

Woman in the Divine Vision Biblical Perspective and Prospects

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Through this well researched article Prof. Paul Kalluveettil establishes beyond doubt the futility of attempts to launch androcentric preconceptions on the authority of the Sacred Scripture. In the correct Biblical perspective woman is not an afterthought of God or a commodity at the disposal of man. The Bible does not attest any sort of discrimination against woman based on her gender. Woman in the divine vision is an equal, inalienable and sine qua non partner who always dared to step in to accomplish the divine demands and save the face of her partner with a selfless devotion and motherly care.

- Editor

1. Introduction

The status of woman in the society is an ever-pertinent issue. Recently studies have come out on this theme and even women have become more conscious of their dignity and rights. Feminist movements are fighting for equality with men in all the spheres. This trend is even seen in the Church. Many leaders are slowly becoming aware of the need to empower women in the Church structures. Unfortunately the Asian Churches have not yet paid proper attention to this burning issue. Many women scholars in the West have come out with feminist interpretation of the Bible and have tried to re-read it from a feminist perspective. They raise their voice against the patriarchal stamp of Scripture. Some want to re-depict God as mother, and try to efface any negative trace concerning women in the Bible. There already exists a feminist hermeneutics¹. While evaluating all these trends one may come to the following conclusion. Women are still marginalized not only in the societies but also in the Church. They are not given the proper dignity and authority as envisaged in the divine vision, as expressed in the Bible. On the other hand, some studies seem to tend to extreme positions, and the authors try to read into the Bible their preconceived ideas and ideals. They seem to forget that Bible is the Word of God, which is written not to defend man or woman. Indeed, it describes the acts of God, who continues to bestow his blessings, irrespective of human unfaithfulness and wickedness. Anyone can be wicked, both male and female. Our focus should not be on the human stories, but on the divine endeavours. One has to look at Bible as the Word of God, who speaks to us in our existential situations. Hence it is of paramount importance to re-discover the divine vision about woman in the Sacred Scripture. This introductory study is intended to provide incentive to

the Asian scholars to take up elaborate and existential investigations on the theme from an Asian context, which may serve to make the Church genuinely a vibrant movement of the Asian Jesus.

PART ONE: THE OT PERSPECTIVE

2. Woman in the Creation Vision

There underlie insights in both the Priestly and Yahwistic accounts of creation

2.1. Priestly Account

Before the creation of human beings God seems to address thus the divine assembly: "Let us make Adam in our image, according to our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Gen.1: 26). Then the next verse reports: "So God created Adam in his image; in the image of *Elohim* he created him, as male and female he created them"². In Hebrew, Adam is grammatically singular in form, but plural in connotation. Thus here it stands not for masculine man, but for human beings, including both male and female. Hence it does not call forth the male superiority. As P.D. Miller has illustrated, we find in the text a shift back and forth between singular and plural in the divine world (our image/his image). It is matched by a shift back and forth from singular to plural in the human world ("Let us make man... let them have dominion"; "So God created man... he created him, male and female he created them"). In both the divine world and the human we are dealing with the relationship of the one and the many³. To conclude, one can say that the text does not refer to male alone. Both man and woman are mentioned there. Their equal status is illustrated. In the divine design they are equals. Gen.1: 28 makes clear this fact. God blessed the male and female and gave them the grace of fertility and authority over the whole creation.

2.2. The Yahwistic Account

This text in Gen.2: 4b-25 presents a human/earth oriented creation story, where God himself assumes an anthropomorphic form⁴. The author wrote the account from a Canaanite background. The dry land needed rain for vegetation and the main concern of the inhabitants was how to assure fertility of land, of animals and of humans. For this they practiced fertility cults in which the priest used to take the role of Baal, the deity of fertility and had sexual intercourse with the Temple virgins (*devadasi*). Woman was considered as inferior, whom men used for their sexual gratification. She had no role in the Canaanite creation myths. In this background the Yahwist wrote the creation story in which woman is presented as the mate and companion of man. Yahweh says that it was not good for the man to be alone. He made *wo-man* from the rib taken out of the man. Their intimate relationship is implied in the very names: '*ish*// '*isshâ*⁵ (Hebrew); *man*//*wo-man*; *male*//*fe-male* (English); *nara*//*nari* (Sanskrit). The Hebrew words '*ish*//

