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# Those Who Came Before Us: A Review of *Tell Her Story*

Hannah Landman

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**Title:** *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church*

**Author:** Nijay K. Gupta

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Growing up in the Covenant CRC family, I've seen women serving as elders and deacons in my home church. In middle school and high school I was confronted with the idea that this is not normal, and even that women serving the community of believers in this capacity is something to be rebuked and avoided. Thus began conversations about women's role in the church, pointing at key texts like 1 Timothy 2 and submission texts and stating that while women have important roles in the church, they should not serve as ordained elders and deacons. While the conversation itself is not new to me, and I recognize that readers of this review may have differing opinions, I found that Nijay Gupta brought a reasoned, compassionate perspective to this issue. Gupta's book offers a refreshing look at women in ministry before, during, and after Jesus's time on earth.

The book begins before the New Testament Church was established. Gupta explores the leader Deborah, revisits Genesis 1, and fleshes out Roman hierarchal society. By pointing out that the introduction to men and women's relationship is as partners—equals who are distinguished by male and female but not distinguished by these roles in their “God-given identity, calling, and relationship to other parts of creation,”—we are reminded of the mutuality of human relationships from the beginning.<sup>1</sup>

Gupta, surprisingly, doesn't begin the book in Genesis. He begins with Deborah, citing how her appearance as a leader in Israel captured his interest and how her story breaks from the typical pattern of judge-deliverer typical of most judges. These differences serve to also display Deborah as a faithful leader—in some ways more wise and upright than the judges who came before and after her, Gupta points out. Deborah wasn't just a “stand-in” for a man's role because of Barak's hesitation, she was a reliable leader bringing peace to Israel by God's command and leading them faithfully long after battle was done. Deborah was likely a spiritual leader in some capacity, leading the people and ministering to them.

It's worth spending time with Deborah longer than other examples due to Gupta's fascination with her, but Deborah was a leader—many claim just a military leader—in a time before the Roman Empire. The exploration of Roman culture was one of the areas I found most interesting, as the particulars of class hierarchy, not just patriarchal society, were fleshed out. I won't go into detail here (it's worth reading the book to get the full picture), but Gupta does a wonderful job emphasizing that patriarchal hierarchy was not the only power structure in play during Jesus' ministry and the years of the early church. Class hierarchy, social status due to wealth and family standing, also played a very large role in how women operated in the Roman world, enabling many wealthy individuals to run their own businesses and operate with some autonomy with their income and decisions. This knowledge informs the way we think about women as benefactors and leaders in the church, with wealthy women like Lydia supporting the church with the profits from their own work.

Having set the stage for how Roman society operates, Gupta moves into examples of women in Jesus's own life and those who were present and named in ministry positions in the early church. He points out that Jesus's interactions with women, particularly the intelligent and meaningful conversations he had with them, points to respecting women as equals in his broad family. Gupta also pointed out that in some Christian traditions, women like Mary Magdalene are considered among the apostles, which is perhaps worth a review of its own.

When discussing the early church, women like Lydia, Junia, Phoebe, and Nympha are all mentioned by name. By funding Paul's ministry and serving as couriers and readers/interpreters of letters sent to the churches around the world, women were involved in ministry—serving as *diakonos*, who served and cared for church communities. The exact terminology around this subject is worth a further look. Gupta lays out the discussion well, but the use of the word *diakonos* and *episkopoi* as conferring ways of life or as actual positions is rather fuzzy. However, Gupta does state that, “At the end of the day, Paul appears to have been a ministry pragmatist: those gifted by God and ready to serve with a willing heart are needed for the gospel mission.”<sup>2</sup> Paul constantly refers to and exonerates women as coleaders and equals, thanking them for their service and encouraging them to continue.

I found myself inspired by this book. Sometimes the conversation regarding women in church office feels less like a defense of my own position and more like a justification of my own worthiness as a child of God. Gupta's book highlights biblical women living their lives in faithful service to God. While I find this book inspiring on many levels, I think it is also valuable for those who do not share my opinion to read this book. At the very least, I find that Gupta provides a very well-researched, thoughtful, and compassionate insight into women throughout the history of God's people and his church, and this is liberating for any brother and sister in Christ. Whatever your position, Gupta's statement that, “God-inspired gifts held women responsible for fortifying the life of his people” rings true for all those participating in the body of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

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1. pg. 23

2. pg. 49

3. pg. 154