

## Review: *No Little Women*, by Aimee Byrd (Part 2)

By Mike Myers

My first review of Aimee Byrd's *No Little Women* focused upon some commendable points and then upon two major areas of critique, namely, questionable exegesis and poor representation of source material. In this second part, I want to address her development and use of the Hebrew term *ezer* and what I believe is the most significant deficiency in this book.

### Does *Ezer* Really Mean Necessary Ally?

Mrs. Byrd's discussion of helper/*ezer* begins in the first chapter:

Before God created Eve, he declared that it was 'not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him' (Gen 2:18). There has been plenty of discussion about this word *helper* in regard to a woman's role, and even to her value. But we don't really attach the same meaning today to this word, so maybe we lose some of its significance. The word *helper* can often bring up connotations of inferiority in our culture. Think of mommy's little helper in the kitchen...But don't let her near the stove or the sharp knives! She's just the helper, she might hurt herself!...Of course this is not what 'helper' means in Genesis 2:18 (NLW, 24, see also this [article](#)).

She moves on to discuss God's use of *ezer* to describe Himself. This proves very significant for how she interprets and defines *ezer* as "necessary ally."

Utilizing Psalm 89:17 as her key text, Mrs. Byrd highlights the theme of strength related to *ezer* with God as the referent: "For You are the glory of their *strength*, and in Your favor our horn is exalted" (NKJV, emphasis mine). Here is her comment: "Here we have our word *ezer*, usually translated 'helper,' translated as strength. These verses are also saturated in military language as they describe God as Israel's *ezer*. The root for this word is used 128 times in Scripture, meaning 'rescue' and 'save.' It refers to God's rescue in thirty cases, which we see mostly in the Psalms" (NLW, 25). Here she is simply wrong.

The word used in Psalm 89:17 is not *ezer* (עֲזָרָה); it is the word *oze* (עֹז, *strength*). While the two words appear similar in their lexical forms and are loosely homophonic (עֲזָרָה and עֹז), they are not closely related linguistically (see Ps. 46:1 for both words used together). In addition to the erroneous starting point of Psalm 89:17, she does not demonstrate her justification for *necessary ally*, but merely cites a November 2015 lecture by John McKinley entitled, *Necessary Allies: God as Ezer, Woman as Ezer* (I have not listened to that lecture). In all fairness, I believe Mrs. Byrd is attempting—rightly—to ward off a pejorative and demeaning status for a woman; however, I cannot join her in utilizing poor exegesis to define a word that forms a major theme of her book. How then should we understand *ezer*?

First, let us consider the word itself. Mrs. Byrd is correct to say that God uses *ezer* to describe Himself. Moses provides a most eloquent example in Deuteronomy 33:26, "There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides the heavens to *help* you, and in His excellency on the clouds" (NKJV). This ought to fill each Christian with wonder and gratitude, that Almighty God is our help and our shield (Ps. 33:20). We must glory in this. However, such use does not prove an equivalence of meaning when He assigns the same word to Eve. I will prove this both theologically and exegetically.

Theologically, we must understand that when God *helps* His people, He does so in sovereign, condescending, covenant mercy. He acts as the vastly, eternally, superior being toward the inferior. Anthropologically, when God fashioned Eve from the rib of slumbering

Adam, He created Adam's equal. In terms of worth from an ontological perspective, Adam finds a beautiful, dazzling counterpart. In terms of *function*, Adam as head is the superior, while Eve is a very content inferior (1 Cor. 11:8-9; WLC 126-132). This does not mean that Eve and all her daughters are consigned to a station of inferior, ontological worth or value. I would in fact argue precisely the opposite, for woman is the glory of man (1 Cor. 11:7b). Yet there is an order and distinction in function. To summarize, it is theologically—and logically—fallacious to equate the meaning of *ezer* when used of God and Eve, for they are entirely different beings with vastly different functions. Now, lest I be misunderstood or misquoted: Eve is absolutely, ontologically equal with Adam in worth, dignity, and being, but inferior in function, which does not mean unimportant or non-essential.

Second, Mrs. Byrd commits a very basic exegetical fallacy. Eve is not merely *ezer*; she is *ezer kenegdo*. Describing Eve's purpose and function as *ezer kenegdo*, Gordon Wenham says, "The compound propositional phrase 'matching him,' literally, 'like opposite him' (*kenegdo*) is found only here. It seems to express the notion of complementarity rather than identity... The help looked for is not just assistance in his daily work or in the procreation of children, though these aspects may be included, but the mutual support companionship provides." (*Genesis 1-15*, 68). In his commentary on Genesis, Bruce Waltke writes, "The word *help* suggests that the man has governmental priority, but both sexes are mutually dependent on each other. The man is created first, with the woman to help the man, not vice versa (see also 1 Tim. 2:13); however, this does not mean ontological superiority or inferiority" (*Genesis*, 88).

