

SYNODALITY: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This article discusses perspectives on Synodality in the Bible. It explores synodality traceable in the major sections of the Old Testament, with a focus on the creation of human beings, the covenant, and the prophetic literature. From the New Testament, passages and episodes are studied to understand synodality. From the Gospels, the communicative style of Jesus is explored. From the Acts, the election of Mathias, the appointment of the Seven Elders and the Jerusalem Council are analyzed. From the Pauline Corpus, the Case of the Incestuous Man (1 Cor 5:1-8, 13) and the Church as the body of Christ are discussed.

Keywords: Covenant; Jerusalem Council; Journeying Together; Prophetic Criticism; Salvation History; Synodality

An important theological as well foundation of synodality, which is now understood as a constitutive dimension of the Church is “together

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on the way.”¹ However, this theological foundation is very much Biblical too. The Christian revelation of God in the Bible is a history of God’s journeying with humanity, initiated at creation and continuing through history. Other than the Biblical passages and episodes usually identified as referring to synodality in the Church, like the disciples walking with the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus, the Jerusalem Council, etc., we can trace the antecedents of synodality as the journeying together of God and human beings as the common thread of Biblical revelation, both in the OT and the NT. Essential to understanding synodality is participation based on the model of the Holy Trinity. The Trinitarian economy of salvation comprises an economy of the participation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, showing a single-minded purpose, even when they act independently. In Trinitarian relationality, we see dialogical reciprocity, which is fundamental to understanding synodality. This reciprocal involvement has implications for right relations of equality and mutuality within the Church. Though the economy of Trinitarian relationality and synodality becomes more conspicuous in the NT, we have traces of it in the OT as well.

The very word synodality has Biblical foundations.² It basically means “journeying together” (syn = with, *odos* = way) and, as Pope Francis indicated at the beginning of his papacy, it is the path “which God expects of the Church of the third millennium” in its life and mission.³

The key features of this journeying together are, listening to one another and learning through listening, giving due dignity to every member of the *ecclesia*, which, in turn, makes the Church a model of men and women travelling together, sharing the travails of history and thus becoming a trailblazer for “a rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and of the function of authority as service will also be able to help civil society to be built up in justice and fraternity and thus

¹Christoph Theobald, SJ, “Gemeinsam auf dem Weg,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 202, 4 (2022): 410-433.

² <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/synod/en/news/synodality-in-the-life-and-mission-of-the-church-by-the-interna.html>, 01.04.2022.

³Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis Ceremony Commemorating The 50th Anniversary of The Institution of The Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015,” https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html, 20.05.2022.

bring about a more beautiful and humane world for coming generations.”⁴

The Synodal Way in the Old Testament

The Creation of Human Being: God's Intent of Journeying Together

The original intent of the creation of human beings was synodal. The participatory character of the creation of human beings is evident in the two creation accounts in Genesis (Gen 1:26–1:28; 2:4–18). In the creation of the universe and humankind, we see the involvement of God, the Creator, his *dabar* and *ruah*. The decision to create humankind in God’s image and likeness was intended to make them participate in taking care of His creation according to His design. Human beings are expected to collaborate with the Creator in a participatory way as highlighted in the creation accounts. In Gen 1:26–28, the very creation of human being is presented as synodal principle of equality of man and woman. Both of them together complete the human being (*adam*) created in the image and likeness of God. Even though there are diverse interpretations of the implications of the creation of woman subsequent to man in the second creation account in Gen 2:4ff. as an ‘ezer, usually translated helper, as David Freedman suggests, can also be understood to mean power. In this sense, “she is created to be a strength or power equivalent to Adam.”⁵ Hence, there is no idea of subordination, but of “equal partners and helpers to one another.”⁶ God asking Man to name the species and the ease of communication between God, Man and the rest of creation, show the symbiosis that existed among them. This symbiotic participatory relationship is called Paradise. It is the place of shalom, namely, well-being resulting from the harmony of relationships.

However, the human infringement upon the creative design destroyed the synodality of Paradise and the participatory and communicative structure of creation. The nature of synodality, that is, travelling together, changes from creation and participation to reparation and redemption, and God’s dealing with human history became salvation history.⁷ The call of Abraham marks the beginning

⁴Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis.”

⁵R. David Freedman, “Woman, A Power Equal to Man: Translation of Woman as a ‘Fit Helpmate’ for Man Is Questioned,” *Biblical Archeology Review* 9, 1 (January/February 1983) 56–58 as quoted in Alice Odgen Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 45–46.

⁶Lisa Sowle Cahill, *A Theology and Praxis of Gender Justice* (Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2018), 46.

