

DIGNITY OF WOMEN: CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES

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1. Introduction

The Christian understanding of the dignity of women is based on the biblical presentation of women and their rightful place in society as human persons. Not even a quick reading of the Bible can miss the powerful presence of biblical women who played significant leadership roles in Salvation History.

I shall begin the paper¹ with a reflection on the biblical presentation of women, focussing on the creation stories (Gen 1-2) and women's role in Salvation History as God's partners in the Old Testament. I shall then explore the New Testament women in the stories of Jesus as well as the attitude of Saint Paul towards women. These biblical episodes uphold the dignity of women as created in God's image and likeness. I shall go on to examine the teaching of the Church and conclude with the Gender Policy of the Catholic Church, a document issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI).

2. Biblical Understanding of Women: Creation Stories (Genesis 1-2)

In the first creation story in Genesis 1, God is powerful and creates everything by WORD and makes human beings as the culmination of

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¹This Paper was first presented at the at the Hindu-Christian Meeting on the theme "Enhancing Hindu-Christian Relations and Collaboration for Justice, Peace and Harmony," organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City, held at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, India, November 6-9, 2011.

God's creative work (1:3-31).² God creates human beings – male and female – in God's image and likeness (1:27). Human beings (both men and women) therefore share in God's life and creative power; God gives them (both men and women) authority over and responsibility for the entire creation (1:26-28). But in Genesis 2, God first makes Adam (2:7) and then the woman from Adam's rib as he is without a partner (2:18-22).

While the creation story in Genesis 1 is often used to reinforce the equality between men and women, Genesis 2 is used to legitimize the domination of men over women. Many factors in the text lend itself to this misinterpretation. Among them two factors stand out: (1) God creates woman as a “helper fit for him [Adam]” (*ezer kenegdo*) because God finds Adam lonely. So the woman is created for the sake of Adam and therefore subordinate to the man (2:18). (2) God creates woman out of sleeping Adam's rib, therefore she depends on him and has only derivative existence (2:21).

How do we understand the expression “a helper fit for him” *ezer kenegdo* in Genesis 2:18b? The modern translations render expressions like helpmate or companion for *ezer*. David Freedman studied all the occurrences of the term *ezer* in the Old Testament (MT) and came to the conclusion that the noun *ezer* could have come from a Semitic root, either *ezer* (meaning “save” or “rescue”) or *gezer* (meaning “be strong” or “be powerful”).³ His study reveals that of the twenty-one occurrences of *ezer* in the MT, thirteen come from the root *gezer* and the remaining eight come from the root *ezer*. In Genesis 2:18b Freedman suggests that the root *gezer* (meaning “power” or “strength”) is more fitting than the root *ezer* (meaning “rescuer” or “saviour”). The second prepositional phrase “fit for him” (*kenegdo*) appears only in Genesis 2:18 and 2:20. The Hebrew *kenegdo* literally means “that which is over against, counterpart” or “like opposite him” or “according to what is in front of him,” i.e., “corresponding to him” or “equal and adequate to himself” as his counterpart.⁴ Freedman therefore translates *ezer kenegdo* in Gen 2:18b as “a power equal to him [Adam].”⁵

²Rekha Chennattu, “Biblical women as Agents of Justice and Peace,” in *Word of God: Source of Justice and Peace*, A. Peter Abir, ed., Tindivanam: CBF, 2008, 124-58.

³David Freedman, “Woman, A Power Equal to Man: Translation of Woman as a ‘Fit Helpmate’ for Man Is Questioned,” *Biblical Archeology* 9, 1 (1983), 56-58.