'*isshâ* show their inseparability; one is the definition of the other, the synonym of the other, the symbol and image of the other, the echo of the other. At the sight of '*isshâ 'ish* exclaims: "Thus is the bone of my bones and the flesh of my flesh"⁶ (Gen 2:23). Man's exclamation implies that male and female compliment each other, that they complete each other, that they are inseparable. His statement shows the purity of the marital relationship, its unity and indissolubility. Man's vocation is to lead a married life. One has to compare this vision with the *devadasi* system, in which there is only sacred prostitution, where there is no married life. In the J. account woman is simply not for sexual gratification; she is not a procreation machine. In the biblical story she is both mate (*ina*) and helper (*tuna*) and comrade (*saqi*) Gen 2:18). Man and woman are conceived as equals. Their union is this sign of love.

3. Woman and the Fall

It is the story of the fall that has provided the material for the early Christian authors to malign women. They have taken it in literal sense. This is a wrong approach.⁷

3.1. The True Meaning of the Story

The modern scholars have illustrated that behind the archaic and primitive story the Yahwist has brought out an advanced covenant theology⁸. During the monarchic times he was reflecting upon the entry of evil into the world at the beginning of the human history, on the basis of the covenant experience of the people. Although Yahweh graciously made Israel his chosen people and showered upon them the graces of numerous progeny, Kingdom and Temple, Israel was often tempted to become unfaithful to the Lord. Now he wants to warn the people. Through the covenant concept Yahwist looks at the dark side of human existence, sin and evil. It was because humans violated the covenant relationship and broke the covenant commandment. Sin, according to him, was an act of freedom. Adam and Eve were never under compulsion. The serpent was only a mere tempter. Thus the story of the fall offers reflective and interpretative history. Now Israel has to be careful. If they do not keep the covenant commandment, the story of the primitive couple will be repeated in them. They also will become cursed and will be banished from the Promised Land, and cease to be a nation ("You will die", Gen 3:4).

3.2. The Role of Eve

Some pertinent questions call forth our attention. Why did the serpent engage the woman in conversation and not the man? Traditional explanations such as woman as inherently weak and incurably curious do not find support in biblical text. P.A. Viviano states⁹ that the author portrays both man and woman as listening to the serpent. She eats the fruits and gives it to the man "who is with her" (Gen.3: 6). The fact that woman is presented first seems to be a literary device that serves to keep the story moving. The serpent is introduced first, then the woman, then the man. When God comes to the garden the man is addressed first, then the woman, then the serpent. When God punishes them, the serpent is punished first, then the woman, then the man. This movement from serpent-woman-man, man-woman-serpent,

serpent-woman-man maintains an even flow to the story. It is wrong to attribute more significance beyond this fact. It is interesting to note that the woman is never the explicit recipient of the command of prohibition (Gen.2: 11,17).

3.3. The Meaning of Yahweh's Words

In addressing the woman Yahweh mentions the pang of childbirth, her passion for husband and his dominion over her (Gen.3: 16), as if they were punitive measures. Scholars point out that these clauses are to be understood as etiological explanations. The author seems to look at the natural pain associated with childbirth as the cause of sin. Really it results from the process of childbirth. Jesus refers to this phenomenon in his last discourse: "A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world" (Jn.16: 21). The desire of a woman for her husband has an etiological explanation. That her husband would rule over her reflects the position of woman in ancient society. One should not forget that from the biblical perspective a woman achieves the fulfilment of her being and her honoured place in the community by belonging to her husband and being a mother. *'isshâ* and *'ish* belong to another. "They shall be one flesh" (Gen.2: 24). In Gen.2: 24 man is said to cleave to his wife; in 3:16 he shall rule over her. Thus the relationship becomes complimentary and complete. The Hebrew verb *masal* is used in the Old Testament texts in order to substantiate the all-embracing order of the whole created world, God being the ruler and humans sharing in that divine prerogative¹⁰. Thus it does not indicate harsh exploitive subjugation¹¹. Finally one should not forget the positive implication of Gen.3: 15, in which the Fathers of the Church find *protoevangelium*. It is the offspring of woman who will crush the head of the serpent. In other words, it is the woman who will become the instrument in bringing salvation to the humankind. Another important fact is to be noted. It is Eve who names her offspring – an activity, which denotes authority¹².

4. Women in Exodux Event

Persons like the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah, the mother of Moses, Miriam his sister deserve our attention. A study of their roles will shed light on the sublime position the women occupied in the Hebrew society.

