at the time a positive command was to be performed.²²

Great misunderstanding of the role of women has arisen from this exemption. Some people mistakenly think this exemption was a prohibition, preventing women from participating in worship

and religious life. Some people actually think women had no role in religious life. They fail to realize that Biblical religious life, as demonstrated in the Tanakh, revolved around the home where the woman's role was certainly as important, if not more so, than her husband's.²³

Torah observant believers, who understand YHVH's Torah is the loving instructions of their heavenly Father, will understand that women, just as men, were to obey these loving instructions at all times. Only when their wifely and motherly duties were deemed to be more important could they be considered as exempt from any particular instruction that required them to be at a particular place at a point in time.

Contrast to Other Cultures' Treatment of Women

The woman portrayed in Proverbs 31 was not an isolated exception or only an aristocrat's wife. Biblical women enjoyed a life of liberty compared to the women of other cultures. And they were understood to be and accepted as equals with men for both were created in the image and likeness of their Father and Creator, YHVH. **B'reshit (Gen) 1:26-27**

“The rights and privileges of [Biblical] women were legislated in Torah as G-d-given ordinances, and formed an integral part of the social structure for hundreds of years. Unlike her sisters in the surrounding pagan cultures, she was respected, her personhood was equivalent to that of a man, and she was considered to be a co-worker with the Lord in the creation of new life.

“By contrast, in the Greco-Roman society of the inter-testamentary period, women had almost no rights. The Father, as household head, had the power of life and death over all family members – adults as well as minors. Almost all women were sequestered in their homes and rarely appeared in public. Their property rights were non-existent. Since only male children were valued, female infanticide was widely practiced. The social institutions – legal, religious, educational – all served to reinforce the status quo.

“As a result, Judaism was very attractive to women living in other societies; that vast numbers of them were proselytes is attested to by numerous references in the literature extant from that time period.”²⁴

Unlike Biblical women who participated in the full religious life of *Bnei Yisrael* (Children of Israel), to the extent that their wifely and motherly responsibilities did not prevent them, the women of pagan cultures were severely limited in their religious participation. Often their participation was only as facilitators or objects used by the male worshipers in their religious experiences.

“Many Greco-Roman religions limited access to their temples to initiates or placed limits on how far nonpriests could enter temples. Married women, for example, could not enter the Temple of Artemis. Religious leadership roles in the state cults

were generally reserved for men. The cults in which women played a leadership role, as priestesses or cultic functionaries, were strictly organized by the state to correspond to the social roles assigned to women, as wife and mother, and to the behavior expected of them, for example as a *univirai*, a woman who remained married to her first husband.”²⁵

Biblical women enjoyed rights and privileges of their equality far superior to women of other cultures. This was even true in the United States until the 20th century. And it remains true in comparison with most societies and cultures world-wide today.

“The position of women in *halakhah* (Jewish Law) that dates back to the biblical period is in many ways better than the position of women under US civil law as recently as a century ago. Many of the important feminist leaders of the 20th century (Gloria Steinem, for example) are Jewish women, and some commentators have suggested that this is no coincidence: the respect accorded to women in Jewish tradition was a part of their ethnic culture.”²⁶

III. WOMEN IN THE BRIT CHADASHAH - NOT IN LEADERSHIP

Y'shua's Attitude Towards and Relationships with Women

Tim Hegg, in his study entitled *The Role of Women in the Messianic Assembly*,²⁷ provides a concise view of Y'shua's respect for women and his relationships with them.

“These brief statements about the view of women in early Judaism set the stage for the Messiah and His interaction with women. In the Rabbinic debate of His day, He must have sided strongly with the minority opinion. The following are only some examples:

1. **John 11:5** Yeshua offered His friendship to women.
2. **Mark 14:9** Yeshua praised the work of Mary.
3. **John 4:7f** Yeshua spoke at length to a Samaritan woman, gave her the gospel, brought her to faith.
4. **Luke 7:13** Yeshua openly displayed His personal feelings for a woman in grief.
5. **Luke 8:1-3** Yeshua accepted women as His disciples who traveled with Him in His ministry team.
6. **John 8:3-5** Yeshua treated the woman caught in adultery as an equal person to those accusing her.
7. **Luke 13:16** Yeshua considered the worth of a woman as greater than the Pharisaic laws of the Sabbath.
8. **John 20:17** Yeshua entrusts to a woman the vital testimony of His resurrection.

The life of Yeshua as recorded in the Gospels is literally full of contacts with women— married, single, sinners and saints. But in each case He treats them as people of high value, fully capable of hearing His message and, by the Ruach, responding to it properly. He endorses their cause (collectively and individually), pleads their case, and enlists their energies for the work He Himself was engaged in. He gives unequaled praise to women.

- The life of Messiah teaches us that women are important to Him.
- The life of Messiah teaches us that women may be His disciples on an equal plane with men.