⁷Dominique Barthelemy, *God and His Image: An Outline of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1966), 172.

of this salvific journey, which has its continuation in the history of the people of Israel and the Church.⁸

Synodality and Salvation History

The Synodal Way of the Covenant

God's command to Abraham to leave his land and people (Gen 12:1), relying and believing on the reliability of God's promises, set in motion the salvation history which reaches its climax in the Christ event. The call of Abraham is understood in the Bible as the beginning of God's decision to journey with a people chosen to represent humanity. The seminal journey of Abraham slowly grows to the journey of Israel, the chosen people, through the vicissitudes of history epitomized by the Exodus experience and the Exile.

We learn from the OT that it is the narrative of the steadfast engagement of Yahweh in human history and Israel's responses to it. Israel understood this engagement as the history of Yahweh accompanying them through covenant and remembrance. The covenant with Abraham prompted Israel to cry to Yahweh during the oppression of Egyptian slavery. It elicited in Yahweh the memory of the covenant which led to the ensuing intervention in Israel's history (Ex 2:23-24). The freedom to approach the covenant-partner with a cry for help or complaint, the readiness to listen to it with patience and generosity and to take initiatives to settle the issues through proactive initiatives are important aspects of synodality.⁹ Based on the covenant with Abraham, Israel became a *qahal* (community) ratified at the Sinai Covenant.¹⁰ The covenant was the identity card of the community of Israel, just as baptism is the identity card of all Christians.¹¹

The Exodus event marks the breakaway from hegemonic patterns of slavery, exclusivism and triumphalism to an acceptable design of solidarity, inclusion and sharing. The strategy of the covenant is synodal, implying walking together. Yahweh guarantees an I-Thou relationship of reciprocity and fidelity, with rights and obligations, through the covenant formula, "I will be your God and you will be my

⁸ See, Carmelo Sant, "Natural Environment: The Biblical Perspective," *Melita Theologica* 71, 2 (2021): 313-323.

⁹ Angelo Card. De Donatis, "La sinodalità come 'stile di pensiero,'" *Alpha omega* 24, 4 (2021): 196-197.

¹⁰ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in The Life and Mission of The Church*, #13.

¹¹ <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html>, 01.05.2022.

people" (Ex 6:7). However, as many OT passages point out, the people, namely, Israel, failed to reciprocate the covenant fidelity and steadfastness of Yahweh.

Walter Brueggemann delineates the dynamics of this covenant-relationship as rooted in Yahweh's inescapable, original commitment to Israel. It came to exist because of the decisive, initial action of Yahweh. Israel as a covenant-partner is expected to order its life in ways that are appropriate to this relationship. Thus, Covenant demands self-giving love and loving obedience.¹² The loving obedience expected of Israel is to be expressed and witnessed in cult and ethics (Mic 6:8). When Israel's response to the self-giving love of Yahweh (*hesed*) was amiss, prophets evaluated the covenant community based on the covenant obligations.

Prophetic Criticism of the Lack of Synodality

The prophetic criticism of the lack of synodality expected of the covenant is significant for understanding synodality in the Bible. As we have seen, covenant expects reciprocity in the journeying together of the partners. The primary intention of the Sinai Covenant was to establish the closest possible intimacy between the people and their God. Yahweh and Israel made an appointment to walk together (Am 3:3). The prophets criticized the complacency that crept into the faith-living of the covenant-community. They indicated that this lethargy crept into the covenant-community by seeking the Lord merely through cult practices and pilgrimages without the required ethical connectivity to justice and righteousness. It implies a concern for the marginalized of society because Biblical justice is more restorative than merely retributive in nature. Prophetic criticism was an evaluation of Israel's faith-living in specific historical contexts, and whenever and wherever they found discrepancies, they demanded interruption and renewal. This goes in line with the synodal process Pope Francis envisages when he writes: "Let us keep going back to God's own 'style,' which is closeness, compassion and tender love. If we do not become this Church of closeness with attitudes of compassion and tender love, we will not be the Lord's Church."¹³

When the synodal way envisaged in the community of faithful (*qahal*) failed, the prophets visualized the possibility of a new

¹²Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 414–415.

¹³ <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html>, 05.05.2022.

beginning. Because, only by interrupting the aberrations that had crept into the covenant living of the *qahal* through a radical renewal would its journey in history make sense (Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 11:10).