4.1. The Midwives

These Israelite women were employed by Pharaoh in order to slaughter the Hebrew male children at their very birth (Ex.1: 15-21). They were slaves in Egypt and ostensibly powerless to defy the monarch. Hence they could not openly flout Pharaoh. These shrewd women had then recourse to trickery¹³. The king was counting on the demoralized women to do anything to save themselves, even when it is at the expense of other Hebrews. But Shiphrah and Puah "feared God". It meant that these brave women bowed before a higher law than the edit of the king, who demanded that they abet the life-giving power at work in the Hebrew community. They let the Hebrew boys live. When questioned by the king they defended themselves with straight faces against Pharaoh's charge of insubordination. Their lives were at stake.

Their sly comparison between the vigorous Hebrew women and the pampered Egyptians came through as totally credible to the 'wise' king. There is a great relish in this uneven conflict between the effete elite and the shrewd and oppressed slaves. Indeed, their explanation smacks of mockery.

Ex. 1:20 and 22 juxtapose the action of God and Pharaoh, the conflicting forces of life and death. God stands by the midwives, protecting them from the king's wrath for non-compliance. He blesses them with enduring progeny. Their clever boldness had secured continued offspring for the Hebrew community, so the midwives are rewarded in kind. It is interesting to note that these two poor women are mentioned by names, while Pharaoh the mighty monarch of the world is left unnamed. In the biblical times name had great significance. It provides a person importance and acceptance in earthly and the future-life. Now the monarch of the world is denied this favour, while the wretched slaves, who do not further appear in the story, is given this privilege.

4.2. Mother of Moses

While the Hebrew slaves in Egypt did not dare to defy the edit of Pharaoh to throw the male children into the river, the mother of Moses had the courage to disobey the king (Ex.1: 22-2:1-4). Such a decision seems to have come from her alone, since the husband does not appear on the scene. She protected the child from the death at great risk. The mother hid him for three months. As it became impossible to hide the child any longer, she hatched a plan. The baby was being prepared for his destiny with motherly love. She got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. She made his sister stand at a distance to see what would happen to him. In God's providence the mother got the baby back and even got payment for nursing him (Ex.2: 8-9).

4.3. A Self-Empowered Woman

4.3.1. An Underestimated Figure

The role of Miriam, the sister of Moses in the liberation history of Israel has not yet fully investigated¹⁴. Although she played a very important part in the Exodus and wilderness events alongside Moses and Aaron, it is not given sufficient focus in the narratives. Only Mic. 6:4 gives Miriam equal status with the male leaders. In His case against Israel Yahweh proclaims: "I brought you up out of Egypt, and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam." According to the divine design she is especially called by Yahweh to bring Israel up out of Egypt and redeem them from the land of slavery¹⁵. The seven texts, which mention her by name, bear repeated testimony of her leadership role in the wilderness community. One may call Miriam a self-empowered woman. It was not the male characters that made her a leader and prophetess. She organized women folk during the march from Egypt towards the Promised Land. She displayed admirable qualities like energetic initiative and untiring enthusiasm. Even when the male leaders hesitated and became timid, Miriam never hesitated and raised her prophetic voice for the cause of Yahweh.

4.3.2. *An Astute Girl*

As a girl she appears in Exodus 2:4: "And his sister stationed herself from a distance to know what would be done to him"¹⁶. Although Miriam was presumably deputized by the mother to guard basket in the reeds, the text does not mention it. Rather the author presents the sister as the active agent, as if by her own initiative she did it. This is implied in the use of the verb *wattetassab*. With all eyes and ears she remained standing. Then Pharaoh's daughter came, found the vessel and opened it. Miriam immediately ran to that scene. She volunteered to fetch a nursing woman. When the permission was granted, the astute girl went and called the child's mother to suckle him (Ex.2: 7-9).

4.3.3. *A Singer Prophetess*

The Book of Exodus in its plague narratives does not speak about the role of Miriam. It is certain that she played a vital role in conscientizing and organizing the Hebrew slaves with her fiery speeches and zealous actions. She became the undisputed women leader as the text of Ex.15: 20-21 implies: "And Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took the drum in her hand and all the women went forth behind her with drums and with dances. And Miriam sang back to them: Sing of Yahweh, for he acted exaltingly, exaltingly! Horse and his driver he hurled into the sea!"¹⁷ The majority of the scholars consider her song as the original poem, from which the so-called Moses' song some how grew¹⁸. The statement "all the women went forth behind her" denotes that Miriam was the unifying force, whose actions spontaneously won over unanimous backing. All, with heart and soul rallied around her and joined in her divine inspired response to the saving act of Yahweh. They, with drums and dances exalted the Lord, and exulted in him. Their leader is called the prophetess, one who "lived, moved and had her being" (Acts 17:28) in God. The title prophet in the Old Testament stands for the official representative of Yahweh, with whose authority he/she speaks and acts. Only four other biblical women are described as prophetess: "Deborah (Jud.4: 4), Huldah (II Kgs.22: 14), Noadiah (Neh. 6:14) and the anonymous wife of Isaiah (cf.Ez.13: 17; Joe 13:1).

