

The Five Sisters - Daughters of Zelophehad

Story

In the times, when Moses and the people of Israel had arrived in the land of Canaan, they began distributing the land among the families.

One day five young women came to the tent of the high court and applied each for a share of land. They wanted land of their own. The young women belonged to the tribe of Manasse. Their names were Machla, Noa, Hogla, Milka and Tirza.

In the tent gathered the high priest, the tribal chiefs and other honourable men. They were in charge of leading the people.

As it was the custom, the young women stood waiting in the entrance area before the tent. One of them – maybe Machla, the oldest of the five sisters – asked carefully and politely to be admitted to the council of men. The young women were invited to walk into the centre part of the tent.

Then Machla began to speak: “Honourable Lords!” she said. Zelophehad, our father, died while we were journeying through the wilderness. He passed away before we entered the land of Canaan. You know, what a trustworthy and faithful man he was.” The men in the assembly nodded their heads. They knew. They remembered Zelophehad very well. They knew too that Zelophehad had five daughters but no son. They had always felt sorry for him, because sons meant the world to men in those days. Daughters did not really count.

“You know that our father has no male heirs, no sons,” Machla continued. “We are his descendants: five daughters. Five young women. Shall the name of our family be wiped out and forgotten, only because our father has no sons? We ask you, Lords, that the five of us sisters are regarded as heirs. We want to be seen equally with the men in our tribe. We want land and a home among the brothers of our father!”

The high council discussed this unusual request thoroughly. This was new and had never happened before. Women asking for land... Women did not possess land, nor had they the right to stand up for their own needs. Women were taken care of by fathers, husbands or brothers. And here were those five young women who had no father, no husbands, no brothers...

Moses brought their case before God. And God said to him: “What Zelophehad’s daughters are saying is right! You must certainly give them land to live on. Their father’s inheritance shall be passed on to the young women! Say to Israel, if a father dies and has no sons, give his possessions over to the daughters!”

Moses went and told the high court. When they had heard this, the chairman got up and said to the five women: “The application of Zelophehad’s daughters is granted. They shall be entitled to possess their own land among the heritage grounds of their father’s brothers. Their father’s inheritance shall be passed on to his daughters. This will be the law in all of Israel from now on: If someone dies without sons, the

inheritance shall be passed on to the daughters. Has he no daughter, the brothers of the dead man will inherit.”

Machla, Noa, Hogla, Milka and Tirza were so happy about the legal verdict, they proudly wanted to move on. They had not only achieved an enormous change for their own lives, but for all women in the whole of Israel.

However, suddenly some of the council members had doubts. What if the daughters got married? If they married a man from a foreign people? Would their possession then be lost to Israel? Could foreign men suddenly own land within the Israelite borders?

Again, the men discussed. Finally, the following decision was made: “The five daughters of Zelophehad can own land and can marry whoever they want to, as long as they marry men who belong to their own people. So, no land would be passed over into the hands of strangers.”

Machla, Noa, Hogla, Milka and Tirza were wise enough to stick to the condition. They married men of their own tribe and became very happy.

Machla, Noa, Hogla, Milka and Tirza are beautiful names full of stories which we don't really know. Only one of them became famous. Tirza had a city was named after her. The capital of the region of Manasse and the Northern Kingdom of Israel was called Tirza. What life story must Tirza have had? What an important role must she have played in her land and among her people? We do not know, but can only imagine...

Meditation on Numbers 27: 1-11 & 36: 1-12

Have you ever heard of them before, the five daughters of Zelophehad?

They stood up, plucked up all their courage, took their destiny in their own hands and shaped the future!

Their father had five daughters. No son.

And together with the people of Israel they were on their way out of Egypt, through the desert, towards the promised land. Still on their way the people of Israel already are making plans how to share the land, once they arrive where they expect milk and honey.

According to the old law women cannot own and daughters cannot inherit land.

But somewhere along the journey Zelophehad, the father of Machla, Noa, Hogla, Milka and Tirza had died. How could they now settle in the promised land? How would they survive without the permission to own ground?

The sisters turn to the authorities of their people: Moses, elders... the community. It looks like a rather official gathering at the entrance of the tent of the Lord's presence,

the sacred place in those days. Without long bothering the five sisters describe their situation and already suggest a solution. Couldn't they have land of their own in their father's name? And among the pieces of land of their father's brothers?

This request is obviously so unusual that neither Moses nor any other of the elders can immediately decide.

The women's demand asks for changing the law which God had just given to his people at the Mount Sinai. Could that mean these women are turning against God? Hadn't the Israelites just overcome that? This request puts an only fairly stable order at risk again.

The men are insecure and frightened. Finally, Moses takes on the task to introduce the sisters' demand to God. And according to the Hebrew Bible God really and truly answers: "What the daughters of Zelophehad request is right. Give them property among their father's relatives. Let his inheritance pass onto the young women.

Change the law.

Stick to humanity and not to the law.

Give these women what they desperately need for their lives. And from now on: whenever a man dies without leaving a son, his daughter is to inherit!"

Revolution in the old days of the people of Israel. But future and the promise of life to five fatherless daughters without land. They are supposed to inherit. They have the right to live and own what every human being needs for life.

And what is remarkable: they didn't even have to fight for it. They just had to be courageous and stand up for their rights, walk to the place women usually didn't enter and talk to those who usually would not listen to young females without male company! Sounds easy. But wasn't easy at all!

What Zelophehad's five daughters did, was risky and dangerous. But in the end it did not only save their lives, it changed the world: from then on the law was changed for all times.

That is a story of resurrection, if you like. Resurrection from social and historical death. And it is obvious how precious this story must be for women all over the world who haven't really achieved justice and equal rights. The olden days aren't that far away...

Women in so many parts of the world still fight for independence, liberation and human rights. At this very moment the Taliban take away the rights Afghan women had achieved over the past years. At this very moment female babies are not allowed to live, girls and women are forced into slavery and prostitution, widows are burnt, others are raped, women are not allowed to decide themselves whether they want to be pregnant or not... This list could be continued endlessly. In too many parts of our earth people have not yet understood that the human rights are female rights too.

With my mentioning of this short story of five brave young women I want to set a sign: A sign for justice, peace and equality of women and men. I want to encourage myself and others to never give up fighting for our rights.

Make decisions and stand up for them.

Don't hesitate to do what is necessary and just.
Dare to use unusual ways to follow up your aims.
Open your mouths. Speak up! Talk! Argue...
Learn what is right and fight for it.
And understand your fighting as a gift to others to help them to change the world.
Support each other in life and faith.
Share your stories. Good and bad.
Listen to one another.
Pray and trust in God.
And do all you do in the name of a God who wants life for his people – men and women
– not death!”
Walk out from here... - be bold and strong because the Lord, your God is with you.
Amen.