Does God use *ezer* to describe Himself? Absolutely, but *never* with this qualifying propositional phrase *kenegdo*. Why? I stated the reason above: Man is *not* equal to God; Eve is equal to Adam. Both the context and referent determine the meaning and sense of any given word in Scripture. While Mrs. Byrd is right to stress that we ought not unjustly to "emphasize authority and submission" in Genesis 2 (NLW, 68), we also must not commit basic exegetical and theological errors in an attempt to prove a point.

Technically speaking, I have no objection to the words *necessary* and *ally* when thinking about women in general and my wife in particular. Every person who knows me well, especially in the congregation I pastor, knows how vastly necessary my beloved wife is to my life. Her gracious alliance adorns my life in the most excellent ways, personally, parentally, and in my case, pastorally. I *am* dependent upon—and endlessly thankful for—her sweet companionship, consistent mothering, and her queenly grace in our home, church, and community. If this was what Mrs. Byrd meant by *necessary ally*, well and good, but she arrives at a very different understanding and emphasis.

In chapter seven, from pages 179-188, Mrs. Byrd includes seven points from John McKinley's lecture to explain the function of necessary ally. Women are necessary allies to men...

1. By warning men to turn away from evil
2. As cobelligerents against evil enemies
3. By mediating the word of the Lord
4. By giving wise instruction and counsel
5. By collaboration in service to others
6. Responding to God as examples of faithfulness
7. By influencing men from a gift of empathy and relatedness

I cannot interact with specifics here, so I encourage you to go read it for yourself. Look closely, however, at each way Byrd/McKinley say a woman can function as a necessary ally. Do you see anything missing? I understand fully that Mrs. Byrd's focus is upon the realm of the local church, but this emphasis blurs the focus on a far more important issue.

### **Underemphasizing the Actual Household**

Throughout *No Little Women*, Mrs. Byrd uses the term *household* frequently (NLW, 33, 68-87, 106-110, 122-123 for example). Most of her discussion focuses not on the family household, but on the Church as the household of God (Eph. 2:19). In all her writing about teaching and discipleship, it seems that for Mrs. Byrd, the ideal goal of discipleship for women is to equip them to teach, *not so much in their homes*, but in the household of God: "The elders have a responsibility to invest in the women so that they are equipped to teach what is good. Women teaching women flows from the ministry. What we do in our own households flows out from and pictures our participation in the household of God" (NLW, 97-98; see also 22, 33, 98, 139, 158, 178 for more of this emphasis). I believe she *underemphasizes* the crucial role that both *women and men* have in the *home* (she does mention this briefly on pages 178 and 183). In my view, this is the most significant deficiency in this book.

Should the elders of the church have an interest in what the women are studying? Absolutely. Nevertheless, for all Mrs. Byrd's emphasis on how closely involved the pastor(s) and elders ought to be with what the women are studying (for one example, see top of page 23), not once did she mention the place of husbands and fathers for that purpose. Here are two examples: "Nothing will frustrate women more than to read this book [I think she is referring to NLW here] and be left hanging in the breeze because their elders didn't bother to read it themselves;" and "Pastors can hardly keep up with what women are up against in the danger zone labeled 'Christian publishing.' But it is imperative that they do. With the technology today, not only do false teachers have more access to spread their doctrine, but the weak people who they target move on to start their own blogs, publish their own books, speak to their own crowds, and lure in more of the same" (NLW, 31, 97, respectively). This is precisely the reason godly *men* must lead their homes well.

Pastors and elders are neither ubiquitous nor omniscient. A godly mother and father ought to have a vested interest and close knowledge concerning what their children are being taught. A godly husband will seek to ensure that his bride is being washed with the water of the Word (Eph. 5:26), not the "sentimental drivel" of much of Women's Resources (NLW, 113). Although overseeing this is one of the many responsibilities of a session, it is not theirs exclusively, but more directly belongs to husbands and fathers. Go read these pages (NLW 31, 46-47, 50, 97, 149, 158, 200-201, 273) and ask yourself: Where are the husbands and fathers? It bears keeping in mind that Mrs. Byrd beautifully articulates this in *Housewife Theologian*:

Our husbands have been given a very serious responsibility. As Christian women, we are to be helping them, respecting their duty. Many women have told me that they wish their husbands would be leaders. However, they already are leaders. Husbands will be held accountable to God for the way they have led their families... The question is whether or not they are good ones. In that case, I love my husband way too much to contribute purposely to his failing before God. I do want to be his helper, easing his role. And if we look at this conversely, whether or not we want to be a helper, that is how we as wives will be held accountable before God (HT, 20).

Why such a shift in emphasis?