4.3.4. *A Rebel Prophetess*

As we know, the prophets were rebels. Often they raised their voices against injustices and other evils. We find in Num.12: 1-15 such an incident, which in the present version depicts Miriam in a negative perspective¹⁹. Different layers of tradition are put together in the text. Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses on account of his marriage to a Cushite woman and concerning his authority in rendering God's word. As Num.12: 1 uses feminine singular verb, one can surmise that Miriam along was confronting Moses on the matter. The tension in the first event does not seem to centre on the race of Moses' wife, but on the uniqueness of his authority. Was he taking a foreign wife as a sign of his authority to choose freely? The second issue is thus stated: "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" It seems that Miriam as a prophetess was voicing a matter

of community concern. The author of the account seeks to establish the primacy of Moses as God's spokesperson, but in doing so he does not negate the authenticity of Miriam as mediator of God's word. He immediately in v.3 inserts a parenthetical note to the reader about the humility of Moses. Thereby he wants to undercut Miriam and Aaron's complaint and seeks to persuade the reader to stand with Moses in his defence against his siblings. There is a uniqueness and supremacy about Moses' position, which must be recognized and acknowledged by all.

5. Women in the Tribal Times

Two women, Jael and Deborah deserve special mention.

5.1. A Shrewd and Courageous Woman

Jael, the wife of Heber (Jg. 4:17) was a member of a splinter group of the generally pro-Israelite Kenites (Jg. 4:11), who settled in the North of Sinai. They were metalworkers who had peaceful relations with Hazor, the enemy of Israel (Jg. 11:16)²⁰. The name Jael means "wild goat". The names of animals for women are usually considered as non-theological in Israel. But Jael acts as a vigorous, energetic and fearless person, and hence lives up to her name. When the army of Hazor was routed, Sisera, the military commander fled on foot to the tent of Jael, expecting sanctuary there. The story does not speak of the presence of Heber. Jael acts alone and independently with no male supervision²¹. This non-Israelite woman stood for the just cause of eliminating the oppressive and aggressive political structure. No personal gain was envisaged. Jael went out of her tent, greeted Sisera by addressing him 'My lord' (Jg.4: 17-22). She brought him into her tent and gave him milk to drink and made him sleep comfortably. Then she drove a pin through his temple until it went down into the ground. Thus the army commander died at the hand of a woman (Jg.4: 9). When Barak arrived in pursuit of Sisera, Jael met him and showed the corpse of his enemy. Deborah in her song thus eulogizes the heroine:

"Most blessed among women is Jael
The wife of Heber the Kenite
Among women in tents she is most blessed!" (Jg.5:24)

The beautiful depiction of the scene ends thus:

"At her feet he slumped, he fell, he sprawled.
At her feet her slumped, he fell.
At the place where he slumped, there he fell, slain!" (v.27)

5.2. A Prophetess Leader

As T.J.Schneider points out, Deborah is introduced with a string of seven feminine nouns²². She was prophetess, wife of Lappidoth and judge of Israel who made her seat of judgement under a palm tree in the Ephraimite hill country (Jg.4: 4-9,14). As her name signified, she was a bee, ever busy and occupied for the cause of Yahweh. When Jabin of Hazor oppressed the people, she sent and summoned Barak. Then she uttered the command of Yahweh in the first person singular. Barak was unwilling to take up the mission

unless accompanied by Deborah, who repaid his reluctance with a taunt: She will go, but victory will not mean glory for Barak, since a non-Israelite woman will deal the final blow. Accompanied by Deborah Barak could defeat Sisera's forces. As the enemy was destroyed Deborah in union with Barak sang the praises of Yahweh (Jg.5:1-31)²³. Although there is a dual subject, the verb is singular and feminine, which means that originally it were the words of Deborah alone. Inviting the kings and princes the prophetess proclaims: "I to Yahweh, I, I will sing. I will chant to Yahweh, God of Israel" (v.3). The poem has the following ending: "Thus may they perish, all enemies of Yahweh! Let his lovers be like the sunburst in full strength!" To conclude, Deborah the woman stands out as the archetype and paradigm of the chosen people. She prophetically foretells the fate of the evildoers and the glory of the righteous.