The talk of newness was necessitated due to the failure of previous covenants, especially, the Sinai. However, whether this means a covenant totally new or a renewal of the Sinai covenant is a subject of debate. One thing is clear, as Walter Kasper notes, the various covenants mentioned in the Bible “do not stand in isolation, without any connection to one another. Each new covenant that is concluded refers back to the preceding one and restates it in current terms. Thus, tradition and interpretation are, in each instance, interconnected.”¹⁴ By articulating the divine resolve to renew and restore the languishing covenant, the prophets wanted to indicate that, “Yahweh refuses to be governed by circumstances,” and “urges Israel to refuse to succumb to circumstances, even when the circumstance is generated by Israel’s ethical failure.”¹⁵ By presenting the ability of God to start anew by restoring the ruptured covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel through the notion of the new covenant, the exilic and post-exilic theology reiterated that God’s initial commitment is not withdrawn, despite Israel’s failures, but envisaged in a new form of its actualization. As Childs notes, “The divine purpose remained that of reconciliation with his people and the restoration of his whole creation.”¹⁶ It implies that it is a part of journeying together in history to be open to being renewed and corrected. From the perspective of synodality, we can say that every renewal is an attempt to take stock of the situation, evaluate together the ups and downs of the journey until now, and ponder together on how to move forward. The New Testament understands the fulfilment of the promise of the New Covenant in the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

Foundation of Synodality in the Gospels

The Biblical understanding of God as a trinitarian God and a God of relationship and communion is basic to the understanding of synodality in the NT (Lk 1:26–38; Mk 1:9–11; 2 Cor 13:14). The fundamental gospel teachings that urged the first Christians to live a life of communion, sharing and *koinonia* were: The promise of Christ

¹⁴ https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/Kasper_Cambridge_6Dec04.htm, 05.04.2022

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 647.

¹⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 355.

to be present in the midst of two or three gathered in his name (Mt 18:2), the revelation of Christ's mission as service and sacrifice of his life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45), the Christian concept of authority as service (Mt 20:25–26; Mk 10:41–45) and the new commandment of love (Jn 13:34–35).¹⁷ The gospels present Jesus as the way, his style as communicative, his mission as participatory, and his path as synodal and his goal as communion.

Jesus is the Way

Synodality refers to the journey the apostles and disciples made together with Jesus who presents himself as “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6). Later, the followers of the Way became the Church (*ecclesia*). In Acts, those who followed Jesus are originally called “the disciples of the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). The kenotic love of Jesus taking the form of a servant, his vision of authority as service (*diakonia*), his washing of the feet of the apostles with humility, his universalistic approach to all are characteristics of his synodal way. When the disciples discussed who was great among them or sought recommendation for the privilege to sit at his right and left and longed for a political messiah, Jesus corrected them and showed them the right path.

Communicative Lifestyle of Jesus

The gospels reveal that Jesus Christ had always maintained a communicative lifestyle with the people, especially the marginalized, in leading them on the path towards the Kingdom of God.¹⁸ He chose the illiterate fisherman and the tax collector, Levi, to be his Apostles. He went to all classes of people like children (Mt 18:2), widows (Lk 7:13), sick (Mk 1:29–31), sinners (Lk 7:50), lepers (Mk 1:40ff), and prostitutes (Jn 4:1ff; Jn 8:1–12). He interacted with the woman with haemorrhages, the Roman centurion, the woman caught in adultery, tax-collector Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman, the repentant thief and the Syrophenician woman. He ate with tax-collectors and sinners, showed a liberative approach towards women, accepted the pagans and gentiles and showed a universalist approach in mission.

¹⁷Cf L. Stan, “Sinodalità” *Orientalia Christiana* 2 (1970): 84–85; P. Pallath, *The Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam 1994), 23.

¹⁸International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014).

Decision Concerning an Offending Christian (Mt 18:15–17)

The passage deals with exclusion from the community of an erring Christian by juridical pronouncement of “the Church.”¹⁹ There is a three-step process involved here. The first step is to correct and reprove the offender to bring him back. The second is to take one or two witnesses in case of his unwillingness to repent. The last step is to tell the Church, which implies informing the local community. Though the procedure followed to exclude a member is not spelt out clearly, the authorities and the whole community is involved in making the decision. Here, we can see an instance of co-responsibility in decision-making, which has to be followed by the church.