- The life of Messiah teaches us that women who have been born from above by the Ruach of God have a personal responsibility and privilege to serve God.”²⁸

In the first century times of Y’shua, “Women were very much exalted, protected, and respected in their roles in the home as wife and also, when they had the appropriate skills and anointing, in their roles as leaders in the community.”²⁹

“Women played a remarkable and notable role in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. He talked freely with women like the Samaritan woman. He healed women. The women were featured in many of his parables and also were the leading persons in several incidents in his life; like the woman with the hem of the garment or the widow who puts in a mite, he commends her for that. Or the Gentile Siro-Phoenician woman who comes and asks for him to heal her daughter.”³⁰

Women As *Talmidim*

Are you aware that women were included among the *talmidim* (students, disciples, followers) of Y’shua HaMashiach? Some even traveled with the group, following their Torah teacher, Y’shua, as he traveled through Eretz Yisrael proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of YHVH. They were probably listening carefully to his teachings, living according to Torah and, perhaps, serving their fellow *talmidim* in the ways that women do best such as with the cooking.

After this, Yeshua traveled about from town to town and village to village, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God. With him were the Twelve, 2 and a number of women who had been healed from evil spirits and illnesses – Miryam (called Magdalit), from whom seven demons had gone out; 3 Yochanah the wife of Herod’s finance minister Kuza; Shoshanah; and many other women who drew on their own wealth to help him. **Luke 8:1-3 JNT**

In the Brit Chadashah, women are portrayed as active members of Y’shua’s movement who could truly be called his disciples. In Hebrew, disciples is *talmidim*, which means “students” or “pupils” while apostles is *shalichim*, which means messengers and connotes one who has authority and singled out for additional responsibilities. So among Y’shua’s *talmidim*, the *shalichim* (apostles) were a subset with special missions of service.³¹

“In the Jewish culture of Jesus’ day, the disciple, or student, left home to study with his or her teacher, either in one location or following the teacher if he traveled about. In Hebrew, there are two ways of saying one is a student. The first is to make the simple statement and the second is to use an idiom that means ‘to sit at the feet of.’”³²

With that information in mind, consider the relationship between Miryam and Marta, the sisters of Lazarus.

On their way Yeshua and his talmidim came to a village where a woman named Marta welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister called Miryam who also sat at the Lord's feet and heard what he had to say. 40 But Marta was busy with all the work to be done; so, going up to him, she said, "Sir, don't you care that my sister has been leaving me to do all the work by myself?" 41 However, the Lord answered her, "Marta, Marta, you are fretting and worrying about so many things! 42 But there is only one thing that is essential. Miryam has chosen the right thing, and it won't be taken away from her." **Luke 10: 38-42 JNT**

From verse 39 we learn that Miryam was a *talmid* (disciple, student, follower) of Y'shua because of the presence of the idiom, "Miryam ... sat at the Lord's feet and heard what he had to say." Recognizing that Miryam was a disciple who followed Y'shua as he traveled, explains why Marta complained that her sister had been leaving her to do all the work of keeping the house by herself. In response Y'shua commends Miryam for doing the right thing. In fact, such situations of women seeking certain scholars and studying with them was reported in the Jewish traditions from the same period.³³

The presence of women in the group of *talmidim* following Y'shua is understandable from Jewish sources dating from that time. For the benefit of the group as a whole, each *talmid* had a task to perform. Women prepared the food in the community so were necessarily included in the *talmidim* accompanying Y'shua. The decision of Miryam to follow Y'shua (to sit at his feet) and Y'shua's response to Marta's complaint would not have been considered unusual at all. In general, the inclusion of women in the *talmidim* was considered so normal that no contemporaneous writers ever commented upon the mixed genders traveling with Y'shua.³⁴

The presence of women among the *talmidim* was confirmed in the account of the crucifixion.

There were women looking on from a distance; among them were Miryam from Magdala, Miryam the mother of the Younger Ya'akov and of Yosi, and Shlomit. 41 These women had followed him and helped him when he was in the Galil. And many other women were there who had come up with him to Yerushalayim. **Mark 15:40-41 JNT.** (cf. **Mattityahu 27:55 and Luke 23:49, 55-56** for their intention to give Y'shua a proper burial.)

And women *talmidim*, Miryam from Magdala and the other Miryam, were the first to see the empty tomb immediately after the resurrection. The resurrected Y'shua HaMashiach spoke first to these women *talmidim* and commissioned them to proclaim to the other *talmidim* that he was risen. (**Mattityahu 28:1-10, cf. Yochanan 20:1, 14-18**).

The Prophet Yo'el had prophesied that YHVH would pour out his spirit (the Ruach HaKodesh) upon both men and women (**Yoel 2:28-32**). Following the death of Y'shua, his mixed-gender *talmidim*

awaited the fulfilling of this prophecy in Yerushalayim. “These all devoted themselves single-mindedly to prayer, along with some women, including Miryam (Y’shua’s mother), and his brothers.” **Acts 1:14 JNT** So the female *talmidim* were also present to witness and participate in the great outpouring of the Ruach HaKodesh that occurred on Shavuot (Pentecost) at the Temple Mount.

There can be no doubt that women in the time of Y’shua, particularly women in his company of *talmidim* following him as he traveled and listening to his teaching the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven, played an important role that was vital to the success of Y’shua’s ministry.

The Priesthood of All Believers

As all good students of the Torah recognize, the *Kohanim* (priests) were all males as were the *Levi'im* who managed and maintained the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple) and assisted the *Kohanim*. Unfortunately, that fact has been used far too often as the basis for keeping women from any form of leadership in the church and the Messianic community.

As demonstrated above, women as well as men could bring their sacrifices to the *Mishkan* and the *Beit HaMikdash*. But all the sacrificial offerings ceased when the Second *Beit HaMikdash* was destroyed in 70 CE. Sacrificial offerings could not be offered at any other location than the place where YHVH put his name, Yerushalayim. The termination of the sacrifices was accompanied by the termination of the male-only *Kohanim* and their *Levi'im* assistants.