Allow me to conclude with some encouragements to my sisters in the Lord. It is important to note, as Mrs. Byrd does on occasion, that there are many women who do not fall into the wife/mother category. This reality, whether by choice or providence, is still the exception, which in this case proves the rule. New Testament application to the home further establishes this point (Eph. 5-6; Col. 3; 1 Pet. 2-3). Second, Mrs. Byrd proves my point on page 33: “You see, Paul does value the teaching of women. The good news is that Christ loves his church so much that he wants his entire household, including women, to be able to teach and to help bring others to maturity.” Who was doing the teaching to which Mrs. Byrd refers? Lois and Eunice, mother and grandmother of Timothy. Where? In the church? In the public sphere? No. In the home to their family. Without their wise, godly, and consistent nurturing in the home, at the very least we would not have the two epistles addressed to this man. God powerfully used these women to bring this eminent evangelist to Christ and prepare him for enduring Kingdom usefulness (2 Tim. 1:5).

Robert Letham elaborates upon the tremendous importance of this vital work in his *Systematic Theology*:

Older women are to teach younger women (Titus 2:3–5), something from which Titus and, by extrapolation, men in general were excluded. To women is entrusted the vital task of childbirth and the nurture of children, integral to the covenant of grace but derided by much of today’s Western culture (1 Tim. 2:15). For Christians to belittle this great privilege is to assault God’s covenant, which is advanced along household lines. The instruction of the very young in the rudiments of the faith, when their minds are open, uncluttered, and receptive, is vital for the good of the church and the future of the gospel. Probably most teaching in the church is conducted by women. The office of episkopos is the exception; it is tragic that so many branches of the church have abandoned the Word of God and capitulated to the spirit of the age (ST, 812).

To encourage a biblical approach as Dr. Letham outlines above is categorically different than to encourage women to teach men in the church. Observe how Mrs. Byrd subtly blurs these categories by way of equivocation (in italics): “So, as for women not having authority to teach a man, this has to do with the authority of the ordained, ministerial office. *Outside of this, we are foolish to think that men do not learn from women.* How can we be allies if we are not all teachers of some sort? And considering the influence that women have in the church, the home, and the world, we should want them to be very good theologians” (NLW, 139). Men learning from women, which absolutely does and must occur, is fundamentally distinct from women teaching men in the church. The former is essential, the latter forbidden (1 Tim. 2:12).

To my dear sisters in the Lord, with all the emphasis upon the importance of godly fathers and qualified men teaching in Christ’s church, we must not overlook the crucial place of godly mothers in particular. Do you find your domestic work and instruction unimportant? Are you tempted to be “consumed by ambition” that would take you outside the home? (NLW, 147). Let me encourage you. I have found no one who speaks more nobly of the glorious and profoundly influential call of motherhood than Robert Dabney, who is unequalled in his honor of godly mothers:

God has assigned to her a private sphere sufficiently important and honorable to justify the whole expenditure of angelic endowments—*the formation of the character of children. This is the noblest and most momentous work done on earth.* ...Does self-will feel that somehow the sphere of the pulpit orator is more splendid still? Wherein? Only in that it has features which

gratify carnal ambition and the lust for carnal applause of men. But let it be noted that Christians are forbidden to have these desires! Let, then, the Christian comply with God's law requiring him to crucify ambition, and the only features which make any difference between the private and the public spheres of soul-culture are gone. The Christian who, in the performance of the public work of rearing souls for heaven, fosters the ambitious motive, has deformed his worthiness in the task with a defilement which sinks it far below that of the humblest peasant mother who is training her child for God (*Discussions*, Vol. 2, 113-114).

Why ought Christians to honor Eve, Ruth, Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary, Lois and Eunice? Their unending significance in the history of redemption has very little to do with their words in Scripture, though we are certainly thankful for them. We must ask: why do we have songs of rejoicing connected with Ruth, Hannah, Elizabeth, and Mary? Their female voices rejoiced because the Lord was pleased to use them as only they could be used, namely, to bear children, and in their cases, sons who would become mighty servants of God. Why was Eve named Eve? Because she was the *mother* of all living. I would imagine if you interviewed any of the profoundly influential men whose lives began in their respective mother's womb, you would hear them defer honor, and probably even attribute their accomplishments, to the grace of God they received through the irreplaceable love and nurture provided by these blessed women. I am equally confident that if you spoke with any of these godly mothers, they would tell you that their joy in the Lord was full as they watched these sons, the product of their prayer, tears and teaching, excel in the public sphere.

I agree with Mrs. Byrd that women need to be taken seriously, that we need to equip women so that they are not "little." We must, however, equip and encourage women for those things best suited to accomplish what God designed them to do. I would urge both my brothers and sisters, do not overlook the extraordinary significance—indeed, the necessary alliance—that wives and mothers have in bearing, nurturing, and sustaining life, both physical and spiritual. That is immeasurably more significant than teaching a women's Bible study.