⁴*The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979, 617. See also the discussions in Claus

This interpretation is further supported by the rib symbol used for the creation of woman (Genesis 2:21). How does one understand rib-symbolism? The rib-symbol communicates a three-fold meaning: “The rib is closest to the heart” and “the rib also protects the heart from rough handling, subsequent injury and possible death.”⁶ The rib is also found “under the arm” and therefore is protected by the arm.⁷ The rib-symbol implies that (1) woman is to be loved and cherished (rib is closest to the heart); (2) the woman in turn protects the man (rib protects heart from possible dangers); (3) the woman is protected by the man (rib is protected by arms). The rib symbol in the literary context of Genesis 2 seems to suggest that men and women are created to love and protect each other (“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” [Genesis 2:24]). Westermann thus proposes that “the narrative in Gen 2 reflects a stage in civilization which was aware of the great importance of the role of woman in the existence of humankind.”⁸

In sum, the second creation story in Genesis 2, just as the first story in Genesis 1, upholds the dignity of both women and men. Genesis 2 presents human existence as a partnership of man and woman that celebrates mutuality and interdependence. It reflects a relationship characterized by communion and intimacy between the partners. Both men and women are created in God’s image and likeness and are persons of equal dignity.

3. Women’s Role in Salvation History as God’s Partners (OT)

We have different portrayals of women in the Old Testament. These stories of women can be grouped under three categories: (1) Women like Eve (Genesis 2-3), Rebekah (Genesis 22-49), Delilah (Judges 16:4-21) and Jezebel (1 Kings 16-21; 2 Kings 9) are wives of great men, but they are traditionally understood as vehicles of evil and deception. One needs to reread these stories from women’s perspectives. (2) Other stories like the

Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1990, 227; Gordon J Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1; Waco: Word Books, 1987, 68.

⁵Freedman, “Woman, A Power Equal to Man,” 57.

⁶I owe this suggestion to Cyril Desbruslais; see *Philosophy of Liberation* (unpublished class notes; Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1987), 59.

⁷Wenham proposes a two-fold meaning for the rib symbol: “rib is very close to the heart” (needs to be cherished) and rib is found “under the arm” (needs to be protected); see *Genesis*, 69.

⁸Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, 232.

daughter of Jephthah (Judges 11) and the concubine (Judges 19) reveal some of the most outrageous and atrocious experiences of violence and female victimisation in biblical history. These stories reflect modern women's struggle for the right to life, and for justice, dignity and wholeness. Our daily newspapers reveal that sexual harassment, rape and murder are the destiny of many women even today. (3) Heroines such as Shiphrah and Puah (Exodus 1:15-21), Miriam (Exodus 15:20, 21; Numbers 12:1-15; 20:1; 26:59; Deuteronomy 24:9; Micah 6:4), Deborah and Jael (Judges 4-5); Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chronicles 34:22-33), Esther and Judith are prophetesses and leaders who used their wisdom and exercised their authority to save people from oppression and establish justice and peace in the land.

The dignity of women is upheld and celebrated in God's choices in the Bible. God chose women to participate actively in God's project for humanity. Here I have chosen three stories of women who became the instruments of God's salvific work of liberation, justice and peace.

3.1. Shiphrah and Puah (Exodus 1)

The beginning of the story of the deliverance of Israel is marked by brave and prudent acts of courageous women like the midwives (Shiphrah and Puah), Moses' mother, Moses' sister (Miriam), and Pharaoh's daughter. Here I present Shiphrah and Puah.

The narrator tells the readers that the king of Egypt commanded the midwives – Shiphrah and Puah to slaughter all the male babies of Hebrew women (Exodus 1:15). What is striking about their story is that these brave women dare to disobey the royal order in order to save the lives of the babies. It is interesting that when they were questioned by pharaoh, they make a lame excuse: “The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them” (Exodus 1:19). The narrator informs the readers that the women dared to disobey the king because they feared God (Exodus 1:17). According to the biblical tradition, to fear God means to walk in God's ways by loving and serving God (Deuteronomy 10:12). It is an attitude of wonder and gratitude in the face of God's infinite goodness and overwhelming love that marks one's way of life. The fear of God refers to the deep respect for and single-minded devotion to the Lord irrespective of whatever happens.⁹ Fearing God

⁹Responding to Job's despondent prayer, Eliphaz chastises him saying, “But you are doing away with the fear of God” (Job 15:4).

is moreover one of the characteristics of those who remain faithful to the covenant relationship with God (Deuteronomy 6:2; 10:12; 14:23).