In the Brit Chadashah, the priesthood was expanded to include both men and women. Rav Kefa (Peter) declared all believers to be “a holy priesthood,” the *Kohanim* (priests) serving YHVH.

As you come to him [Y’shua], the living stone, rejected by people but chosen by God and precious to him, 5 you yourselves, as living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be *cohanim* set apart for God to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to him through Y’shua the Messiah. **1 Kefa (Peter) 2:4-5 JNT**

The Messianic community of the first century consisted of male and female believers. Each was expected to be exercising the ministry YHVH had given them by the Ruach HaKodesh. It was a partnership of men and women working side-by-side in various functions and ministries, empowered with the gifts of the Ruach HaKodesh that he had bestowed on each one according to his sovereign will.³⁵ (See **1 Corinthians 12:7-13**)

Ministry and Functions

Based upon that statement, and as a preface to the next section on leadership, consider the following thoughts regarding “ministry” that are based upon the Biblical examples of Y’shua’s *talmidim* and the many servants of YHVH portrayed throughout the Tanakh.

Ministry is what every follower of Y'shua does because he is Y'shua's *talmidim*. Ministry is **not** just some one job that one decides to do, day in and day out, over and over again, and one calls "my ministry." Why do I say that? Because all who are Torah observant believers are called and privileged to be the servants the King of the Universe, YHVH, carrying out his ministry.

Consider a Biblical King reigning over his kingdom. In Yisrael, he probably had a vineyard in which his servants carried out various functions but it was probably not their only place of service throughout the course of the year. Rather, as the King needed to have something done on any particular day, he would probably instruct his chief servants to have his servants carry out various functions that day. One day it might be to cultivate the vineyards. Another day it might be to prune the vines. Another day might be harvest time in which some servants would carry out the function of cutting the grapes from the vines while others functioned as carriers of the grapes to the pits. Some servants would function as stompers of grapes one day, while functioning as fillers of casks or skins another day, and transporters of skins on yet another day.

The key to this illustration is this - the servant never decided what he needed to do, what function he would fulfill. The King or his chief servants assigned the function based upon the needs of the day. Nor did the servant isolate one task, decide to specialize in it, and tell the King he would only do that special task. No, the servants of the King were always ready, willing, and able to do whatever functions the King wanted them to do on any particular day.

So it is in the Kingdom of YHVH. Our loving Father, by the Ruach HaKodesh, determines what needs to be done on any particular day. That is his ministry through his servants. He sets divine appointments so the needs of his Kingdom and the King's people will be met in his time and his way. He decides who does what and when on a daily basis. All that we do is his ministry. If we are submitted as his *talmidim*, we submit ourselves and our wills to his will and his daily direction by the Ruach HaKodesh. We don't define our speciality, call it "my ministry," and refuse divine assignments unless they fit in our "ministry."

If one wants to be out on his own, out from the covering of the King of the Universe, one does have free will to walk in his own way apart from the will of the King. He can decide that a particular speciality is "The ministry I am called to do." He can demand G-d bless him in all he thinks he is doing for G-d because he just knows his "ministry" is exactly what he is supposed to be doing. If you are ever tempted to be wilful and walk in your own way and declare your own "ministry" and expect G-d to bless it, be very careful. If you are not a servant who can respond promptly to the daily call of the Ruach HaKodesh to do whatever function within his Kingdom he asks you to do to fulfill his ministry, you might want to check your status as his *talmidim*.

The functions of the Messianic community were filled by men and women together as the loving Father empowered to them and enabled them to fulfill his ministry. They did not declare for themselves a "women's ministry" or a "children's ministry" or a "singing ministry" or a "healing ministry" that they would pursue. No, they willingly served as the servants of their King and carried out the functions as they were led by the Ruach HaKodesh to meet the need within the community.

IV. WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES IN THE BRIT CHADASHAH

Overview of Leadership

Leadership must be distinguished from the ministry all *talmidim* of Y'shua have in carrying out the day-to-day functions needed within the Messianic community. While all *talmidim* are to be servants in the ministry of our King, functioning to benefit his Kingdom and his people, not all *talmidim* are leaders.

True leaders rise to the needs as they are called by the King. They do not force themselves into positions and exert control over others. Rather, they are like whole milk before it is the cream is taken off or it homogenized. When whole milk, just like it comes from the cow and not the square bottle or box, sits for a while, the cream naturally rises to the top. If the cream is skimmed off, you have skimmed milk remaining. If it is broken down into small particles and thoroughly mixed up, it is homogenized milk. In the Messianic community walking according to Torah, the leaders will be drawn to leadership by the call of the King through the Ruach HaKodesh. When they emerge they will be recognized by the community as leaders. And as leaders, they never lose their positions as servants and must never use their positions to rule over others like nobleman or lords.

The process of leadership development and recognition occurs in stages for both men and women. First, the King by the Ruach HaKodesh places a call on the future leader's life so that he/she has the desire to be a servant leader. If one desires to be a leader of the King's servants, he desires a good work. (**1 Timothy 3:1**) And being a servant leader is hard work and without the call and the desire, it will not be done well. Second, the King bestows the skills that will be necessary to carry out the work of leading his fellow servants. Third, the King gives his anointing, his blessing, his identification, his authorization to act on his behalf as a servant leader. And finally, the King provides the empowering that is necessary to do the work of being a servant leader.