6. A Liberator-widow

6.1. A Valiant Woman

It was Judith, a widow who dauntlessly came forward to liberate God's people from the clutches of Assyria, when the faint hearted political and religious leaders were ready to kneel down before the invaders. Putting her faith in Yahweh she went into the Assyrian camp, made the military general dance to her tune, chopped his head off and brought it back to her people. Then Judith mapped out a strategy to exterminate the Assyrian army. She with her followers marched to Jerusalem, the women dancing along the route and the warriors following them. Along the way Judith sang a psalm extolling Yahweh who foiled the enemy by the hand of a female. Thus this devout widow became the sublime symbol and charming paradigm of Israel.

6.2. Her Name

Judith (in Hebrew *Yahudith*) means Jewess. She was typically a Jewess, one who loved and lived for her religion and people, even willing to sacrifice everything completely for the sake of liberation of the community. Hence the book itself is entitled after her name.

6.3. Issues of Canonicity

The Jewish religion was reluctant to accept the book in its canon. The Alexandrian School, the community of those who were living outside Palestine, considered it as an official book of the Old Testament. But the Palestine School refused to include it in the canonical corpus²⁴. The following reasons are adduced for it. Contrary to the prohibition in Dt. 23:3, Achior, an Ammonite was accepted into the Jewish religion; Judith is represented in the book as a *tôq* 'liberated' woman whose actions were considered by the conservative rabbis as immoral. To these reasons one may add another factor. The story speaks of cowardly and non-edifying behaviour of the religious and civil leaders. It is a widow who was considered as feeble and marginalized in the society, one who needed protection, safeguard and security came forward to save the community. Naturally the authorities would not like such a humiliating situation. Hence they seem to have adduced other reasons against the canonical approbation of the book.

7. OT: Concluding Remarks

The society of the Old Testament times was patriarchal. Naturally this will reflect in the narratives. God of the Bible is a God who enters human history and works in it, taking into consideration the existential factors and the time and space limitations and prejudices. It is an astounding fact that the eternal and transcendental Deity deigns to undergo imperfect and finite modes, in order to reveal his compassionate and loving nature and providence. Still one can find the divine designs concerning humanity, in which both male and female adorn equal status, power, privileges and responsibilities. The first three chapters of Genesis attest to this fact. There appear in other parts of the Old Testament very energetic and self-empowering women leaders, who excel men in taking initiatives, making decisions and executing them. Thus one can say that despite its androcentric and patriarchal orientation, Israelite faith was a woman's faith – cherished, defended and exemplified by women.

8. Women in the Interestamental Period

During the period between the Old Testament times and New Testament era, there underwent a considerable change in the mentality of the Jewish society. The main concern was to preserve the faith amidst adverse and antagonistic situations. It was indeed a matter of life and death. Naturally the pre-occupation of the authorities was to stick to the religious essentials. There arose a legalistic mentality. Such a situation did not favour to encourage theologization and cultivate liberalistic trends. Women were not allowed to play significant role in the society. Home and family became their world²⁵. The female folk could not make up the quorum that constituted a synagogue, or make the pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the major feasts. She did not fully enjoy the rights of inheritance or of divorce. And their movements outside home were restricted.

PART TWO: THE NT PERSPECTIVE

Here we limit ourselves to a summarization of four pertinent aspects in the New Testament times.

9. Jesus and Women

Taking into consideration of the thinking of the Jewish society of his time, Jesus words and actions had a very radical perspective²⁶. He accepted women both as followers and as travelling companions (Lk.8: 1-3). This teacher preferred for a woman to listen and learn from him as a disciple would, rather than to serve him in a woman's traditional capacity (Lk.10: 38-42). He allowed unclean women to touch him (Mk.5: 25-34). In his proclamation there was freedom for both women and men to remain single for the sake of the kingdom of God. Such a teaching was foreign to the Jewish ethos where marriage and procreation were considered obligations. Such an attitude opened the door for women to assume roles in the Jesus movement other than the traditional domestic ones. They were witnesses of his crucifixion, burial, empty tomb and resurrection. In his parables both men and women are given equal place (Lk.13: 18-21; 18:1-14). The paradigmatic sermon in

Lk.4: 18-19 seems to structure the liberation of various women from diseases or infirmities in Lk 4:38-44; 8:1-3. According to H.Flender "Luke expresses by this arrangement that man and woman stand together and side by side before God. They are equal in honour and grace; they are endowed with same gifts and have the same responsibilities"²⁷.