As these women feared God, God in turn blessed them by building up families for them (Exodus 1:21). It seems that God helped Shiphrah and Puah to get away with their disobedience and let the king have no other choice but give up on them as agents of genocide. As a result, the responsibility to exterminate all the male babies of the Israelites goes to all the members of Pharaoh’s sovereignty (Exodus 1:22). Although they are commissioned by the king to be agents of the total annihilation of Israelite babies, in reality they become deliverers of many Hebrew babies – they respected human dignity and saved human lives.

3.2. Deborah: A Prophetess, Judge and Mother in Israel (Judges 4-5)

The book of Judges narrates the stories of tribal leaders – heroes and heroines from the period before the settlement of Israel in Palestine as one nation. These stories follow more or less the same pattern: the Israelites abandon God; God hands them over to their enemies; the Israelites repent and cry out to God; God forgives them and sends them a judge to save them; the Judge delivers them from the hands of their enemies; the land rests for some years; the judge will die and then the cycle of sin-punishment-repentance-deliverance repeats itself. Deborah stands out as the only woman among the judges and charismatic leaders of this period; her story is narrated twice: first in prose (Judges 4) and then retold in poetry (Judges 5).¹⁰

The Israelites were severely oppressed by the Canaanite King Jabin and his commander Sisera for 20 years and it is at this moment of crisis that Deborah takes up the task of delivering Israel as her mission.¹¹ As a judge, Deborah sits under a palm tree and exercises judgment, settles disputes and dispenses justice to the people. As a prophetess, she is the messenger of God and mediates God’s word to the people. She guides Barak to the forefront of war, plans the strategy of the battle, and determines the moment of attack. After this mighty victory, “the land was at rest for 40 years,” that is, there was peace in those years as a result of Israel’s faithfulness to their covenant with God.

¹⁰For a discussion on the discrepancies between the stories presented in the prose version and in the poetic version, see John Gray, ed., “*Joshua, Judges and Ruth*,” *The Century Bible*, London: Nelson, 1967, 216-22.

¹¹For a survey of the oppression of Israelites by Sisera (1221-1201 BCE), see John Garstang, “*Joshua and Judges*,” *The Foundations of History*, London: Constable, 1931, 289-94.

Deborah is portrayed as a multifaceted personality and a competent leader. She speaks on behalf of God, gives counsel, inspires teamwork, brings about liberation from oppression, establishes justice and thus ensures the well being of the people. The effectiveness of her leadership is revealed by the fact that she could bring together people from six tribes, the largest number gathered by any of the 12 judges to fight against their respective enemies. This is particularly significant since, as the narrator indicates, a disordered political system and extreme individualism marked the period. Hence she is bestowed the honour of a “mother in Israel.”

3.3. Judith: A Prophetic Leader of Israel (Judith 8-16)

The setting of the mission of Judith is provided in the first seven chapters of the book (Judith 1-7).¹² Holofernes, the general of Nebuchadnezzar, has captured many cities and peoples. On their way to Jerusalem, Holofernes and his army arrive at the fictional town of Bethulia and cut off the water supply of the Israelites. They were left with two choices: either to die without water for their allegiance to Yahweh or to give up their faith and worship the king of the Assyrians.¹³ The council of elders decided that they would hold out for five more days in order to see whether God would save them; if not, they preferred to surrender rather than die.

At this crucial moment, Judith appears for the first time in the narrative (Judith 8:1-8). The author gives the details of her genealogy and makes her story deeply rooted in the traditions of Israel (8:1). Judith is depicted as a rich widow (8:4) who observes the covenant laws by fasting and keeping the important feasts (8:6). She is beautiful (8:7) and God-fearing: “No one spoke ill of her, for she feared God with great devotion” (8:8). When Judith learns that the leaders of her community has decided to give up their faith if God does not save them in five days, she rebukes them for their lack of commitment to the covenant relationship with God and reminds them of what God has done for the people of Israel (Judith 8:9-27). Judith understands God’s ways; her speech reveals her wisdom

¹²Judith’s story is a “historical fiction.” When one compares the historical details of the story of the book of Judith with the actual history of Israel, there seem to be many discrepancies; see the detailed study of Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1997, 153-178.