If a person thinks that they are to be a servant leader, they had better have the call, the skills, the anointing, and the empowering of the King before they begin to act as a servant leader. If they lack these gifts from the King, they may be filling an office, have a position or a title, but they are not a servant leader for the King of Kings.

Since the third or fourth century, in Christianity the so-called leaders, the churchmen, have often been filling offices with warm bodies rather than finding true servants who will function and do the work of the Kings ministry. They have preferred to play politics or curry favors rather than select true servant leaders who G-d has called, given skills, anointed and empowered.

Women in Leadership

Throughout the Brit Chadashah women are seen exercising their faith, their empowering gifts and skills bestowed by YHVH, as they had opportunity. At the upper room, Jewish women were present (**Acts 1:14, 2:4**) and Gentile women were present in the home of Cornelius (**Acts 10:24, 27, 44**) where those assembled were receiving the baptism of the Ruach HaKodesh that empowered all present to evangelize by sharing with others the gospel of Y'shua. (**Acts 1:8**)

“Why would God give women the power to minister and then deny them the opportunity to use it? *He wouldn't and he didn't.* In the pure apostolic first century church, women could exercise all gifts of the spirit, and they did!³⁶

As we study the Brit Chadashah regarding women in leadership roles, I believe we shall see fulfilled, in women as well as men, what is described by Rav Sha'ul as true servant leaders for the Messianic community.

Furthermore, he gave some people as emissaries (apostle), some as prophets, some as proclaimers of the Good News (evangelists), and some as shepherds (pastors) and teachers. 12 Their task is to equip God's people for the work of service that builds the body of the Messiah, 13 until we all arrive at the unity implied by trusting and knowing the Son of God, at full manhood, at the standard of maturity set by the Messiah's perfection. **Ephesians 4:11-13 JNT**

Note that these each of these servant leaders, though their functions may be different, has a common goal and objective. They are all to be equipping G-d's people, the King's servants, for the work that builds up the body of the Messiah, the Messianic community, the Kingdom of G-d.

Recall the story above about the King, his chief servants, and his servants working together in the vineyard. We can analogize Rav Sha'ul instructions to that story. The servant leaders he mentions are like the King's chief servants. They equip the other servants and provide the proper training, guidance and example. The servants then carry out the various functions that the King wants accomplished each day as each servant is lead by the Ruach HaKodesh. The servant leaders continue to provide the equipping and training necessary for each servant to faithfully function for the benefit of the Kingdom.

As Rav Sha'ul states, the servants as a whole are to build up the body of the Messiah. The servants of YHVH, male and female, are themselves the body of the Messiah. The Messianic community is to have a body life. We are all together as members of the body. Every member of the body of Messiah, male and female, is to function for the benefit of the whole body. The leaders are to be equipping, training, counseling, coordinating activities, and assisting in any way the servants need so they can do whatever the Father wants them to do.

Rav Sha'ul states the process of equipping the servants for service is to continue until the body of Messiah, the entire Messianic community, attains full maturity. That maturity will be evidenced by

our trusting, faithful obedience to the Torah of YHVH, the loving instructions of our Heavenly Father. The task of these servant leaders and the servants will not be complete until the body of Messiah is as obedient to Torah as Y'shua was; he perfectly obeyed the Father's Torah and his perfection is the standard for measuring our maturity. Only when the King of Kings is enthroned in the heart of every person, the Torah is written upon their hearts, and all are making living sacrifices of themselves to him will there be no need for the servants of the King to carry out his ministry with the assistance of the servant leaders Rav Sha'ul described.

Note that Rav Sha'ul did not intend for the servant leaders to do the work of the King alone. So if there are leaders who are not equipping the servants but are trying to do all of the work by themselves (or with a staff that they have assembled), consider carefully whether they are servant leaders according to the Biblical pattern. Upon closer examination you may find that they are not called, skilled, anointed, or empowered. Rather they have a title to wear and they retain it for the sake of perpetuating their own personal power, prestige, position and pay.

Consider now how women have been called, skilled, anointed and empowered by YHVH through the Ruach HaKodesh to serve him in various aspects of leadership that have been typically and erroneously considered as for men only.

Apostle

One woman is named as an apostle. Rav Sha'ul wrote in **Romans 16:7 JNT** Greetings to Andronicus and Junia, relatives of mine who were in prison with me. They are well known among the emissaries (apostles); also they came to trust in the Messiah before I did.

“From the 13th century, on this text has read Junias with an “s” on the end. It was a desperate attempt to take a feminine name which was very common in this period, Junia, and make it into the masculine form. The problem is that we have no precedent whatsoever for the male name, Junias. And in the earlier manuscripts it is not there. It is Junia. Junia is a woman, it is a common woman's name of this period.”³⁷

“Andronicus and Junia are apostles. ... An apostle is simply a sent-out-one sent with a special message or commission with the authority of the community behind him. Junia is an apostle.”³⁸

Further confirmation of this understanding is available.

