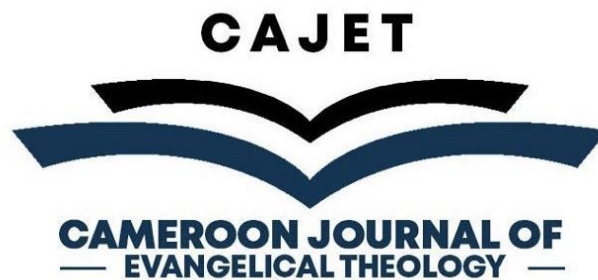


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Zelophehad's Daughters in Numbers 27:1-11 as a Model for Women in the Pursuit of Justice within the Cameroon Baptist Convention

Les filles de Tselophchad dans Nombres 27 :1-11 comme modèle pour les femmes dans la poursuite de la justice au sein de la Convention Baptiste du Cameroun

Julius NDISHUA, Ph.D.¹

Abstract

Gender issues remain a recurring discourse across social media and conferences within national and international communities. The discourse does centre on the rights of the vulnerable, especially the girl child and the widows. The belief has often been that whenever there is an abuse of rights, man is the leading cause of it. The women and children are often exonerated from abuses that they perpetrate. However, the abuse of rights and privileges is a common existential reality in human society. Female staff in some church-based organizations like the *Cameroon Baptist Convention* (CBC) are shy in addressing their problems in the church. The quest is how women can successfully communicate their struggles in the church and society to achieve justice. The researcher defends the thesis that the Zelophehad daughters' non-violent fight against gender-based biases provides a model for the pursuit of justice by women of the CBC. The researcher used the historical-grammatical method. The findings reveal that Zelophehad's daughters identified a problem and applied the most needed approach to seek redress in a non-violent manner.

Keywords: Zelophehad's daughter, model, justice, women

Resumé

Les questions de genre restent un discours récurrent dans les médias sociaux et lors de conférences au sein des communautés nationales et internationales. Le discours est centré sur les droits des personnes vulnérables, en particulier les filles et les veuves. On a souvent cru que chaque fois qu'il y avait un abus de droit, l'homme en était la principale cause. Les femmes et les enfants sont souvent exonérés des abus qu'ils commettent. Cependant, l'abus des droits et privilèges est une réalité existentielle courante dans la société humaine. Le personnel féminin de certaines organisations confessionnelles comme la *Convention Baptiste du Cameroun* (CBC) hésite à aborder les problèmes qu'il rencontre au sein de l'Église. La quête de cet article est de savoir comment les femmes peuvent communiquer avec succès leurs luttes au sein de l'Église et de la société pour parvenir à l'équité et à la justice. L'auteur défend la thèse selon laquelle la lutte non violente des filles de Tselophchad contre les préjugés sexistes constitue un modèle pour la quête de justice des femmes de CBC. Il a employé la méthode historico-grammaticale. Les résultats révèlent que les filles de Tselophchad ont identifié un problème et ont appliqué l'approche la plus nécessaire pour obtenir réparation de manière non violente.

Mots-clés : Fille de Zelophehad, modèle, justice, femmes

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Introduction

The women's leadership of the *Baptist Women's Union of Africa*, in general, and the Women's Department in the *Cameroon Baptist Convention* (CBC) churches, in particular, is saddled with the responsibility to educate their members on various issues about the fulfilment of Christian women including the pursuit of justice. Women's edification on matters related to the quest for justice seems lacking among some local congregations of the CBC. Women in the ancient Near East often suffered gender-based abuse in society. For instance, the Mosaic law stipulates that the right to inheritance belongs only to male children (Deut. 21:15-17). To some extent, women were considered 'cheaper' in monetary value than men (Lev. 15:16-33); male slaves were sold at a higher price than female slaves. Based on uncleanness Law (Lev. 27:1-8), only male animals were required for necessary sacrifices. Some laws did not apply to women in some particular contexts (Exod. 3:17). Zelophehad's daughters took upon themselves the challenge to ensure that the gender-based bias on inheritance is reviewed and amended (Blomberg, 1996, 825; Wright, 1992, 762-764).