¹³The author of the book of Judith introduces Nebuchadnezzar as the king of Assyria (“The twelfth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled over the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh” [Judith 1:1a]), but in real life he was the abhorrent king of Babylon who exiled the people of Israel.

and prudence. She is on a mission of saving Israel, and she is absolutely certain that God will deliver Israel by her hand (Judith 8:33).

The author dedicates one whole chapter to her prayer before she leaves for the Assyrian camp (Judith 9:1-14). She knows the rituals and the traditions of Israel and wears sackcloth and puts ashes on her forehead. Her prayer follows the usual structure of Israelite lament and prayer of petition.¹⁴ It reveals the depth of her relationship with God, whom she recognizes as the Creator, the Lord of heaven and earth, the God of the lowly, the powerless, the hopeless and the oppressed (9:11-12). She prays that God may make her, a widow, God’s instrument to defeat the powerful Assyrians. After this long prayer, she goes to the Assyrian camp with her maidservant. Judith’s beauty won her acceptance in the camp (Judith 10:19). She then persuades Holofernes to believe that she has deserted her people and joined their enemies (Judith 11) and succeeds in getting him to fall in love with her (Judith 12). Seizing an opportune moment when alone with Holofernes in his tent, she cuts off his head when he is drunk, and returns home with the head of their enemy (Judith 13).¹⁵

Judith always remains faithful to her God and her religious traditions and practices. The book concludes with her hymn of praise (Judith 16). Like Miriam who celebrated Israel’s escape from Egypt with song and dance (Exodus 15:20-21) and Deborah who led the community with a song of praise after killing Sisera (Judges 5:1), Judith sings a hymn of praise to thank God for delivering Israel from the oppressive hands of the Assyrians (Judith 16). Her hymn underscores God’s continued protection of Israel.¹⁶ Like Mary in the New Testament, Judith receives the honorary title of “blessed among all the women of the earth” (Judith 13:18). The last sentence of the book ranks Judith among the judges who guided Israel before the monarchy: “No one ever again spread terror among the

¹⁴Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament*, 160.

¹⁵The paradox is that Judith, a widow, has the courage to kill Holofernes, but Achior, the military commander and leader of the Ammonites, faints when he sees the head of Holofernes (Judith 14:6).

¹⁶Because of the close verbal similarities between Judith’s song (Judith 16) and that of Moses (Exodus 15), J. W. van Henten suggests that she is portrayed as a new Moses, the greatest prophet and deliverer of Israel (“Judith as a Female Moses,” in F. van Dijk-Hemmes and A. Brenner, eds., *Reflections on Theology and Gender*, Kampen: Pharos, 1994, 33-48). After a comparison between Judith and David, André LaCocque claims that “Judith is David in the feminine;” (*The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel’s Tradition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Pres, 1990, 35).

Israelites during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death” (16:25). Judith’s wisdom and brave actions lead the Israelites to peace and prosperity. Like the Judges in general and Deborah in particular, Judith becomes an agent of God’s mighty work in saving Israel from her enemies.¹⁷

4. Women in the Stories of Jesus

The presentation of women in the gospels is revolutionary in the context of the socio-religious traditions concerning women in the Second Temple period of Judaism.¹⁸ Elizabeth Achtemeier describes the situation of women in this period as follows:

Women were excluded from testifying in a court trial; they were not to be seen in public or to speak with strangers, and outside their homes they were to be doubly veiled. They could not even teach or be taught the Torah in their homes... They had become second-class Jews, excluded from the worship and teaching of God, with status scarcely that of slaves.¹⁹