“There is no evidence contrary to the understanding that Paul is referring to a woman, however. In fact, this person is referred to as a woman by John Chrysostom and Jerome. Catherine Kroeger has concluded that indeed early tradition considered Junia an apostle and it was not until the Middle Ages that this identity was questioned. In the Middle Ages a male-oriented church hierarchy could not conceive of a female apostle. The named Junia was changed to the masculine form Junias by

translators and appears as such in manuscripts from that time on. This is in spite of the fact that the masculine form is ‘unknown in antiquity, and there is absolutely no literary, epigraphical, or papyrological evidence for it.’”³⁹

These are simply stunning statements the significance of which should not be lost or glossed over. Rav Sha’ul names a woman, Junia, as one of the apostles, an ambassador or emissary, one who was sent out with a special message or commission with the authority of the Messianic community behind her. The churchmen were so opposed to the idea of a female apostle and they changed her name, a common female name, to a male form of the name. But they did not know, or they did not care, that there is absolutely no evidence that any man ever had the name they used, Junias. But now we know the depths to which the churchmen will stoop, even to changing the very text of the Word of YHVH, to keep women subordinate to them and out of any place of leadership.

For the Messianic community, these statements should be sufficient evidence that women did participate in the leadership of the Messianic community and more entrusted with responsibilities in the same way that the men were. They should also fully justify the inclusion of women whom YHVH by the Ruach HaKodesh has called, skilled, anointed and empowered to serve him as servant leaders in the body of Messiah.

Prophet

A prophet was one who was called, skilled, anointed and empowered by the Ruach HaKodesh of YHVH to proclaim an inspired revelation, to tell about something that is hidden from view, and to foretell something that lies in the future. Both men and women were given the gift of prophecy. A female prophet was called a prophetess from the Greek word *prophetis*.

In the Brit Chadashah, the first reported female prophet was Chanah bat-P’nu’el (Anna the daughter of Phanuel) who was present at the Pidyon-HaBen (redemption of the firstborn son) of Y’shua and the purification of his mother after childbirth that took place at the Second *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple) in Yerushalayim. After the prophet, Shim’on (Simeon) prophesied over the baby Y’shua, Chanah also prophesied about the Y’shua as Luke reports.

There was also a prophet [Greek *prophetis*] named Chanah bat-P’nu’el, of the tribe of Asher. She was a very old woman - she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage and had remained a widow ever since; now she was eighty-four. She never left the Temple grounds but worshiped there night and day, fasting and praying. She came by at that moment and began thanking God and speaking about the child to everyone who was waiting for Yerushalayim to be liberated [redeemed].

Luke 2:36-38

Clearly Chanah as a prophetess was involved every day and night in the leadership of *Bnei Yisrael* (Children of Israel) who came to the *Beit HaMikdash* to draw near to YHVH with their praises and

offerings. The importance of Chanah's role as a prophetess was demonstrated by Luke's inclusion of her and her speaking about Y'shua in his report.

Luke also reported about four female prophets in **Acts 21:8-9 JNT** where we wrote – Philip the proclaimer of the Good News, one of the Seven, ... had four unmarried daughters with the gift of prophecy.

In the Greek manuscripts, the female, plural form of the verb *propheteuo* (to prophesy) is used to describe what these young women did, just as described in the first paragraph above.

In verse **21:10**, Luke further reported that Rav Sha'ul remained in the home of Philip and his virgin daughters, the prophetesses, for “many days.”

If Rav Sha'ul had any objections to these ladies functioning as female prophets, as the Ruach HaKodesh had called, skilled, anointed and empowered them to prophesy, surely he would have rebuked and reprovved them as well as their father for allowing them to prophesy. Or Rav Sha'ul might have written in his letters to the churches that women were not qualified to prophesy. Yet Rav Sha'ul made no objection known, either to Philip and his daughters or to the Messianic community in his letters. Seems like Rav Sha'ul must have approved of women prophesying.

In fact, Rav Sha'ul implicitly approved of women prophesying by his statement in **1 Corinthians 11:5 JNT** “... every woman who prays or prophesies...” Rav Sha'ul took no issue with women praying or prophesying in public - only with them doing so without their heads being covered. Thus Rav Sha'ul confirmed his acceptance of women who are used by their Father to speak forth his Word to his people.

A fascinating description of YHVH's use of female prophets is found in **Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah) 9:17-20**.

Thus says YHVH of hosts, “Consider and call for the mourning women, that they may come; and send for the wailing [Hebrew means wise, skilled] women, that they may come! Let them make haste and take up a wailing [lamentation, mourning song, dirge] for us, that our eyes may shed tears and our eyelids flow with water. For a voice of wailing is heard from Zion, ‘How are we ruined! We are put to great shame, for we have left the land, because they have cast down our dwellings.’” Now hear the word of YHVH, O you women, and let your ear receive the word of his mouth; teach your daughters wailing, and everyone her neighbor a dirge.

YHVH instructed Yirmeyahu to call for women to assist him in prophesying and proclaiming about the future of Zion and Bnei Yisrael (Children of Israel). These women were called, skilled, anointed and empowered by the Ruach HaKodesh to prophesy in a most unusual way. They were to wail their lamentations and sing songs or dirges of mourning. In so doing, they were assisting Yirmeyahu in prophesying. By their example, they were also calling on *Bnei Yisrael* (Children of Israel) to humble themselves, to cry and mourn about their future that would result from their disobedience

to the Torah, the loving instructions of their Father. And these skilled women were to be teachers, teaching their daughters and their neighbors how to wail and sing dirges to aid Yirmeyahu in prophesy.