In John there are at least five episodes, which feature women and their roles: Mary, Jesus' mother (2:19); the Samaritan woman (ch.4); Mary and Martha (ch.11-12); women at Calvary (ch.19); the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene. All these women became model disciples of Jesus and became living witnesses of the Master in the community in a way the men disciples were not portrayed as doing. In Jn.20 Magdalene was commissioned to be an evangelist to the apostles, proclaiming the good news of resurrection to them.

10. Mary, The Paradigm of Woman

Usually the Fathers of the Church call Mary as the antitype of the first woman of Genesis, a designation that focuses on Eve's negative nature. I would prefer to name Mary as new Eve, who, in her personality totally fulfilled the divine design concerning '*isshâ*'. Indeed, she is called the woman in Jn.2: 4 and 19:26²⁸. When the first woman is said to have become the instrument of the human misfortunes, Mary brought joy and celebration at the house of Cana. The title '*isshâ*' with which Jesus addressed his mother does not have negative connotations, but denotes a very positive perspective²⁹. He involves her in his messianic mission and invites her to accept it in mystery of salvation, beyond the maternal and familial relationship. She becomes the personification of the symbol of messianic Zion. J.P.Michud thus articulates it: "Mary is thus seen at the heart of the major feminine messianic thread. It is side by side with the masculine messianic thread, which terminates in Jesus Christ, that we find a messianic thread, which is inferior but parallel and yet prepares the messianic community. John leads us here to think that this thread ends with Mary"³⁰. According to scholars the new Eve becomes at Cana the spouse of Christ³¹.

At the Calvary scene Jesus said to his mother: "Woman, this is your son" (Jn.19: 25-27). The unit has a messianic and ecclesial character³². Authors find here parallelism with the wedding feast of Cana. By addressing Mary as woman Jesus elevates her to the status of the mother of the new messianic community. She becomes the mother and archetype of the Church. Thus the text unveils the 'Marian Countenance' of the Church.

Rev.12 speaks of a woman crowned with stars. Scholars give the text a Marian interpretation. They find her as archetype of the Church: Mother and Bride³³. Thus in Mary womanhood achieves its sublime and most exalted dignity and honour. In her song at the house of Zechariah (Lk.1: 46-55) Mary appears as the prophetic herald of the mighty acts of God who reverses the situations of the powerful and weak³⁴. She becomes the symbol and paradigm of the saved ones.

11. Women in the Acts of Apostles

Woman adorns important and honourable positions in the life of the early Church³⁵. She appears as prophetess (Acts 21:9), a religious teacher of a notable male Christian leader (Acts 18:1-3,24-26), a hostess for a house Church (Acts 12:12-17) and the first convert in a new region (Acts 16:12-40). Women could assume the role of deaconesses (Acts 9:32-42). Church meetings were held in the homes of women (Acts 12:12; 16:40). The author of the book, through five stories, show how the gospel progressed through the female population across the Roman Empire from Jerusalem (1:14; 12:12-17), to Joppa (9:36-42), to Philippi (16:11-15), to Corinth (18:1-3), to Ephesus (18:19-26), to Thessalonica (17:4), to Beroea (17:12), and to Athens (17:34). Thus women were empowered in the early Churches to fully involve themselves in the evangelisation process.

12. Women in the Pauline Communities

Paul is often labelled as antifeminist. Certain portions of some of his letters are given negative interpretations. An objective study, however, does not substantiate this hostile attitude³⁶. Paul also follows Jesus tradition in affirming the sanctity of marriage and family (1Cor.7; Eph.5: 22-31; Col.3: 18-25; 1Cor.11). However, according to him the family of *faith* is the primary unit of Christian identity. Physical family should be transformed into the family of faith, which is rooted in Christ. Thus he clearly stands for women assuming important roles in the Christian community, including proclamation roles (1 Cor.11: 5; 16:19; Rom.16: 1,3,7; Phil.4: 2-3). There are certain difficult texts, such as 1 Cor.14: 34-35 and 1Tim.2: 8-15, which need closer investigation. The apostle was dealing with specific problems in some communities, like women disrupting the worship service or usurping authority on others. Paul sternly speaks against such abuses. This does not mean that he ruled out women speaking or exercising authority in the assemblies, provided that was done in a proper and orderly manner.