The situation of women of the CBC is almost similar to that of women in the ancient Near East. In both instances, the domineering male culture is essentially prevalent. Zelophehad's daughters' case in Numbers 27:1-11 exemplifies the woman's plight in today's church and society. Gender-based issues remain a recurring discourse across different social systems within national and international communities. This discourse is centred on the rights of the vulnerable, especially the girl child and the widows. Male children are configured to believe that society is structured to favour them. The belief has often been that whenever there is an abuse of rights, the man is the main cause of it. The women and children are often exonerated from abuses that they perpetrate. However, the abuse of rights and privileges is a common existential reality in human society.

Female staff in some church-based organizations like the CBC are not outspoken in addressing their problems in the church. They lack what it takes to approach a competent authority with their struggles in the church and at home. The quest is how women can successfully communicate their struggles in the church and society to achieve equity. The wages of some female children staff, although holding certificates similar to their male counterparts, are not the same across some congregations in the CBC. The wage disparity between female ministers and their male colleagues with the same certificate in the same church suggests some injustice towards the female staff across some CBC congregations. Thus, the researcher defends the thesis that the Zelophehad daughters' non-violent fight against gender-based biases provides a model for the pursuit of justice by women of the CBC. This paper is structured as follows: (I) introduction; (II) exegetical analysis of Numbers 27:1-11; (III) Zelophehad's daughters' pattern in pursuing justice; (IV) women's pursuit of justice in the CBC; and (V) implications for women pursuit of justice in the CBC.

Exegetical Analysis of Numbers 27:1-11

An analysis of Numbers 27:1-11 requires a background of the book. As such, before the analysis is a discussion of Numbers' historical background, authorship, date, and audience.

Historical Background of the Book

The book of Numbers is among the books in the canonical section of the Bible known as the *Torah* or the Pentateuch. This book is a detailed record of the Israelites' thirty-eight and nine months of wilderness experience. Hill and Walton estimate thirty-eight and nine months as the actual wilderness duration. However, Milgrom (1992) believes that the book of Numbers describes a forty-year trek of the Israelites in the wilderness. The range difference in the

approximate duration is not too much of a problem. The census in the book of Numbers gives the impression that they were two different generations.

Authorship and Date

Conservative Jewish people and Christians ascribe the Pentateuch's authorship to Moses (Hill and Walton, 1991, 145; Longman III & Dillard, 2006, 93). However, scholars of the Documentary Hypothesis school of thought, like Julius Wellhausen, argue that four authors contributed to the Pentateuch. These scholars opine that Exodus 35 to Numbers 1-10 are sourced from the Priestly material (P), while Numbers 11-36 originated from Yahwist (J) and Elohist (E) sources. Also, they assume that there are two other (P) traditions where Numbers 11-14, 16, 20-25 are referred to as (J) and (E), with Numbers 13-17, 20, 25-36 ascribed to the (P) source.

The Canaanites and Edomites located in the Negeb and the Moabites, Ammonites, and Midianites within the Transjordan posed a real threat and opposition towards Israelites (Num. 21 and 31). The book of Numbers reveals Israel's early days of covenant relationship with their God and God's patience and faithfulness towards a grumbling and rebellious people (Hill and Walton, 1991, 148). The Israelites were caught up with the ancient Near East's cultural climate that forbade females from the right of inheritance, although their jurisprudence was clear on it. However, Zelophehad's daughters challenged themselves to pursue justice and equity for the girl child's rights (Ndekha, 2013, 38; Levine, 2000, 341).

The pericope of Number 27:1-11 is located within the second census frame that Moses conducted in the wilderness. It is an appeal from Zelophehad's daughters for justice to prevail over the allotment of inheritance. Modern scholars assume this episode is part of the priestly document added much later, probably around the sixth century. They believed that most biblical laws existed before this time (Ilan, 2017, 166).

Syntactical Analysis of Numbers 27:1-11

Recognize and Approach Competent Authorities with Your Struggles (Num. 27:1-4)

The issue of land, inheritance and power are areas of concern in predominantly patriarchal societies. Families without male children are often confronted with challenges regarding family inheritance. In patriarchal societies, the name of the family and the history of a person is only preserved through males of that family (Boniface-Malle, 2010, 198). The man Zelophehad is described in terms of his ancestors as seen in Number 27:1a. The daughters of Zelophehad are equally from the same clan as their father (Num. 27:1b). The text is silent about the state of their mother. However, widows in the ancient Near East without male children faced challenges. The male children were responsible for the welfare of their mothers. They were equally allowed by tradition and custom to represent their mothers before the council of elders to plead or defend them in case of an issue (House, 1992, 233). The reverse is the case in this text with the five daughters of Zelophehad.

