

Old Testament Women: Zelophehad's five daughters in Numbers 27:6-8

The Church of England today has a complex relationship with human laws as well as God's law. In each diocese there are legal teams and a senior judge called a Chancellor. Let's suppose the case of Zelophehad's daughters is being heard today in a Consistory Court somewhere in rural England. The Chancellor might publish their judgement under headings something like this.

History

It is important first to clarify some concepts of 'law'. This book called 'Numbers' is one of the 'Five Books of Moses' along with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. These Five are known as the Torah. We often translate Torah as 'law' but its meaning is actually closer to 'instruction' from God. For 40 years the Jewish people have been on the move in the wilderness after leaving slavery in Egypt. Along the way they have been dealing with events and solving problems. Above all, they are planning ahead for when they finally reach the Promised Land. 38 years ago the First Census counted people according to the male heads of family. The Second Census has just taken place, a necessary recount because of many changes. People have died, from natural causes and through conflict too. The case before us today is part of a complex problem of how land should be allocated fairly in future, in Israel. The law, as it stands, says that when a man dies, only his sons can inherit his land. If he has no sons, then that land passes out of his direct family line.

Statement of Needs

To understand the case, let the daughters speak.

Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward. Zelophehad was son of Hopher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph, a member of the Manassite clans. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.

They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, 'Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers.'

This is quite unprecedented. Daughters cannot at present inherit land in their own name. If they have no brothers, the land goes to the father's brothers and their sons.

Decision

The judgement of this Consistory Court rests on the truth that God makes law, not humans. The daughters must have new rights to property. Here is the word of God.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. You shall also say to the Israelites, 'If a man dies, and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter'.

Revised judgement on appeal

God's instruction certainly does support justice for daughters. However, in Numbers 36, we have to recognise that the case for compromise is also made.

Then Moses commanded the Israelites according to the word of the Lord, saying, 'The descendants of the tribe of Joseph are right in what they are saying. This is what the Lord commands concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, "Let them marry whom they think best; only it must be into a clan of their father's tribe that they are married.

Conclusion

The five daughters of Zelophehad challenged human custom. By 21st century standards their victory for God's will has been quite small. Nevertheless, today they are celebrated in Israel by having settlements named after them. It must also be noted that it has taken right up to the 20th century to finally give women equal property rights in England.

In both the Old Testament and New Testament, the focus on the true meaning of 'law' is always about God's will for the world. In Matthew 5:17. Jesus said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.

The Message version of Jesus's words then takes a lovely poetic long view:

'God's Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God's Law will be alive and working'.

Alison Wedgbury

LLM