



A Feminist Theological Study of Numbers 27:1-11 and Its Relevance to Inheritance Distribution in the Batak Toba Community

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ABSTRACT

Gender injustice in the Toba Batak tradition which still adheres to patriarchy which requires sons to be heirs while daughters are only given gifts, not official shares, and this condition creates conflict for today's girls who are increasingly aware of their rights. This study aims to examine gender injustice in the distribution of inheritance in the Toba Batak community which is patriarchal. This research method uses a qualitative method with library research and a feminist theological approach based on the text of Numbers 27:1-11 from the thoughts of Rosemary Radford Ruether. The results show that the principle of God's justice can be a theological basis for reviewing the distribution of inheritance to be more equal for women, but still respects the Toba Batak cultural customs, and provides theoretical and practical contributions in creating a fair distribution of inheritance in accordance with the Christian faith. The principle of God's justice in Numbers 27:1-11 becomes a theological basis for reviewing the Toba Batak tradition which eliminates women's rights to inheritance and feminist theology allows reviewing the Toba Batak tradition so that it is in line with the values of love, justice, and equality in Christianity, without eliminating cultural values.

Keywords: *Toba Batak Society, Distribution of Inheritance, Feminist Theology*

INTRODUCTION

Inheritance refers to property or wealth left by a deceased person and passed on to surviving family members. The rules and regulations regarding inheritance vary across cultures, reflecting the uniqueness of each customary region. Inheritance is also a significant aspect of social and economic life, particularly within the Batak Toba community, which remains strongly rooted in its cultural traditions. For example, customary law regarding inheritance often follows a patriarchal system, where males are considered the primary heirs. Hilman Hadihusuma explains that customary inheritance law consists of legal provisions outlining the principles and systems of inheritance law, including regulations concerning inherited property, the heirs, and the process of transferring assets from the deceased to their successors. In other words, it governs the transmission of wealth from one generation to the next. A notable conflict regarding land inheritance in the Batak Toba community occurs in Aek Nabara Village, Simangumban

District. This village adheres to a strong customary system in which males inherit their parents' property, while females receive only a form of gift, or *silehon-lehon*, from their parents, intended as compensation relative to what their male siblings inherit. In Batak Toba terms, land granted to daughters in this manner is called *ulos naso ra buruk*, which is not considered part of the official inheritance. Conflicts over land inheritance often arise due to differing family perspectives on ownership rights and the division of property. As society evolves, factors such as economic development, education, and modernization influence the way the Batak Toba understand and apply inheritance customs, leading daughters to demand their rightful share of parental assets. In Aek Nabara Village, disputes often emerge because family members disagree on who is entitled to the larger portion of inheritance.

The narrative in Numbers 27:1-11 presents a situation that parallels gender injustice in inheritance distribution. Zelophehad's daughters approached Moses to request their father's inheritance after he died without male offspring. They challenged the system that would erase their father's name merely because he had no sons. Their appeal was heard by Moses, who brought it before God. God affirmed that Zelophehad's daughters' request was just and commanded that the inheritance be granted to them. This event marked a significant shift in Israelite law at the time.

The meaning of Numbers 27:1-11 highlights that God values justice and equality, even when it contradicts existing social norms. God sided with the voices of women advocating for their rightful claims. In this cultural context, the passage demonstrates that customary law or tradition is not absolute when it conflicts with divine values of love and justice. God's intervention opens the door for legal and social reforms that ensure fairness and equity for all.

Thus, Numbers 27:1-11 can serve as a theological and moral foundation to encourage fair treatment of daughters in inheritance matters, while still respecting cultural traditions that align with Christ's love and God's justice. This passage provides a framework for advocating gender justice in customary inheritance practices, emphasizing that cultural norms should evolve in accordance with divine principles of equity and compassion.

METHODS

Inheritance refers to property or wealth left by a deceased person and passed on to the surviving family members. The rules and regulations governing inheritance vary across cultures. Inheritance is also a significant aspect of social and economic life, particularly within the Batak Toba community, which remains deeply rooted in its cultural traditions. For example, customary inheritance law often follows a patriarchal system, where males are considered the primary heirs.

Therefore, in this study, the researcher employs a qualitative library research method with a narrative interpretive approach, integrated with a feminist theological framework. This approach is used to explore and clarify the narrative analysis of the Bible and to directly relate it to issues of gender justice in inheritance distribution within the Batak Toba community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Numbers 27:1-11: A Feminist Theological and Narrative Perspective in the Batak Toba Context

Narrative Overview

Numbers 27:1-11, a passage from the Old Testament, presents a unique and significant story regarding women's struggle within a patriarchal social system. The text narrates how five daughters of a man named Zelophehad—Mahla, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah—approached Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and the entire congregation to request their father's inheritance after he died without male heirs. This narrative extends beyond a mere account of inheritance law; it embodies rich theological and social significance, particularly when analyzed through a narrative and feminist theological lens. Narratively, Numbers 27:1-11 is structured systematically, beginning with the introduction of Zelophehad's daughters, highlighting their lineage to contextualize the social and legal backdrop of their request. The daughters are not anonymous figures; they are named individually, which is rare in the Hebrew Bible, where male figures usually dominate the narrative. This naming emphasizes the importance of their role in Israelite history and signals the text's intention to elevate marginalized female voices.

The conflict arises from the tension between prevailing customary law, which allowed only males to inherit family property, and the concrete reality that Zelophehad had no sons. This situation created structural injustice for his daughters, who risked losing both their inheritance and family name. They did not remain passive; instead, they courageously voiced their claims before the highest authorities in Israel—Moses and Eleazar. This demonstrates female initiative and agency in seeking justice, challenging assumptions of women's passivity within ancient Israelite society. In the narrative approach, the story reaches its climax when Moses brings their request before God.