The names of these daughters are Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. Their name also appears in the census statistics (Num. 26:33) to serve the patriarchal interest. Land in Ancient Israel and today belong to God (Lev. 27:23-28). The management and land distributions remain a concern to God then and now. The clause וַתִּקְרְבוּןָהֶן verb Qal waw consecutive imperfect third person feminine plural "Then they approached" describes a narrative in progression and the clause $\text{וַתִּצַּמְדוּןָהֶן}$ verb Qal waw consecutive imperfect third person feminine plural "Then they stood" paints a graphic picture of a courtroom where complainants or plaintiffs present their case before a competent jurist with the hope that the litigation will turn out in their favour.

The daughters of Zelophehad recognized a problem with the Law on inheritance. In general terms, the *Torah* did not provide a girl child's right to family inheritance. The instruction on family inheritance was reserved only for male children. They were legitimate

heirs of their late father's property (Deut. 21:15-17). However, the case of parents without a male child was not enshrined in the text. The importance of land in the Ancient Near East and today was essential for economic reasons. The orphans and widows were left to suffer if they did not have a piece of land that belonged to them. The daughters of Zelophehad needed their father's allotment of the inheritance for their livelihood, just as we cannot afford to let go of our ancestral land today.

The clause that they stood before Moses and the elders (Num. 27: 2b) suggests a courtroom context. The daughters of Zelophehad acknowledged and argued that their father's death was not because he had joined Korah's rebellious group (Num. 16:28-30); instead, he died for his sin. The text reveals the sin that kills Zelophehad. However, the five daughters could not imagine why their father's inheritance should be ignored because he did not have a male child to inherit his property. Thus, they were concerned about their father's inheritance. These five daughters were courageous enough to move beyond grumbling to meet the competent authorities to plea for their father's inheritance among their father's relatives or brothers (Num. 27:4b).

The primary concern was to know the fate of their family land. They noticed that the allotment of inheritances might not reach them. Instead of carrying a placard or teaming up with others in a similar situation to stage a public demonstration against the law, they met the leaders in person to plea for consideration of their situation as females who should inherit their father's property. The initiative of these five daughters for fair consideration is similar to other women like the Egyptian midwives (Exod. 1:15-21); Moses's mother and Miriam (Exod. 2:1-4); Naomi and Ruth (Ruth 1-4); Deborah and Jael (Judg. 4:14-21).

Christians must admit that competent authorities have the right to oversee people's struggles in the church and society. Although, at the time, these authorities may not listen to the plea as the church desires, maybe because the case at hand is beyond their control or because they lack the expertise to resolve people's dilemmas, Christians are not to take the law into their hands. Instead, while they continue to appeal for a fair hearing, fervent prayer should be offered to God the perfect judge.

Godly Leaders Listen and Advocate when Members Complain (Num. 27:6-11)

The Hebrew word *נַחֲלָה* from its root, refers to "inheritance". It speaks more of a property received after the death of someone's father in the land of Israel. The use of *נַחֲלָה* "inheritance" is similar to other texts like (Gen 48:6; Exod. 15:17, Lev 20:24; Num. 18:20), except Genesis 21:10-13 where Isaac's inheritance is traced over his brother Ishmael (Ndekha, 2013, 39). *נַחֲלָה*; "inheritance" was linked to the land property.

Hiers (1993) submits that "all kind of property was subject to transfer by inheritance. The transfer of real estate like land field was of importance in the biblical law and tradition" (122). In the absence of the father, the right to entitlement was reserved for the male child alone. The Law of "intestate" ruled that, in the absence of a male child, that right should go to the female child. The text states vividly that the five daughters of Zelophehad had the right to inherit their father's property (Dentan, 1965, 570; Heir, 1993: 128).

In this text (Num. 27: 5-6), Moses demonstrates the quality of a godly leader who listens and promptly acts on request. Moses sought wisdom and counsel from the LORD. This is not the first time Moses sought the face of the LORD for an issue that was above his competence. It is noticed in the case of a man who blasphemes the name of the LORD (Lev. 24:10-16); the issue of those who, because of the uncleanness law, was unable to observe the Passover feast at the stipulated time (Num. 9:6-13); and the issue of the man who violated the Sabbath (Num.15:32-36). The verdicts from God per their situations were never the same. In this text, God ruled it into a law that females should be allowed to inherit their late father's property (Num. 27:6-11). The verdict solved one problem and created another, as seen in Number 36. Accordingly, they will only have to marry within their tribe.