According to K.Stendahl Gal.3: 28 provides the Magna Charta of human equality³⁷. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In the Christian vision all the earthly distinctions are done away with. In Christ all form one family of God, a loving, serving, and celebrating community of brothers and sisters. Paul had a healthy respect for marriage and human sexuality, as did Jesus. For him the male-female bond is a symbol of the mystery of Christ's loving union with the Church (Eph.5: 22-33). Even then he prefers the single status, which allows one to serve wholeheartedly and totally the Lord and his community.

13. NT: Concluding Remarks

The divine vision concerning male-female equality, belongingness to the other, companionship, mutual complementary nature found its realization in Jesus' behaviour, words and actions. He empowered women and made them his associates and messengers. His was a radical and revolutionary concept of a new way of human life. The early Church, with all limitations, tried to live up to the vision of the Master. Still one may say that there existed

a tension between ideal and praxis. One cannot expect that the centuries old androcentric preconceptions will die all on a sudden.

14. Prospects for the Future

The history of the Church attests that the biblical vision and its early praxis did not last long. That is the root cause of present feministic movements in the Church. They fight for equality in the structures of the Church, and advocate for a feministic interpretation of the Bible. Rosemary R. Ruether gives the following list of the anti-feminist tendencies:³⁸ conflicting paradigm of redemption and gender in Scripture, in patristic and Medieval Christianity, and in the Reformation era. She even asks the question: Can a male saviour save women? According to the author whatever contributes to the full becoming of women should be considered as redemptive³⁹. Ruether claims to guide humans forward in terms of dialogue, pluralism and a firm rooting in the commitment to end the suffering and oppression of women.

It is wrong to outrightly reject the feministic trends in the Church, accusing them of extremism and exaggerations. The Church needs to devote herself to delve deep into the Scriptures and bring out the authentic vision of God concerning humanity and its realization in Christ. She has to conscientize herself and the community of the biblical vision of male-female equality, comradeship and creative collaboration to build up a new heaven and new earth (Rev.21: 1). It will then call forth a radical re-construction of the present structures of the Church. The existing non-divine and inhuman evils are to be eradicated. Will a time come when womenfolk can stand up, lift up their heads, and exclaim: our redemption has drawn near (cf. Lk.21: 28)?

Endnotes

¹The literature is vast. A few studies are mentioned here. P. Achtemeier, ed. "The Bible, Theology and Feminist approaches," *Interpretation* 42 (1988), 3-72; R.S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak. Feminism,,Language,God*, New York, 1989; V.R. Mollenkot, *The Divine Feminine. The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, New York, 1983; L.M. Russell (ed) *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Philadelphia 1985; E.F.Schuessler, *Bread Not Stone. The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Boston, 1985; A.C.Yarbro (ed.) *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, Atlanta, 1985

²C.Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, Minneapolis 1984, pp. 142-161.

³P.D. Miller, *Genesis 1-11*, Sheffield, 1978, pp.9-26.

⁴Paul Kalluveettil, *Vachanabhashyam* (Theological Introduction to the Old Testament) Vol.I, Bangalore 2003, pp.62-68.

⁵N.P.Bratsiotis, 'ish// 'issâ in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol.I, ed. G.J. Botterweck, H.Renggren, Grand Rapids, 1974, pp.222-235.

⁶W.Brueggmann, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone," *CBQ* 32 (1970) 532-542.

⁷On the genre, setting and intention of the narration, see G.W. Coats, *Genesis* (The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, Vol. I), Grand Rapids, 1983, pp.58-60.

