

**ABUNDANT LIFE  
FOR ALL**  
A LIVING WAGE SERIES

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Why should the  
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because he has  
no son?”  
(Num. 27:3,4)**

# Zelophehad's Daughters for Then and Now

By elmira Nazombe, Ed. D

**The book of Numbers records a useful lesson of women's boldness for our time.**

Zelophehad was one of the slaves liberated from Egypt by Moses who spent the next 40 years wandering in the wilderness. Zelophehad had five daughters and with his death, according to custom, the daughters had no claim to any land that he owned because they were women. A census established land inheritance and women were not counted in the census.<sup>1</sup> Here's more of the story:

*Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward.... The names of his daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. (Numbers 27:1 New Revised Standard Version)*

In these days of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis, who are the “Daughters of Zelophehad”?

They are the so-called “*essential workers*”: tipped workers, low-wage workers, farm workers, domestic workers, nursing home workers, care workers and immigrant workers. They are families of African American and Latinx men and women who have died or were killed at the hands of police in cities and towns across the nation. They are people living in poverty, especially people of color, dying in disproportionate numbers.

We have seen these workers -- especially women workers, come *forward* because they have been invisible within society. They see their possibility of abundant life threatened because they do not have power within the structures of society. These “essential workers” are taking to the streets to declare that a different reality is not only possible but necessary for now and for the future. They are willing to challenge an unjust status quo.

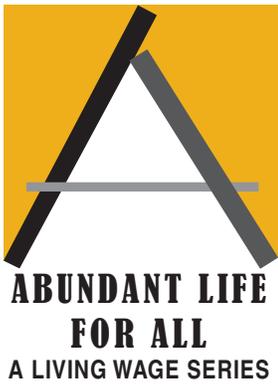
*They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and all the congregation at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they said, (Num. 27:2)*

They are standing before hospital administrators, employers, farm owners, food industry leaders, food sellers and industry owners. They are standing before city councils, state governors and representatives, senators and even presidents to speak their truth and make demands.

*“Our father died in the wilderness... Why should the name of our father be taken away... because he has no son? (Num. 27:3,4)*



1. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, The “Daughters of Zelophehad: Bible” [jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/daughters-of-zelophehad-bible](http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/daughters-of-zelophehad-bible). Accessed: October 27, 2020



“  
**Give to us a  
possession  
among our  
father’s brothers.”**  
(Num. 27:4)



Essential workers are saying: “We remember that we have been living for centuries in this place, struggling against racism and poverty. Many of us remember slavery. We remember those who came before us, dying without ever being given rights that are “guaranteed” to so many others. Many of us came to the United States recently with the hope of a better life, only to find exploitation to rival the places that we came from. We have picked and processed the food that comes to your tables. We have cared for your elderly family members in nursing homes. Too many of our young men have died needlessly in the streets in the face of the impunity of the perpetrators and the systems that protect them -- like Zelophehad’s daughters, who sought to retain control of their father’s property in spite of rules that would have left them with nothing.

*“Give to us a possession among our father’s brothers.” (Num. 27:4)*

Today’s “daughters” are saying “recognize our rights and our rightful place within society: a living wage, paid medical leave, unemployment compensation, universal and affordable healthcare, safe working conditions, clean air and water and reversal of a warming climate, protections against COVID-19 including facemasks, protective gear, safe working conditions, affordable housing that makes safe distancing really possible.

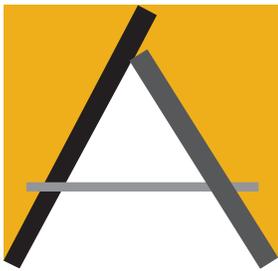
*And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father’s brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. (Num. 27:6-7)*

Across the nation people are moving forward to affirm and demand the recognition of the rights of our modern-day “daughters” of Zelophehad. They are marching in the Poor People’s Campaign, the Movement for Black Lives, through nurses unions and domestic workers’ alliances, with migrant women workers’ organizations, farm workers’ unions, teachers’ and meat packing workers’ organizations, coal miners, the Sunrise Movement, United Methodist Women, the Fight for \$15, the One Fair Wage campaign, United for a Fair Economy, citizen groups working for clean and safe water and affordable energy, coalitions, associations and alliances.

*The heads of the ancestral houses of the clans of the descendants... came forward and spoke in the presence of Moses and the leaders... “But if they are married into another Israelite tribe... And when the Jubilee of the Israelites comes,... their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our ancestral tribe.” (Num. 36:1,3,4)*

There are those among today’s “leaders” who insist that the protest and outcry are out of proportion to the needed response to the crisis and step forward to challenge the rights of the “daughters.” Some, who have lived for centuries with the privilege of wealth and race domination over others, continue to look for ways to hold onto their power. A few have even risen up and armed themselves to fight for the privilege that comes with their racial identity.

*Then Moses commanded the Israelites according to the word of the Lord saying, “The descendants of the tribe are right in what they are saying... ‘Every daughter who possesses an inheritance in any tribe of the Israelites shall marry one from the clan of her father’s tribe, so that all Israelites may continue to possess their ancestral inheritance.’” (Num. 36:5,8)*



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**This is the time  
for the boldness  
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One commentator notes that this time Moses’ decision rested on his *interpretation* of “the word of the Lord” rather than a direct consultation.<sup>2</sup> Moses’ second decree granted the daughters’ rights but those rights were to be constrained by marriage requirements for the female heirs. If the daughters were to receive their inheritance they would have to marry within the clan. That way the clan’s right to the land would be maintained and male/traditional cultural power relationships would also be maintained.

Can we dare today to go further than the daughters of Zelophehad were able to go? Those of us who carry the biblical vision of Jubilee must insist that Jubilee solutions encompass both the present crisis and long-term strategies. Jubilee calls us to a permanent stance not wedded to “the law” of each generation or preservation of privilege, but to God’s vision of inclusion for all, a vision that is *always* ready to consider change. This vision must be both a road map and “a moral heart for change.”<sup>3</sup> Abundant life must be abundant life for all not just for some. It is time to challenge systemic racism and oppression.

Today’s “daughters” remember the challenge of Isaiah. 58:7 NRSV:

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the chains of injustice  
And untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free,...*

**Decent affordable housing, healthcare for all, paid sick leave**

*And when you see the naked, to clothe them...*

**No more poverty, free childcare, a living wage**

*and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

**Everyone is a part of the kin-dom, the family of God. Everyone has a place at the table.**

This is the time for the boldness of the daughters of Zelophehad. This is the fast that we must choose now, to join today’s “daughters” of Zelophehad in working for Abundant Life for All.

**About the Author:**

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2. Rabbi Silvina Chemen, “The Daughters of Zelophehad: Power and Uniqueness” [myjewishlearning.com/article/the-daughters-of-zelophehad-power-and-uniqueness](https://myjewishlearning.com/article/the-daughters-of-zelophehad-power-and-uniqueness). Accessed October 27, 2020

3. “Sounding the Jubilee Horn for Abundant Life”, William J. Barber II and Liz Theoharis, Abundant Life Issue 7. September 2020, [unitedmethodistwomen.org/abundant-life-for-all](https://unitedmethodistwomen.org/abundant-life-for-all)

*Abundant Life for All* is a series addressing aspects of the United Methodist Women Living Wage for All Campaign for use by members in programs for education and action. Edited by elmira Nazombe.



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