

# Invisible Pillars

The Patronage Practised by Women

In recent years, the patron-client relationship has been utilised as a useful model for understanding the dynamics of Muslim societies as well as the churches that have emerged within them. Jayson Georges in his book on ministering in patronage cultures offers a simple definition of patronage: it is a “reciprocal, asymmetrical relationship.”<sup>115</sup> Relationship is the foundation; patronage is most commonly external to institutions. It is also asymmetrical in that the patron is the possessor of the greater resources. These resources are not necessarily financial. The concept of patronage has been expanded to identify more diverse areas of capital, such as the social and religious. But reciprocity is still expected. Patronage is not benevolence. The client’s loyalty, defence, and public praise are offered in exchange for sponsorship, protection or other capital offered by the patron.

Most of the literature on patronage in Islamic settings has examined the role of male patrons, though there is a growing body of literature identifying female patronage in the areas of art and architecture. This has been a classic area of patronage for women in Western history. Western literature also offers us Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the imposing dowager from *Pride and Prejudice* whose patronage is framed within a narrow-minded asperity that emasculates, producing the fawning and equally narrow Mr. Collins. A more positive example of religious patronage would be Khadijah, wife of the Prophet Mohammed. Though her patronage was not initially

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<sup>115</sup> Jason Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures: Biblical Models and Missional Implications* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 19.

'religious,' her encouragement and resources were a decisive factor in the launching and growth of Islam.

Positive examples of female patronage outside of the arts are rare. It is possible that the influence of female patronage, especially in the Muslim world, is unseen due to the assumed limits of female agency in a world where the public space is controlled by men. However, I would suggest that patronage practised by Muslim, and Muslim background, women is of such a different shape and character to typical patronage that it frequently goes unseen.

My experience of over 35 years in Turkey will form the context for some observations I would like to offer. I will first focus on female patronage in Turkish culture in general and then will look briefly on how patronage has been a factor in the Muslim background church in Turkey.

### **Collective patronage**

As a new worker in Turkey, a key ingredient in my language and culture training were the 'tea parties' held daily in the apartment building in which I lived. Turkish women generally did their cooking and cleaning chores in the morning, reserving the late afternoon to gather together to knit, crochet and sample the delectable treats proudly presented by that day's hostess, washing them down with tulip shaped glasses of sweet tea. The conversation – once I could understand what it was – revolved around children, husbands, recipes, and despair over the inability to lose weight.

I was taken aback one day when one of the neighbours produced a notebook and then, one by one, each of the neighbours solemnly presented her with a 'çeyrek' – a small medallion made of gold. I had been used to seeing similar tokens affixed to the bride's dress at a wedding or pinned on a new baby, usually by relatives or close

friends. They represented a significant chunk of a monthly wage so to see nine unrelated females each pass one over was quite a shock! I was further stunned to see, after each was entered in the notebook, that they were gathered up and presented together to one beaming neighbour. She gushed about what her sudden windfall would mean and how it would be used.

I learned that this ‘*altın günü*’ (Day of Gold) was a monthly event in our building and that it was a common custom amongst Turkish women. More affluent groups or buildings did it weekly. In villages, it might be done quarterly due to the expense required. Başak Bilecen in her work on these events within diasporic migrant circles, refers to them as ‘lending circles’ or ‘rotating savings and credit associations.’<sup>116</sup> Their purpose is to allow women, who generally do not have free access to the family resources, to benefit periodically from a larger sum of money than they normally have access to.

In this way, the group operates collectively as a patron and its patronage fulfils Georges’ definition. It is most definitely a relationship. Bilecen stresses both the trust and relationship factors within the groups and the dissatisfaction of women when they sense that one member is only interested in the financial aspect. It is asymmetrical in that the resources of the group together are greater than any one individual. And it is reciprocal in that each member participates in both giving and receiving.

We see a similar type of collective patronage occurring when a Turkish woman receives unexpected guests. The term for ‘unexpected guest in Turkish is to be ‘*Allah’ın*

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<sup>116</sup> Başak Bilecen, “*Altın Günü*: migrant women’s social protection networks,” *Comparative Migration Studies*, 7 no. 11 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0114-x>.

*misafir*" – God's guest. The Qur'an frequently acquaints guests with angelic visitation, linking this to the importance of hospitality. The veneration of hospitality, and providing a generous welcome to guests, is deeply rooted in Turkish culture, even in the most secular home.

My husband and I often visited isolated believers at a time, long before cell phones, when having a landline phone was an expensive commodity. We frequently had to arrive unannounced. And while receiving unexpected guests may be an honour, they still need to be fed and welcomed generously. Male guests would never witness what happens behind the scenes, but as a woman, I was usually allowed in the kitchen to observe, if not help. The wife would quickly thrust her feet into the plastic shoes reserved for outdoor work and, throwing on her coat, urgently knock at the doors of her neighbours. They responded instantly. Some brought food they had prepared for their own families' dinners. One started a soup from a prepared package, adding an entire block of margarine to give it the taste of homemade. The kitchen was full of 'patrons,' providing resources within the context of a relationship, secure in knowing they would someday soon be on the receiving end.

### **Hospitality itself as patronage**

The third epistle of John is often presented as the template for Christian hospitality. The shortest book in the Bible by word count, it is a personal letter directed to 'Gaius' with a commendation and an exhortation – the former to praise him for his hospitality to travelling Christian workers. While the word 'hospitality' is not present in the Greek but is inferred in this passage, the most common Greek word used when it is expressed elsewhere in the Bible is '*philoxenia*.' This word does not carry the connotation of having one's Christian friends around for snacks and to watch football. Instead, it

means ‘love of strangers.’ Christian hospitality is unique in the West in that it prepares a bed and a table for those who were previously unknown.