- ⁸N.Lohfink "Wie sollte man das Alte Testament auf die Erbsunde hinbefragen?" in *Zum Probleme der Erbsunde: Theologische und Philosophische Versuche*, Essen, 1981, pp 9-52
- ⁹*The Colledgeville Bible Commentary*, ed. D.Bergant, Colledgeville, 1992, pp.43-44
- ¹⁰H. Gross, *mâdal* in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. IX, ed. G.J. Botterweck... Grand Rapids, 1998, pp.68-71.
- ¹¹S.T. Foh, "What is the Woman's Desire?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974/75) 376-383, argues that the woman's urge is not a craving for her man whatever he demands, but an urge for independence, indeed a desire to dominate her husband. Her theory, however, lacks conviction.
- ¹²According to Lk.1: 31 it is Mary, the new Eve who gives the child the name Jesus. Leah gave names to all her children, Gen.29: 31-35; 30:9-12,17-21.
- ¹³J.S. Ackerman, "The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story", in Gros Louis (ed), *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, Nashville, 1978, 74-119, esp.pp.84-88
- ¹⁴The monograph of R.J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses?* (SBLDS 84), Atlanta, 1987 studies the specific traits of the personality of Miriam.
- ¹⁵The reason why Miriam was not given due importance is because of her so-called rebellion against Moses and the ensured punishment with leprosy (Num. 12:1-15; cf. Deut. 24:9). All scholars, however, do not look at this incident in a negative way. According to them the original story seems to have had positive overtones.
- ¹⁶W.H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18* (The Anchor Bible), New York 1990, pp.143, 150-154.
- ¹⁷W.H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, pp.464, 475-476, 510, 546-549.
- ¹⁸M.Noth, *Exodus*, Philadelphia, 1962, pp 121-122; G.P. Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus*, London, 1971,pp.169; A.Lauha, "Das Sehilmmermotif in AT" in *Congress Volume*, ed. G.W. Anderson, Leiden, 1963, pp.33; G.W.Coats, *Moses*, Sheffield, 1988, p.114; T.E.Fretheim, *Exodus*, Louisville, 1991,p.161.
- ¹⁹On the origin of the twofold traditions and the possible reasons for the negative portrait of Miriam, the authors take different positions. Some try to absolve Miriam from her non-edifying reaction. See M.Noth, *Numbers* (OTL), London, 1968, pp.91-97; J. de Vaulx, *Les Nombres*, Paris, 1972, pp.158-163; S.K. Sherwood, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Colledgeville, 2002, pp. 155-157
- ²⁰J.A. Soggin, *Judges* (OTL) London, 1981, p.77.
- ²¹On details of Jael-Sisera encounter, see T.J. Schnider, *Judges*, Colledgeville, 2000, pp.75-81.
- ²²T.J.Schnider, *Judges*, pp.63-69.
- ²³For a structural and literary analysis of the song of Deborah, see M.D. Coogan in *CBQ* 40 (1978) 143-166. B.Lindars studies the song from the perspective of women in the Old Testament, *BJRL* 65 (1983) 158-175.
- ²⁴C.A. Moore, "Book of Judith," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol.3, ed. D.N.Freedman (ed), New York, 1992, pp.1117-1125.
- ²⁵Ben Witherington, "Women (NT)" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol.VI, D.N.Freedman (ed.), New York, 1992, pp.957-961.

- ²⁶E. Stagg, F. Stagg, *Women in the World of Jesus*, Philadelphia, 1978; B. Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, Cambridge, 1984.
- ²⁷H. Flender, *St. Luke – Theologian of Redemptive History*, London, 1967, p.10.
- ²⁸P. J. Barsly, "Mary the Perfect Disciple," *TS* 41 (1980), 461-504; R. E. Brown... (ed), *Mary in the New Testament*, Philadelphia, 1978.
- ²⁹I. de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, Mumbai, 1995, pp.236-242.
- ³⁰J. P. Michaud, "Marie et la femme selon saint Jean," *Eglise et Theologie* 7 (1976) 379-396.
- ³¹J. P. Charalier beautifully sums up his exegesis on the sign of Cana: "In their gestures and their dialogue, the Virgin Mary and Christ surpass by far the human and material part of the local festivities, supplanting the young couple of Cana in order to become the spiritual Bridegroom and Bride of the messianic banquet," *Le Signe de Cana*, Bruxelles, 1959, p.77.
- ³²I. de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, pp.245-267.
- ³³I. de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, pp.271-294.
- ³⁴J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (AB) New York, 1985, pp.357-371.
- ³⁵R. Grýson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, Collegeville, 1976; S. Heine, *Women and Early Christianity*, Minneapolis, 1998.
- ³⁶G. Thiessen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, Philadelphia, 1982; R. W. Graham, "Women in the Pauline Churches," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 11 (1976) 25-34; R. Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40 (1972), 283-303.
- ³⁷K. Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women*, Philadelphia, 1966.
- ³⁸R. R. Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, Sheffield, 1998.
- ³⁹R. R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, London, 1983, pp.18-19.