Elder (Pastor) and Teacher

Because of the typical English translations by churchmen with positions to maintain, another opportunity to understand the true status and role of women and their functions in the Messianic community has been lost.

In **Titus 1:5**, Rav Sha'ul reminded Titus that he left him in Crete to “appoint elders in every city.” The Greek word here for elders is *presbuteros*. Rav Kefa, and Yochanan identified themselves as “elders” in **1 Kefa (Peter) 5:1**, **2 Yochanan 1:1**, and **3 Yochanan 1:1**. In all three cases the Greek word translated to English as “elder” was *presbuteros*.

In **Titus 1:6-9** Rav Sha'ul listed the qualifications for the elders, *presbuteros*, Titus was to appoint in every city of Crete. In verse 7, Rav Sha'ul changed the word he was using for such men to “overseers,” the Greek word for which is *episkopos*. But there is no indication that Rav Sha'ul was referring to any different men than those in verse 6. The terms *presbuteros* and *episkopos* are interchangeable.

In the next eight verses, Rav Sha'ul seems to have inserted a parenthetical statement (as we say in Texas, he chased a rabbit down a trail) about evil men that must be refuted and corrected.

When he resumed describing the qualifications for the men to be appointed, Rav Sha'ul provided further instructions in

“Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance. 3 Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, 4 so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, 5 to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored.” **Titus 2:2-5 NAS**

In this continuing list of qualifications, once again Rav Sha'ul changed the Greek word he was using for such persons to *presbutes* (a shortened version of *presbuteros*). The translators have chosen to interpret this word as “older men” instead of “elders.” But these are the same men Rav Sha'ul was referring to earlier. In the context of the entire passage, beginning with the instruction to appoint men in 1:5 and continuing through 2:2, Rav Sha'ul was referring to the same men who were to have the same function in the Messianic community in Crete. Rav Sha'ul simply closed his parenthetical statement in verse 2:1, and, beginning in verse 2:2, he resumed and then concluded the list of qualifications for these very same men (variously called *presbuteros*, *episkopos*, and *presbutes*).

That the hierarchical and episcopal traditions of the translators has been allowed to bias their translation is evidenced by their choice of different words (elders, overseers, older men) for the very same men. They do this to support their positions and traditions regarding congregational leadership. As a result of their biased translations, the readers are confused. But even more to their liking, women are put in their place, excluded from the leadership of the Messianic community.

In verse 2:3, the words “older women” are derived from the Greek word *presbutis*, the female form of *presbutes*, the shortened version of *presbuteros*. If the men in verse 2:2 were *presbutes* (also known as *presbuteros*, *episkopos*), then logically the women *presbutis* in verse 3 were the female counterparts of the *presbuteros*, and the *episkopos*. And as the males were called “elders,” we may reasonably conclude that these women were also “elders” of the female gender.

The qualifications of these female elders, not separate qualifications but in addition to those previously listed for the male elders, were set out by Rav Sha’ul in verse 2:3 revised as “Female elders likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good.

Rav Sha’ul also set out the additional special duties for the female elders, particularly in relationship to women whom they were better qualified to serve than male elders, in verses 2:4 and 2:5. “So that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, 5 to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of G-d will not be dishonored.”

Not to be overlooked is the fact that Rav Sha’ul expected these women, the female elders, to be both teachers (“teaching what is good”)and encouragers (“encourage the young women”). These are the same functions he had specified in **Ephesians 4:11** for the elders - the pastors and teachers - who were to be equipping the servants for the work as servants for the building up of the body of the Messiah. This combination of tasks confirms that Rav Sha’ul was talking about females as elders and not as merely as harmless, sweet “older women” as the churchmen would like.

Evangelist

For so long we have been led by churchmen to believe that only men were evangelists, sharing the good news of the life of Y’shua and salvation in him and bringing them to know Y’shua. This erroneous believer overlooks the fact that women were evangelists in their own right.

In fact, Chanah bat-P’nu’el (Anna) was not only a prophetess, as we described above, but she was also an evangelist. Following on the heels of the recorded statements of Shim’on (Simeon), she also proclaimed about Y’shua to those awaiting the redemption of Yerushalayim by him. Certainly this sharing of the good news of the future life and redemption in Y’shua would qualify as evangelism and make Chanah the first female evangelist in the Brit Chadashah.

Recall the story of the Samaritan woman with whom Y'shua spoke at Ya'akov's well about his living water. She was certainly an evangelist as Yochanan reported:

So the woman left her water-jar, went back to the town and said to the people there,
29 "Come, see a man who told me everything I've ever done. Could it be that this
is the Messiah?" 30 They left the town and began coming toward him. **Yochanan
(John) 4:29-30 JNT.**

Prior to the revelation of Y'shua on the road to Damascus, Rav Sha'ul persecuted both men and women who were evangelists because they were proclaiming the good news of Y'shua HaMashiach. Luke reported:

But Sha'ul set out to destroy the Messianic community – entering house after house,
he dragged off both men and women and handed them over to be put in prison. 4
However, those who were scattered announced the Good News of the Word
wherever they went. **Acts 8:3, 4 JNT.**

So by persecuting these evangelists, both men and women, for sharing the good news, Rav Sha'ul was demonstrating that women, as well as men, were evangelists, bearers of the good news of the restoration of the Kingdom of YHVH that Y'shua had proclaimed to his people.