Synodal Procedures in the Emmaus Story (Lk 24)

Elements of Synodality can be seen in the way Jesus encounters the two Emmaus disciples in Luke (Lk 24:1–35). As a first step, Jesus was just walking with Cleophas and the other unnamed disciple; a journeying together on “their way.” The second step is listening to these men narrating the tragic events that had taken place in Jerusalem in their sight. The third step is discussing with them and interpreting the Scripture to them. Jesus does not simply start with providing a solution, telling them to return to Jerusalem. Instead, he draws near, walks with them in their doubt and pain, and listens to them. The next step is Jesus’ reclining at the table with the disciples and the breaking of the bread. They recognize Jesus and decide to turn around and go back to Jerusalem. The whole synodal process of Jesus’ walking with them, listening to them, interpreting the scripture and sharing the meal with them, helped them to opt for a new journey and a new mission.

Synodal Thinking in the Acts

The Acts of the Apostles provides a model of the Church that we are called to imitate in our synodal process.²⁰ The early Christian community believed in the presence of the Lord in their midst as they gathered and had, as its core, the idea of communion or *koinonia*. They came together to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and make and take decisions. Mary, Mother of Jesus and of the Church, gathered the disciples and prepared them to receive the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The four most important areas of the inner life of the

¹⁹M.M. Bourke, “Collegial Decision Making in the New Testament,” *Jurist* 31 (1971): 8.

²⁰J. Schröter, “God’s Righteousness and Human Law: A New Testament Perspective on Law and Theology,” *Journal of Law and Religion*, 32, 1 (2017): 16.

community included the following: (i) teaching of the apostles, (ii) fellowship, (ii) breaking of bread, and (iv) prayer. The community gathered together whenever important decisions were to be taken. We find synodal models of decision making in the following episodes in Acts of the Apostles: (i) Election of Mathias (Acts 1:15–26); (ii) Election of the Seven Disciples (Acts 6:1–6); (iii) the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

Election of Mathias (Acts 1:15–26)

The early Church applied the synodal principle in the election of Mathias.²¹ Taking inspiration from the life and mission of Jesus, the seed of synodal thinking began to sprout in the activities of the Church. In finding a replacement for Judas, we have an example of the disciples' thinking together for a better communion, a participation, culminating in a fruitful mission. About 120 people gathered with Peter and the other apostles to discuss and discern the replacement for Judas. The Christian group came together in one accord and the community as a whole to put forward for the vacant position two candidates, Joseph and Matthias, who were presented as worthy of ministry and apostleship. Here the people of God were called to the communal exercise of discernment of the will of the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit was guiding them to take decision playing a significant role. They listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit and discerned the way they had to follow, a synodal path that they followed later as well (Acts 5:19–21; 8:26, 29, 39; 12:16–17; 13:1–3; 16:6–7, 9–10; 20:22).

Appointment of the Seven Elders (Acts 6:1–7)

Journeying together started in the ministry of Jesus, is being continued by in the appointment of seven elders. The early Church was disturbed by a complaint from the Hellenists against the Hebrews. The tension was between the service of the Word and the service at table, suggesting a community divided into service groups.²² The main task of all the believers was to seek out seven men suitable for the purpose and bring them before the 12 so that they might appoint them. The chosen seven were to be men of good repute (cf. 16:2; 22:12), and also men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. The people were pleased with the proposal because they recognized that it was in agreement with God's will (cf. Acts 6:2) and it did not simply come from the

²¹P. Duprey, "The Synodal Structure of the Church in Eastern Theology," *One in Christ* 7 (1971): 152–153.

²²C.K. Barret, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1994), 312.

authority of the apostles.²³ They sought out seven who were placed before the Twelve and the apostles appointed them. It was not merely the task of the Twelve but the whole group laid their hands on the seven men and gave them the task of serving at tables (6:1–6).²⁴

The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15; Gal 2:1–10)

In Acts 15, we see the first Council of the church at Jerusalem and the visible manifestation of the synodal journey of a church travelling together, debating, discussing, deliberating and discerning. There were real challenges and turbulences during the missionary activities and hence the community of Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas and some others to the Church of Jerusalem, to the Apostles and Elders to discuss the matter (15:2). The crucial questions of gentile admittance to Christianity without circumcision and the application of Jewish laws and customs on gentile converts, etc. were to be dealt with in the council. When Paul and Barnabas reported the issue, the Jerusalem community met to study the matter, a lively and open discussion and debate on above issues followed (15:7), Peter bore testimony to what had happened and asserted that God gave the Holy Spirit to the gentiles just as he did to them, the Jews. The circumstances in which the conversion of Cornelius took place, the gentile Pentecost, was acceptable to the Jerusalem Church (cf. Acts 11:18). James then quoted from Amos 9:11–12, the Septuagint version rather than the Hebrew text which spoke of the conversion of the gentiles and supported Peter and interpreted the events in the light of the prophetic words (Amos 9:11–12) presenting the matter in favour of the gentile converts. Thus, the Apostles and presbyters, “in agreement with the whole Church,” decided on gentile acceptance into the Church without undergoing circumcision and the observance of the Mosaic Law.²⁵

James then sent Barsabbas and Silas with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:22) with a letter which stated the “vision of Church’s mission.” According to the letter Paul and others had been given complete freedom by the Jerusalem apostles in dealing with the gentiles (Gal 2:1–10). The community at Antioch rejoiced at the procedure, the decision and the letter. The decision was taken in agreement with the whole Church and applying

²³ G. Stählin, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1962), 98; Barret, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 314.