YHWH ruled in favour of Zelophehad's daughters and authorized that נַחֲלָה 'inheritance' should become לְתִקְוַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל 'a statute of judgment' 'to the sons of Israel'. The detailed application of the inheritance became statutory that every Israelite is supposed to align within the land (Num. 36:8). Thus, the biblical Law on inheritance was transformed to allow the daughters who had no brothers to become rightful heirs of their father's property (Ilan, 2017, 177). The outcome of their complaints gave ground for females to be given equal rights of inheritance as their male counterparts.

Zelophehad's Daughters' Pattern of Pursuing Justice

Zelophehad's daughters identified a problem that needed attention and appealed to the proper authority. They knew the Law of Israel and its application in the people's lives (Fernando, 2017, 1). It is often difficult to recognize ongoing discrimination from among one's people or group. There is an instance in the church whereby people from the same class, status, and level discriminate against fellow group mates or colleagues.

The daughters of Zelophehad did not hire a male individual to speak on their behalf. Instead, they filed their complaint to the competent authority for a public hearing. In one accord, they did the advocacy boldly to make their case heard by the entire Jewish community. The outcome of their complaints gave ground for females to be given equal rights of inheritance as their male counterparts.

Zelophehad's daughters paved the way for the girl child in Israel (Fernando, 2017, 1). They could have used lobbying to advocate for justice in favour of women, like a feminist activist group that pressured the government to promulgate laws that favour their agenda. Instead, they used a non-violent approach to appeal for a hearing on the inheritance law bill. The outcome of this peaceful initiative was a statutory law in Israel.

Women Pursuit of Justice in the CBC

Women in most congregations constitute the majority in attendance and display giftedness. They are often very passionate about the church's life and everyone's well-being in and beyond its walls. They are among the key actors in the life of society, given the participatory role they play in the upbringing of a child and the care they show to their husbands and strangers. Esther Ayandokun (2014) asserts that "women have remained the life-wire of any community. They help and guide members of the community on expected roles. They direct children and family members on how to behave at home and in the church. They teach the ideal and correct abnormal behaviours" (65).

The Zelophehad's daughters' model and God's instruction to allow a girl child to inherit the late father's property may be a useful instrument for today's women to use against the right of inheritance that culture demands belongs to the male figure. They may also use it to advocate for equal pay for workers in the church. Laurel Damsteegt (2013) posits that "it is proper to pay experienced women workers just as the men are paid" (14). Laurel decries the unfair treatment that some experienced women workers face in some congregations today.

The daughters of the Zelophehad model offer the CBC women a pattern to use to pursue justice in the church. Three significant roles stand out in this model: "an understanding of their covenant status; a collective voice and non-violent approach to their case" (Ndekha, 2013, 47). The abovementioned factors can serve as a model for women to pursue justice in any repressive society.

The daughters of Zelophehad understood their status under the Law. They were not ignorant of what was enshrined in the Law on inheritance rights; their understanding gave them enough confidence to present their case before the competent authority. The biblical literacy of most African women, especially in rural areas, is deplorable. The challenge of illiteracy leaves

most of these women unable to understand some aspects of discrimination within the church and those common with the women group, like the situation of single women who find it hard to join the women's group because of class and status barriers in the group. Single women should be allowed to participate in the CBC churches' women's groups to nourish their souls (Ndekha, 2013, 47). The church's model may also be used to dismantle unjust structures like single mothers not being allowed to join the women's group. However, she may be qualified to become a member and the fact that single women can be members of the diaconate in the church.

The daughters of Zelophehad were one in purpose, vision, and mission. They did not allow individualism to consume them; instead, they used a collective voice to face their shared problem. Also, they should have used a male or pressure group to confront Moses, Eleazer, the chief and the congregation at the Tent of the meeting; instead, they approach them with one voice. Women in the local church can make their voices heard by not keeping silent when they notice discrimination. The best approach might not be to use an ungodly medium to address their situation. Preferably, in unity, they can seek redress in the church through its competent body (Ndekha, 2013, 47).