Deacon

A deacon (Greek *diakonos*) was (1) one who served as an intermediary in a transaction, an agent, intermediary, or courier and (2) one who got something done at the behest of a superior or an assistant. In the Messianic community the deacons were the ones who carried out these tasks as true servant leaders. The seven men appointed by the Apostles to meet the physical needs of the growing Messianic community were examples of deacons. They were called, skilled, anointed and empowered by the Ruach HaKodesh and recognized by the community as servants and leaders through the laying on of hands.

Rav Sha'ul wrote to the body of Messiah, the Messianic community living in Rome. In this letter, he introduced to this Messianic community a person who was important to him for having been a big help to many people. That important person was a woman. Rav Sha'ul used *diakonos* as a significant, specific word to describe this woman in order to demonstrate that she was a servant leader in the Messianic community and she should be received with respect as such.

I am introducing to you our sister Phoebe, *shammash* of the congregation at Cenchrea, 2 so that you may welcome her in the Lord, as God's people should, and give her whatever assistance she may need from you; for she has been a big help to many people – including myself. **Romans 16:1-2 JNT**

David Stern has used the Hebrew word, *shammash*, in this translation. In his Jewish New Testament Commentary he rightfully asserts that the Greek word “*diakonos*,” meaning “runner of errands,”

“[I]s a technical term denoting someone ordained to a recognized office in the congregation and having the duty of caring for its practical affairs, as at Acts 6:6. The usual English term for this office is “deacon,” which transliterates the Greek word; and the closest Hebrew equivalent is “*shammash*” (Yiddish “*shammes*”), the person who handles the day-to-day practical tasks of keeping a synagogue going. In an age where feminism is an issue, it should be noted not only that this woman held a prominent office in the Cenchronean congregation, but that the word “*diakonos*” is a masculine, not a feminine, form. Phoebe was a “deacon,” not a “deaconess” (as some English versions render the word).”⁴⁰ [Italics added.]

“Most scholars believe that it was actually Phoebe who is carrying this letter of Paul to the church at Rome. He entrusted it with her and gave her instructions regarding it.”⁴¹ That Phoebe was entrusted with carrying Rav Sha’ul’s letter to the Messianic community in Rome would agree with the root meaning of “*diakonos*” - “runner of errands” or “courier.” This confirms that Phoebe was a servant leader of the Messianic community in whom Rav Sha’ul placed great trust.

Rav Sha’ul wrote letters to his son in the faith, Timothy. In one, Rav Sha’ul described the qualifications for servant leaders, *diakonos* or *shammashim* [deacons]. Those qualifications also seem to include the female servant leaders.

Likewise, the *shammashim* must be of good character, people whose word can be trusted. They must not give themselves to excessive drinking or be greedy for dishonest gain. 9 They must possess the formerly hidden truth of the faith with a clean conscience. 10 And first, let them be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them be appointed *shammashim*. **1 Timothy 3:8-10 JNT**

Notice that in these verses there is no reference to the gender of these servant leaders. Some translators (the New American Standard and the New International Version among others) have misled the readers by inserting “men.” This is a good example of the dishonesty of some translators of the Word of YHVH who work to make it mean what they want in order to support their position.

Notice also the next verse **1 Timothy 3:11 JNT** Similarly, the wives must be of good character, not gossips, but temperate, faithful in everything.

Here David Stern has chosen to translate the Greek word as wives while it can also mean women. The New American Standard translation of this verse - “Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things” - confirms that using “women” to translate the Greek word *diakonos* is also appropriate in this case.

Based on the context (1) the general topic of the qualifications of those who are called, skilled, anointed and empowered to serve and lead in the Messianic communities, and (2) specifically verses

8-10 listing the qualifications for those persons, male or female, who would serve the communities, we may reasonably conclude that verse 11 simply expands the qualifications for female deacons, in addition to those in verses 8-10.

Support for this understanding is provided by Peter A. Michas in his work, *Christianity's Misconceptions of Women*.⁴²

“In context, **1 Timothy 3:11** shows that even the women are held to high standards when they serve the body of believers in the role of Deaconess. Robertson agrees that this refers to ‘women as deacons’ (**Romans 16:1** about Phoebe), and not women in general or just “wives of deacons”.⁴³

This well reasoned and logical understanding of the passage serves as a further confirmation of the role of women who filled this important function in the Messianic community. Additional confirmation is provided by a Greek word that Rav Sha’ul uses in **1 Timothy 3:13**, “*diakonesantes*, which includes both male and female, deacon and deaconess.”⁴⁴

V. OTHER EVIDENCE OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Archaeological Evidence of Women in Leadership

The Scriptures cited and discussed above describe the role and status of women in the First Century Messianic community and their equality with their male counterparts. As believers who trust our loving Father, rely upon his written word and accept it as his declaration of truth and instructions, this should be sufficient evidence for our trusting, faithful obedience. It should be enough for us to put aside our prejudices and pagan ways and see each other, men and women, as our Father sees us, united in Y'shua HaMashiach and equals.