²⁴ Barret, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 315.

²⁵ Pallath, *The Synod of Bishops of Catholic Oriental Churches*, 43.

the synodal principle.²⁶ Thus, the council showed how decisions have to be taken in the Church giving specific role and place to each one (cf. 1 Cor 12:12–17; Rom 12:4–5; Eph 4:4). Here, we see a synodal form of consensus and understanding rather than dominion, imposition or command of one or some over others.

Synodal Models in Pauline Writings

The Case of the Incestuous Man (1 Cor 5:1–8, 13)

An example of co-responsibility in decision making in Pauline writings can be seen in 1 Cor 5:1–8, 13 in the case of the incestuous man. “It has been brought to the attention of the apostle that there is in the church of Corinth an example of immorality such as cannot be found even among the pagans: a man is living with his stepmother.”²⁷ According to the apostle such offenders have to be removed from the community. It is a sentence which far surpasses excommunication as we now understand it. The offender is to be “handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that the (his) spirit may be saved on the Day of the Lord” (5:5). Separated from the community, the sinner will become a prey of Satan and will die.

In this episode what concerns us is the procedure followed in the passing of the sentence. Paul orders to cast out the evil one from their midst (5:13), an exhortation from Deuteronomy (Dt 17:7; 22:21).²⁸ He also demands that the community gather together to pass sentence on the man. Though the apostle has already decided the punishment, he wants it to be pronounced by the entire community. By this Paul shows a concern for the collegial exercise of authority and wants the community members to make his decision their own, so that the verdict will be that of the entire Church.²⁹ There are biblical scholars who argue that here we can see an example of co-responsibility in making the decision. C.K. Barret writes: “Paul then knows his own mind quite clearly, and does not hesitate to declare it. This does not mean however that he intends to impose it on the Church.”³⁰ Paul’s mode of action in this case is that he wished to have the whole community join him in his judgment on the incestuous man.

²⁶ Duprey, “The Synodal Structure of the Church in Eastern Theology,” 152–153.

²⁷ Bourke, “Collegial Decision Making in the New Testament,” 3.

²⁸ Bourke, “Collegial Decision Making in the New Testament,” 3.

²⁹ Bourke, “Collegial Decision Making in the New Testament,” 6.

³⁰ C.K. Barret, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row 1968), 124. However, J.C. Hurd makes a different estimation: Paul was not persuasive but dictatorial,” *The Origin of I Corinthians* (New York: Seabury Press 1965), 78.

Church as the Body of Christ

Paul presents Church as the body of Christ where each organ has a specific place and function. The members though many, constitute one body whether they are Jews or Greeks, slaves or free (1 Cor 12:12-13). All have received one baptism and the same spirit is given to each one and hence all members have a share in decisions taken and each one's dignity and opinion have to be respected (Gal 3:28). The early Christians right from the beginning were conscious of their oneness in Christ, their equality and dignity as faithful and their role in the building up of the Body of Christ. Paul regards the Church as composed of individuals equipped with a variety of charisms given for the good of the whole Church (1 Cor 12:7). Though the spiritual gifts given to the members of the Church are diverse, they are to be used to serve and edify others and enhance the unity of the Church.

Conclusion

Biblical writings assert that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the journey of the people of God in the OT and the NT. The very act of creation manifests divine-human synodality which got disrupted by sin, but God continued the synodal way of walking which culminated in the Christ event. Since God's engagement with humanity is recorded in the Bible through the representations of Israel in the OT and the Church in the NT, the Church has the mission to implement the Biblical vision of Synodality. The kenotic love of God manifested in the incarnation should become the guiding principle of synodality in the Church because the synodal way of Jesus was kenotic, namely, self-emptying to uplift and save the downtrodden other. It is this kenotic path that was set as a paradigm for the Church to follow in the Jerusalem Council, a kenosis that would entail abandoning the obstinacy of presupposed claims and convictions to move towards broadening the horizons of Christian living to make it the kenotic form of Christian witness.