The daughters of Zelophehad used a non-confrontational method to dismantle a structure that they noticed was not working for both sexes. The non-confrontational approach in pursuing justice can be used in a repressive context to dismantle structures, for instance, the unequal pay packages of the workers in some congregations. It is assumed in some churches that female workers in charge of children and teenagers are doing less; hence, their pay should not be compared to males in adult congregations. Every child should be treated with respect and dignity irrespective of gender as it relates to inheritance. Female children are of equal value as their male counterparts in personhood. They have the right to exist and to function as valuable persons in the sight of God. The right of inheritance should not be restricted only to the male child. The female and male children have the right to inherit their father's property.

The church should advocate laws that agree with Christians' teaching today and confront laws that contradict the gospel message, such as those that have to do with widow inheritance and those that allow only male children to the right of inheritance (Boniface-Malle, 2010, 199). Also, the church should seek God's guidance when dealing with societal issues to provide guidelines that result in positive change and justice for all in the community. A godly parent should strive to leave an inheritance for their children (Prov. 13:22). However, everyone born of God in Christ is promised an unfading inheritance that cannot decay but is kept in heaven for those who have believed in Christ Jesus as their Saviour and LORD (Col. 3:23-24; Eph. 1:18; 1Pet. 1:4-5).

Implications for Women's Pursuit of Justice in the CBC

Women are created in the image of God. They are of equal value as their male counterpart in personhood. They have the right to exist and function as valuable people in God's sight. Women make up the majority of some congregations in the CBC. They are very instrumental in the smooth functioning of the church. Despite their numbers in the church, they are considered women in the strict African sense of the word. The value of male workers in salary payment within some congregations in the CBC is one of the injustices that most women seem not to understand. The fight against injustice begins if the problem is diagnosed within the organization or church. Zelophehad's daughters understood their context and acted within the confines of the law to draw attention to the right of inheritance that did not favour the girl child in society. Felix Ajedokun says, "Africans believe that every human comes from God, and he/she belongs to Him. Africans do not despise human life; instead, everyone should be given fair treatment, equity and justice" (143)

Unity is strength remains a famous and meaningful slogan in society. The CBC's women will dismantle the unfair treatment accorded to the female staff, provided they are united in purpose. The struggle for equity and justice is not a one-person show but a collective effort. Moreover, women of the CBC will have to rise above their ethnic and tribal inclination to speak in one voice against the unfair treatment that some of their female-children workers receive in some congregations. Thus, there is room for unity to prevail in pursuing justice. The daughters of Zelophehad were in one accord and one voice in the cause of pursuing justice. Women will achieve justice in the church if they speak with one voice. Unity is strength, as mentioned above, and a lot can be achieved in one accord. True justice is hidden in God, and the church is challenged to ensure that everyone, especially women and children, receives justice within the church (Ayo-Obiremi, 2014, 15 and Ogunewu, 2014, 31).

The Zelophehad's daughter model is a non-violent approach to fighting for a just cause. Women of the CBC are challenged to understand the nitty-gritty of these girls' patterns before their application. This tool demands that the problem be diagnosed, and the necessary competent authority be consulted appropriately. It may be termed rebellious if the due procedure is not followed to redress matters. Thus, the Zelophehad's daughters are enough of a lesson for the CBC women to pursue equity and justice in paying female-children workers to their male counterparts across some congregations.

Conclusion

This writer has underscored that the daughters of Zelophehad model are a valuable tool that women in the local churches can use to fight for justice and equity. The analysis of Numbers 27:1-11 reveals that Zelophehad's daughters identified a problem and applied the most needed approach to seek redress in a non-violent manner. The right of inheritance became a law that allowed both sexes to inherit their late father's possessions. This write-up reveals that the CBC women will dismantle repressive structures if they are careful enough to apply Zelophehad's daughter's model. This involves knowing the Scriptures, speaking with one voice when discrimination is noticed, and employing a non-confrontational approach to pursue women's rights in the church.

Recommendations

The writer recommends the following for African Christians and the CBC in particular:

1. The CBC should give everyone the benefit of the doubt to demonstrate God's given ability in the church without prejudice.
2. The CBC should deliberately enshrine in her working documents the value of female theologians and their place in the local congregations and the convention.
3. The CBC should ensure no gender bias or discrimination in female workers' salaries to male workers in the local congregation.
4. The CBC should consciously identify women with a passion and interest in church-based ministry and train them for effective ministry.
5. The CBC should deliberately uphold the value and practice of peace and justice, especially towards women.
6. The CBC should discourage the practice of chauvinistic tendencies, ethnocentrism, and racism in the church.

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