This concept in the East, however, is not unique. As we discussed under collective patronage, hospitality amongst Muslims is a cultural norm. It is also closely tied to the honour/shame paradigm present in those cultures, indeed, as is female patronage as well. The collective patronage shown during a period of unexpected guests is as much a protection from shame as it is a form of patronage. Presenting as a stingy or unprepared hostess would be the fodder of gossip.

But is it *philoxenia*? If one is generally on the receiving end of abundant Middle Eastern hospitality, it appears to be completely selfless, a profligate expression of love and welcome. When it is showered on strangers who are never seen again, it certainly presents that appearance, though the concept of patronage is always present. The host provides the best food and drink, the best place at the table and the best accommodation. But within this asymmetrical temporary relationship, the guest is still not without responsibility. A good Middle Eastern guest would know not to refuse any of these offers as it would offend the host. The guest would know exactly the right amount of food to eat; enough to avoid giving insult but not eating so much that it stresses the family resources. A family will often prepare their entire week’s food for a guest in order to be seen a generous and lavish host and when running out of food is a deep insult.

Hospitality as patronage moves more to the fore in the context of relationship or being a repeat guest. If reciprocity is not forthcoming, other means to prevent the relationship from becoming too asymmetrical may be utilised. I have frequently observed this in Turkey when the relationship is between a local and a foreigner. The foreigner has dutifully studied about Turkish culture and enjoys being a recipient of all

the expressions of hospitality that she has read about. Her neighbours are clearly so thrilled to be showering their hospitality on her – who is she to deny them this pleasure? Maybe she feels awkward to offer reciprocate invitations, unsure if her food will be accepted and appreciated. Or perhaps she has young children or works full time and has not managed to reciprocate. In any case, the patrons will find other ways to balance the relationship because patronage is reciprocal as well as asymmetrical. One may ask for English lessons for her son. Another may request that medications not easily found in country be obtained. This is not a ‘tit for tat’ situation but emerges from female commitment to collective patronage.

### **Following Paul and Apollos**

Much of the literature about patronage is written through Western eyes, looking from an individualistic cultural perspective on collectivistic cultures where patronage has generally been the prevailing paradigm. This is no less true in the models of church in what is basically the majority of cultures in the world. And yet, missionary-led gatherings of Muslim background believers are generally built on a Western-inspired ‘equality’ model. These types of churches promote individualistic conversions, individualistic discipleship, individual gifting. Jayson Georges claims that Western missionaries “rarely notice this prominent cultural reality.”<sup>117</sup> While this may be true for some, I think it is equally true that many Western missionaries have observed it and rejected it as a biblical paradigm for a church.

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<sup>117</sup> Georges, *Ministering*, back cover.

It has been a privilege to arrive in Turkey just as so many seeds sown by previous generations were beginning to bear fruit. The four tiny fellowships that cared for Muslim-background believers in my early years had no names; like the book of Acts, they were ‘the church in İzmir’ and ‘the church in Adana.’ As they developed into modalities with legal structures churches were named, but amongst the believers they continued to be ‘Ahmet’s church’ or ‘Mehmet’s church.’ As a Westerner, I initially found this disturbing until I realised that it was a reflection of how local believers viewed church leadership. The pastor was most definitely the patron. And once the balance changed between missionary led churches to locally led, the concept has become even more prominent. Strong, apostolic church leaders have formed networks and groupings of churches. Their church members are loyal; being clients, or church members, under a strong, charismatic leader strengthens one’s identity and stature. Some patrons bring resources of vision and strong leadership. But others bring resources of humility and compassion. Still, in each case they are strong patrons of the clients in their churches.

Western-led attempts at egalitarian church leadership have failed in Turkey so we are unable to observe the impact of female pastors. Like in the West, gifted women leaders are finding roles in parachurch ministry situations. Even in situations where they have been a patron, they are rarely recognised as such because the role of the pastor carries the main patron connotation.

### **Unseen patrons**

In 2007, I attended a conference in Southeast Asia that focused on developments in church planting amongst Muslim people groups worldwide. As was common in previous

decades, the more than 500 people who attended were predominantly white males, hailing from North America and Europe.

In each of the plenary sessions, following a time of a worship, a believer from a Muslim-background came forward to share his journey of faith. These were uplifting, encouraging stories, intended to inspire us to the fruit that would be the result of the days of research and strategizing that were the focus of the conference.

However, I never saw any reflection on the fact that in almost every one of the testimonies, it had been a woman who had been the prime ‘patron’ of the (male) believer’s spiritual journey. It was a Christian background woman sharing with a fellow Jordanian Muslim. It was a white, missionary woman sharing with a Muslim theological student in Bangladesh. And there were others. But despite the fact that the purpose of our conference was to gather empirical research, the impact of female patrons remained unseen.

Female patronage within the Kingdom may continue to remain unseen and it may be that its influence lies in its invisibility. Just like the powerful collective patronage amongst neighbours and friends in Muslim society, female believers need to carve spaces of non-threatening patronage. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that “even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers...” I believe the same thing could be said for mothers. We can see in Central Asia and Bulgaria a proliferation of women in church leadership who act openly as patrons. But even in countries like Turkey where it is more rare, female patrons have much to offer the church.

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## **About the Author**

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