Feminist Theological Perspective

Through the lens of Rosemary Radford Ruether, this narrative represents a moment in which women's voices are not merely acknowledged but become the basis for legal transformation. Ruether emphasizes the importance of elevating women's experiences as sources of theological authority. In this context, the experiences and petition of Zelophehad's daughters function as a form of "social revelation," providing new understanding of divine justice. Feminist theology does not separate faith from women's lived experiences; instead, faith should respond to historical and structural injustices experienced by women.

Thus, Numbers 27:1-11 demonstrates that biblical texts are not static nor inherently patriarchal; they create space for legal reform grounded in love and justice. In Batak Toba culture, patrilineal inheritance systems have historically created gender disparities, privileging sons while marginalizing daughters. However, as shown in Numbers 27:1-11, God affirms women's voices when they claim their rightful inheritance. The story of Zelophehad's daughters illustrates that discriminatory laws can be reformed when divine love and justice are invoked.

In the Batak Toba context, customary inheritance reforms can be guided by principles of love, aligning decision-making with Christian values of equity. Social transformation

through a gender-aware lens allows reinterpretation of oppressive systems to respect the equal dignity of all individuals.

Relevance in the Batak Toba Context (Equality and Customary Reform)

Engaging customary leaders, church figures, and the wider community is essential to foster collective awareness; without inclusive participation, cultural reforms may face resistance. The church has a strategic role as an agent of value transformation, providing theological education grounded in gender equality. Ruether emphasizes that feminist theology serves to correct patriarchal domination in faith understanding, and the church must advocate justice through sermons, seminars, and pastoral guidance.

Inclusive inheritance practices can be formulated by granting equal rights to sons and daughters. Research indicates that some Batak Toba families, particularly those with only daughters, are beginning to shift their views. Reforming customary rules does not eliminate tradition; it adapts it to universal values of justice and contemporary societal developments. Many family conflicts in Batak Toba arise from unfair inheritance distribution, yet principles of love encourage sharing and prioritize collective well-being over personal gain. This aligns with biblical teachings, such as Philippians 2:4, underscoring that love should guide all relationships. In this way, inheritance is not merely a customary obligation but a tangible expression of Christian faith that fosters family harmony.

Modern Indonesian civil inheritance law already provides equal rights for males and females, offering a framework for reinterpreting customary practices. Consequently, tradition and modern law need not conflict but can be integrated to achieve justice. Cultural transformation is gradual and requires sustained effort. The Batak Toba younger generation should understand that customs are valuable heritage but can be reinterpreted according to gospel values that uphold gender equality. Through this approach, societal change is not merely normative but has tangible impacts on daily life. In this study, prior research is incorporated as a theoretical and contextual foundation to understand how Numbers 27:1-11 can be interpreted within patriarchal cultures, particularly the Batak Toba community. Previous studies help identify gaps and challenges in implementing women's inheritance rights from a feminist theological perspective and demonstrate the practical relevance of biblical texts in contemporary social and cultural contexts.

The difference between this study and prior research lies in its approach: employing narrative interpretation of Numbers 27:1-11 combined with feminist theological methodology, and directly relating it to Batak Toba culture. This approach not only advances academic discourse but also provides practical pathways for advocating gender justice in inheritance practices while respecting cultural values.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion of the data in this study, it can be concluded that understanding customary law is essential as a cultural identity for the Batak Toba community. The narrative of Numbers 27:1-11 demonstrates that God listens to and affirms women's voices. Through the courage of Zelophehad's daughters in claiming their inheritance rights, Israelite inheritance law underwent transformation, illustrating that

God's justice is inclusive and open to reforming patriarchal traditions. Consequently, women are able to attain inheritance rights equal to men. From a feminist theological perspective, this text provides both critique and renewal of patriarchal social structures. Women's voices are not marginalized but recognized as instruments for legal and social transformation, showing that feminist theology is not merely a social movement but also part of God's work in manifesting justice through women's experiences. In the Batak Toba community, traditional inheritance practices have historically prioritized male heirs as successors of the clan. However, with the influence of Christian faith and changing social dynamics, the community is increasingly acknowledging women's rights to inheritance. Cases in villages such as Aek Nabara demonstrate a growing awareness that women also have the right to inherit, reinforcing justice and equality. This study further indicates that Batak Toba customs do not need to be abolished but can be reinterpreted to align with biblical principles of justice. Thus, the principles illustrated in Numbers 27:1-11 can serve as theological inspiration for the Batak Toba community to reform inheritance traditions, ensuring women are respected as integral members of both family and community. A feminist theological study of this text provides a strong foundation for advocating women's rights in inheritance distribution, showing that the God who responds to Zelophehad's daughters is also present to uphold justice and gender equality in Batak Toba society.

It is recommended that the Batak Toba community open dialogue among customary leaders, church figures, and younger generations to discuss inheritance reform. These reforms need not abolish tradition but should adjust it to ensure fairness for all family members, regardless of gender. The Church should strengthen its role in promoting gender justice based on biblical principles through sermons, seminars, and congregational discussions, while serving as a practical model of equality in leadership, ministry, and social rights, including inheritance. For future researchers, further evaluation of the narrative text of Numbers 27:1-11 is suggested, as well as comparative studies with other Indonesian cultures that have similar inheritance systems, providing broader and more applicable recommendations for reform.

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