We have different portrayals of women in the life and ministry of Jesus. Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as Gentile women were included in the genealogy of Jesus [Tamar (Aramean, Genesis 38), Rahab (Canaanite, Joshua 2:1-21; 6:22-25), Ruth (Moabite, Ruth 1-4) and Bathsheba (Hittite, 2 Samuel 11-12)] (Matthew 1:2-16). Women were present in the ministry of Jesus (e.g., Mary, the mother of Jesus [Luke 1-2; John 2; 19], Mary and Martha [Luke 10/John 11-12], Mary Magdalene [John 20], the Canaanite woman [Matthew 15/Mark 7] and the Samaritan woman [John 4]). Women were there at the tomb of Jesus (Mark 16:1 [Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, Salome]; Matthew 28:1 [Mary Magdalene and the other Mary]; Luke 24:10 [Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary mother of James]; John 20:1[Mary Magdalene]). Women were the

¹⁷“So perish all your enemies, O LORD! But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might.’ And the land had rest forty years” (Judges 5:31). See also Judges 3:11, 30; 8:28.

¹⁸See also Rekha Chennattu, “Revisualizing Women in the Story of Jesus,” *Word and Worship* 41, 4 (2008), 270-80.

¹⁹Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Women: An Overview” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (eds., B. M. Metzger and M. D. Coogan; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 807.

first to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus (Luke 24:1-11; John 20:18).²⁰

This short survey highlights the significant role played by women at every stage in the life of Jesus, from conception to resurrection. The gospels thus demonstrate the decisive role played by women in the progressive unfolding of Salvation History. Here I have chosen three outstanding women from the Gospels.

4.1. Mary, the Mother of Jesus (Luke 1)

Mary is traditionally depicted as a sinless virgin who is elected to be the mother of God, a model of humility and selfless devotion to God. A second model regards Mary as a paradigm of our universal quest for justice, equality and wholeness. I shall focus on the presentation of Mary in Luke 1.

Mary is presented as the one who is filled with the power of God: the angel promises that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her. Mary however addresses herself as “the servant of the Lord.” The reference is not a portrayal of Mary’s naïve submissiveness and humility; on the contrary, the servant of God is an honourable title attributed to the great figures in the history of salvation – Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and the prophets. Like them, Mary is filled with God’s power and her life should be seen within the context of God’s redemptive work accomplished through these servants of God.

Mary’s *Magnificat* stands in the grand tradition initiated by the victory songs of Moses, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, David and Judith. It reveals a God who intervenes to reverse the established order by scattering the proud, overthrowing the powerful and sending away the rich empty handed. Mary’s song highlights the grander dimensions of God’s universal salvific plan transcending the boundaries of time, space and class – God’s mercy is for all who fear God (Luke 1:50); God reaches out to the poor, the lowly and the destitute (Luke 1:52-53). Mary as the representative of the new Israel, the new people of God, thus becomes an agent of God’s work of liberation, justice and fullness of life for all and forever.

²⁰Women’s stories in the Gospels also include women in the parables of Jesus (e.g., Luke 15; 18; Matthew 13; 25), the gospel texts dealing with women’s issues or gender justice (e.g., the question on divorce in Mark 10:10-12). But it is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with all of them.

4.2. The Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15)

The Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28 is the mother of a daughter possessed by a demon who will be the beneficiary of Jesus' healing ministry.²¹ The story, however, gives no attention to the healing itself; instead it focuses on the dialogue between Jesus and the woman. The same story is narrated in the Gospel of Mark (7:24-30), but Matthew seems to have altered the Markan story.²² Matthew gives special significance to the woman and her interventions. By the specific reference to the place as Tyre and Sidon (Gentile territories) and the designation of the woman as Canaanite (indigenous people of Canaan and ancient enemies of Israel), Matthew presents the woman as a political enemy of, and a religious outsider for, the Jews.²³ She encounters Jesus in a public place – the domain of men.²⁴ In Matthew's version, the woman is presented as a social critic who transcends the traditional norms and conventions concerning the role of women in public, which appreciated the surrender and submissiveness of this woman pleading for the "fallen crumbs." The true image that emerges from the text is that of a bold and courageous woman who takes the initiative to come out on her own and make her request to Jesus by shouting: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David" (Matthew 15:22). Her request reflects the Christological titles of the early Christian communities ("Lord, Son of David") and the language of the Jewish prayer – the language of the lamentation psalms ("Have mercy on me").²⁵ A lament psalm is understood as an act of hope and trust in God's

²¹Normally a woman is depicted as a "daughter of a man" or "sister of a man" or "wife of a man" or "mother of a son."