But, in his infinite wisdom, YHVH knew his word would not be enough evidence to convince those who claim to follow him to actually do so. Because of his love for all his children, male and female, our loving Father also left physical evidence that can be explored and analyzed. Such analysis serves as an additional witness to the truth of the equality of women as servant leaders in the community

“Archeological studies have shown that women served in many capacities in the synagogue. There are numerous inscriptional evidences of women donors to the synagogue and the honor they were given. That Jewish women served in leadership positions is evident from inscriptions denoting these functions. Bernadette Brooten has made an extensive study of archeological inscriptions and has noted evidence for such leadership roles among women as:

1. Head of synagogue: *archisynagogos*, whose function was in administration and exhortation.
2. Leader: *archegissa*, derived from *archegos*.
3. Elder: *presbytera*, with no indication that they were the wives of elders; may have been involved in financial oversight of the synagogue and/or have been scholars.
4. Mother of the Synagogue: *meter synagoges*, from second century C.E. and later; their function may have had to do with administration.
5. Member of the Priestly Class: *hiereia/hierissa*, perhaps equivalent to the rabbinic כַּהֲנָנִית - [*kehunnah* (priesthood)].”⁴⁵

This quote only skims the surface of the archaeological evidence available to those who would view it as YHVH's additional evidence. Bernadette Brooten is the foremost researcher in this field. Her outstanding book, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogues: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*⁴⁶, documents well the equality of men and women as servant leaders based upon

archaeological evidence that spans “from 27 B.C.E. to perhaps the sixth century C.E. and in provenance from Italy to Asia Minor, Egypt and Palestine.”⁴⁷

Post-Brit Chadashah Women in Leadership

Some women, who lived after the Brit Chadashah was written, should be mentioned as servant leaders in their own right based upon the written, historical record outside the Brit Chadashah.

“There were many learned women of note. The Talmud and later rabbinical writings speak of the wisdom of Berurya, the wife of Rabbi Meir. In several instances, her opinions on *halakhah* (Jewish Law) were accepted over those of her male contemporaries. In the *ketubah* (marriage contract) of Rabbi Akiba’s son, the wife is obligated to teach the husband Torah! Many rabbis over the centuries have been known to consult their wives on matters of Jewish law relating to the woman’s role, such as laws of *kashrut* and women’s periods. The wife of a rabbi is referred to as a *rebbetzin*, practically a title of her own, which should give some idea of her significance in Jewish life.”⁴⁸ [Italics added.]

VI. CONCLUSION

Dwight A. Pryor, at the close of his two-tape audio teaching, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church & Synagogue*, summarizes so well the totality of the status and role of women in the First Century Messianic community.

“I must summarize. All have been created in the image of God. Or said philosophically, we all have ontological equality. In the realm of being, we are all equal. And in Christ there is neither male nor female. We have spiritual equality. In the Old Testament, in rabbinic periods, and in the New Testament, women served in strong leadership roles. They were prophets, rulers, judges, advisers, heads of synagogues, rabbis, elders, deaconesses, apostles, evangelists, teachers. Women served in varied and various ministerial functions, not offices, functions in response to the need and anointing upon them. Their dominant role/function was that of wife and mother. But this did not exclude them from other functions as they were able and equipped and anointed to do so.

“Pure marriage was seen as a partnership characterized by mutuality of submission; her respect for him and his love for her; a voluntary subordinating of one’s will in deference to the one who loves and cares for you above all others. The New Testament, then, affirms the equality of women and men and gives clear precedence for women serving in leadership positions.

“What does this mean in practical application? Find ways, as appropriate, for women to serve. Every congregation is autonomous, the situations vary from place to place, circumstance to circumstance. But don’t be hindered by tradition and barriers limiting what functions women can serve in the church. Remember, the New Testament model is a model of a servant, not a ruler. It is a model of function, not office. The primary issue in the early church wasn’t the issue of authority, it was the issue of service. The emphasis was on God’s gifts and functions, not on organization and ruling. Each congregation under the influence of the Holy Spirit should be open to women, as well as men, serving in that gifts and skills that they have as the Holy Spirit anoints them to do so.

“So I conclude by saying, the church historically has been a Potters Field in which the talents of women have been buried. It is time to restore the full biblical perspective to the structure and functions of the church, including the full utilization of women in the church in response to their gifts and anointing and recognition of the needs and judgment of the congregation. Amen.”⁴⁹

I beseech you, my beloved brothers and sisters who have the same Father, YHVH, who serve the same Messiah, Savior and Redeemer, Y’shua HaMashiach, and who are guided by the same Ruach HaKodesh to follow our Father’s loving instructions.

Let us unite in our Messiah and see each other as our loving Father does - as equals. Let us go forward in our Messianic communities as brother and sisters. Let us be submitted, obedient servants of the King of Kings, ministering to and building up the body of Messiah. If we are not leaders, let us seek out and serve together with true servant leaders, men and women who our King by the Ruach HaKodesh has called, skilled, anointed and empowered.

May we, as living members, be joined together and built up into the one body of Y'shua HaMashiach. May we, his chosen bride, be properly cleansed and clothed, made ready in every way to be received by the coming Prince of Peace. May our loving Father, YHVH, the Creator and King of the Universe, provide all that we need to trustingly obey his loving instructions, serving him and his people faithfully in every respect as his servants.

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Comments may be submitted to the author via e-mail at mrensign@arn.net or by mail to Adot Adonai, P. O. Box 3220, Amarillo, Texas 79116-3220.

The author reserves the right to respond or not to respond to any communication. He has no intention of entering into a dispute about this study following the instructions of Rav Sha'ul to Titus in 3:9-11, which passage should be read by all who would respond hereto before doing so.

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