

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#66 Is the Elect Lady of 2 John a Woman Pastor?

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Today's question: "Could the "elect lady" of 2 John be a woman pastor/elder?  
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/09/10/woman-pastor-named-in-the-new-testament/>"

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, could the Elect Lady of 2 John be a woman pastor or elder? And there's a link to an article on the Jesus Creed blog, which I'll link below. I think it's unlikely.

Like a number of other cases, for instance, with reference to Junior, there's use of special pleading in these sorts of instances that take a text that's fairly ambiguous and uses that to make a fairly grand set of claims against the general tenor and teaching of scripture in places that are fairly clear. And some patterns that we see throughout the whole of the Bible, Old and New Testament, are overturned on the basis of an ambiguous text. And I don't think that's what's happening here.

There are a number of possibilities that are quite harmonious with what we see elsewhere in scripture. And I think they are more compelling on other grounds as well. When we're looking at this particular passage, there are a number of things to notice.

First of all, it's within the Johannine Corpus. And within the Johannine Corpus, there's an extensive treatment of themes of childhood, of the church's mother, these sorts of things that already exist. And so John, I think, is working with this.

John has already spoken about Christ's death as something akin to a woman groaning in birth pangs and giving birth. And then later on, we see in Revelation, the church or Israel as a sort of mother figure that gives birth to her children. And so we have that vision already.

The church is a bride. And as a bride, the church gives birth to offspring. But the bride also represents the totality of the body of the church.

And then you have the children as the particular members. And many of the questions that people have about this, they argue that it would be he's talking to an individual entity as the elect lady, and therefore it can't be referring to the church, because he'd be talking in a plural sense then. But elsewhere in his gospel and epistle and his epistles and in the book of Revelation, we see a theology that completely grounds all of this, that presents the church as a unified entity as the bride or as the mother, and that speaks also about the children as the various members, the individual members of that body.

And so if we just talked about individual members, we'd be losing something important about the character of the church. The church is more than the sum of its parts. It's not just a set of individuals.

It's a unified entity. And the church in a particular place is not improperly referred to using such imagery. We see a similar thing in 2 Corinthians, where Paul addresses the Corinthian church.

I'll read the passage in question, where he speaks to the Corinthian church and addresses the Corinthian church as if a woman, a singular woman. Oh, that you would bear with me in a little folly, and indeed you do bear with me, for I'm jealous for you with a godly jealousy, for I've betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear less somehow as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you may well put up with it. And so we have the idea of the church as a bride. This church is not just a sum of individual members, but the church of the Corinthians is like Eve, and the church of the Corinthians is like a bride.

And in both of these cases, I think we see a similar pattern within the gospel of, or the epistle of 2 John. In 2 John, we see the same sort of themes. Eve is in the background, and so there's the threat of deceivers coming and deceiving the elect lady.

For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ is coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves that we do not lose these things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward.

And you find within this epistle in verses 6, 8, and 10, there are these plural verbs used that would suggest he's referring not just to a particular woman and her spiritual children or her physical children, but that he's speaking to a body of Christians that he is collectively symbolising as an elect lady. And this elect lady has a sister. We see this in verse 13.

And here it's interesting that it's not the elect lady and her sister that greet her, but just her children. And that would seem to make sense if the elect lady is a church. The elect lady can be personified as a church, but as a personification as an individual lady, she's not going to be the one that's greeting.

She's not acting in that same way. Rather, her children act and her children together represent her, or she is representing them as a body of Christians. But she's a personification of the church.

And so as a personification, it's not surprising that the elect sister wouldn't greet the elect lady here, because the elect sister is not actually a person. The elect sister is a personification of the church. Putting all these things together, I think that John is playing with the background of Genesis 3. He's playing with the background of Eve being tempted by the serpent, the danger of deceivers coming in, and the church being presented as a woman.

Not just the church collectively, the New Jerusalem, Sarah, the mother of us all, or the church as the bride, the totality of the church of God and Christ. But the church as an individual church, like Paul talks about the Corinthian church, that the Corinthian church can be personified as a woman, a virgin betrothed to Christ, or like Eve being tempted by the serpent. And here, the elect lady and her children are referring to a church and the members of that church.

And that's why he's referring to the elect sister as well. Other things to notice, I think that the different theories that are put forward for this, there are a number of other ones that could be put forward. A woman and her children, physical, biological children, or a woman leading a group of other women, or other things like a woman who is a pastor, or a woman who's some elder figure within a community.

And these have various strengths and weaknesses. But I think when we put it all against the background of John's theology as a whole, and the theology of the New Testament, by far the most likely explanation is that it is the church and the individual members of the children. And that I think also shows that it fits in very well with the rest of the teaching of the New Testament on women as not being permitted to be pastors, to

exercise authority and teach over men in this position within the church.

The other thing that's worth recognising is that there are women who are active within the church in roles that we can often forget. Women as patronesses of the church, women as those who have the church in their houses. And these are significant roles as well, but we can forget about those.

I don't think that's what's being referred to here, but I think it's important to see that in part as something of the background of what's taking place. Because for the church to be personified as a woman, there's something about that personification that is specifically represented in women. That we see something of the feminine aspect of the church, particularly in the women of the church, in the same way as Israel is described as the firstborn son of God.

And then there's a focus upon the firstborn sons of Israel in the events of the Passover, in the threat to Moses' firstborn son, these sorts of events. Israel is summed up within these firstborn sons. But Israel is also represented by these women struggling in birth, because Israel is a woman that needs to be delivered of her child.

Israel is a woman who needs to be betrothed to God at Sinai. And so these various images are working alongside each other. So when Paul talks about the church as like Eve, or the church as a chaste virgin that's supposed to be betrothed to Christ, or as John talks here about the church as an elect lady, there's something about the meaning of that that we should see being concentrated in something of what the women in the church represent.

And what we see here, I think, is the significance of the woman as the lady of the house, as the one who is supposed to retain the integrity of the house, to hold together the family, to keep the unity of this body of believers. And there's something particularly, I think, within churches that we see women doing in this respect. That the unity of the church, the bonds of love and things like that, and the connections, and the church as a home, the church as a place of shared life, of communion, that these things are particularly associated with the women of the church.

And one of the things that we have lost, I think, with focusing very much upon the structures and institutions and the offices of the church, is we've lost that organic sense of the church. The church as a home, the church as a mother, the church as a realm of shared life. And so when John talks here about the elect lady, I don't think he's referring to an actual woman, but I think he is saying something that can have implications for the way that we think about women within the church more generally.

I hope that this is of some help. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. And if you'd like to support this and other videos, please do so using my Patreon account.

And Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow with another question and answer. God bless and thank you for listening.