²²The understanding is that Mark's Gospel is earlier than Matthew's.

²³For the importance of these cities during the OT and NT periods, see LaMoine F. De Vries, *Cities of the Biblical World*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006, 73-82.

²⁴The first century culture of the Mediterranean society relegated the activities of women to the private or domestic sphere; see Karen Jo Torjesen, "Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History," in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol 1: *A Feminist Introduction*, ed., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1993, 290-310. See also Mary Lefkowitz and Maureen Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982.

²⁵See for example, "Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us" (LXX Psalm 123:3a).

faithfulness to the covenant promises.²⁶ Her persistent request (*ekrazen*) coupled with her liturgical posture of kneeling (*prosekynei*) underlines her desperate need as well as her confident faith in Jesus’ divine power (as the expected Davidic Messiah) to heal her daughter (Matthew 15:25). The woman thus seems to have transcended the boundaries of her own religious traditions, customs and beliefs.

Matthew portrays the woman as an active dialogue partner who dares to confront Jesus, the newly found Jewish prophet, with counter theological arguments. Jesus’ categorical statements: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24) and “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Matthew 15:26) are very rude and harsh. They contradict the usual charm, respect and compassion of Jesus. What is striking is the fact that in spite of Jesus’ harsh words, she does not give up but challenges Jesus with equally powerful counter arguments: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” The implication of her response – “the dogs eat from the fallen crumbs” – is that “Gentiles as well as Jews are fed by God.”²⁷ Although she accepts the priority of the Jews in Salvation History, she challenges Jesus to include Gentiles as an integral part of the salvific community brought about by Jesus. She wins in this theological dispute concerning the boundaries of Jesus’ mission and gets her daughter healed. She seems “to have opened the way for Jesus’ (and the Church’s) mission beyond the Jewish community.”²⁸ The divine power of Jesus is for all – Jews and Gentiles, men and women – and that all should be the beneficiaries of justice, peace and equality – the blessings of God’s reign.

The woman’s gender and non-Jewishness render her intervention with Jesus insignificant and marginal in the Jewish world of that time. In the Gospel of Matthew, however, she is praised for her “great faith” required of all true disciples of Jesus. (“O woman, great is your faith” [15:28b]). What does this great faith refer to? It consists in her ability to interpret her faith in response to the needs of the emerging situation or

²⁶For a study of Matthew 15:21-28 and the Lament Psalm, see Gail O’Day, “Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman,” in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed., Amy-Jill Levine; Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001, 114-125.

²⁷Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew, Sacra Pagina 1*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991, 235.

²⁸Sharon Ringe, “A Gentile Woman’s Story,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed., Letty M. Russell, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985, 65-72.

new context. She is reading the “signs of the times” by bringing non-Jews into the family of God’s chosen people. Like the prophets in the Old Testament, the woman seems to be filled with the Spirit and the power of God to speak on behalf of God, and to reveal the will of God for her daughter’s destiny.

4.3. The Samaritan Woman (John 4)

I shall now examine the Samaritan story in John 4.²⁹ In this missionary episode the evangelist makes a woman the protagonist; this is also one of the few texts in the Gospels, in which the issue of women is explicitly raised by the characters and responded to by Jesus (John 4:9, 27). The Samaritan woman is presented as a social critic, a contextualized theologian and a committed apostle.

The Johannine Jesus allows the Samaritan woman to question him at every significant moment of the narrative. The request of Jesus in 4:7b: “give me a drink” is questioned by the woman in 4:9: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” Her response establishes a two-fold division; she challenges the religious association between the Jews and the Samaritans as well as the social association between men and women.³⁰ She has the ability to give water to Jesus, but she raises an objection because of the social and religious prohibitions. The woman introduces the issues of the national antagonism between the Jews and the Samaritans, and of the interaction between men and women in public. Like Jesus, she has also shown an openness which transcends social traditions by entering into a dialogue with him. Her courage and freedom are great as she is completely unaware of the identity of Jesus.

Although the Samaritan woman is traditionally interpreted as a prostitute who was evangelised by Jesus, the dialogue between Jesus and the woman in 4:19-20 reveals that her sins are not the point of the story. It is in verses 19-20 that the woman takes an initiative in bringing forward a new topic and Jesus’ prophetic character by raising the issue of the right place of worship. If her personal life were the central theme of the story, then, like the

²⁹Rekha Chennattu, “Women in the Mission of the Church: An Interpretation of John 4,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 65, 2001, 760-773; reprinted in French, “Les femmes dans la mission de l’Église: interprétation de Jean 4.” *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclesiastique* CVIII/3, 2007, 381-396.

³⁰Birger Olsson claims that the symmetrical use of participial construction in the Greek text in reference to Jesus on the one hand and the woman on the other hand emphasizes this separation; see *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text-Linguistic Analysis of John 2, 1-11 and John 4, 1-42*, Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1974, 177.

disciples of John the Baptist, very probably she would have asked a personal question: “What then shall I do?” (see Luke 3:10-14). On the contrary, what she brings forward is a national and religious issue pertinent to her people, namely, the right place of worship. According to the Scripture of the Samaritans, the Pentateuch, there is only one place of worship (Deuteronomy 12:2-12); Mount Gerizim is the Mount of grace and blessing, because Noah and Abraham offered sacrifice there.³¹ This disagreement about the right place of worship was the most important religious dispute between the Samaritans and the Jews. The Samaritans believed that the Messiah would settle this dispute (John 4:25). In the words of Teresa Okure, “the woman thus proves to be remarkably in touch with the current disputes between the two nations. As for finding a topic worthy of a Jewish prophet she could do no better than raise this long standing issue of Gerizim versus Jerusalem.”³² These verses thus reveal a woman well-versed in her religious tradition and a theologian who dares to confront a prophet and discuss theological issues with him; and she does both these in the context of her own religious tradition. She is rooted in her tradition yet open to learn from Jesus, the newly found prophet. She is portrayed as someone who initiates and encourages dialogue and contextualization in our mission.

The woman’s change from unbelief to belief in Jesus reflects the faith-journey of a committed believer. At the beginning she encounters Jesus with puzzlement because of her ignorance. She is however open to participate more and more actively as the dialogue progresses. Her response when she recognizes Jesus as the Messiah is very significant. She abandons the water jar and goes into the city to spread the good news of her encounter with Jesus, the Messiah.³³ The transforming effect of her apostleship is marked by the whole-hearted response of the people from Sychar.

At the beginning of the story there existed no dealings between the Jews and the Samaritans (4:9), but at the end of the episode, they become members of the one covenant community (4:42). This episode thus projects a breaking down of all barriers – gender, religious and racial – that will bring about a radical egalitarian understanding of the presence of the Church in the world.

³¹John MacDonald, *The Theology of the Samaritans*, London: SCM, 1964, 406.

³²Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42*. WUNT 2/31, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1988, 115.

³³This resembles the standard way of responding to the call of discipleship in the synoptic Gospels: leaving the boats in Mark 1:16-20 and leaving the tax stall in Matthew 9:9.

5. Paul's Attitude towards Women

Although the letters of Paul *seem to have presented* the differing views of Paul on the role of women in the church, no one can deny Paul's vision of a new society characterized by reciprocal partnership between men and women in the church. There are passages that impose some restrictions on the participation of women in the life of the church (e.g., 1 Corinthians 11). As I have argued elsewhere, these texts need to be understood as pastoral directives aimed at specific situations and concrete problems for the building up of the church.³⁴ One needs to be careful in distinguishing the voice of the apostle from the concerns of the early churches (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7 and 14). There are also other passages which underscore the oneness and mutuality of women and men in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26-28). Moreover, on various occasions, Paul acknowledged the roles actually played by women colleagues and apostles and the significant contributions made by them in the church (Romans 16). Therefore, one needs to make a distinction between the general principles of Paul and their pastoral applications in response to the specific concerns of different communities.

As Paul expected the imminence of the Parousia, it is understandable that, in his missionary work, Paul did not focus on the transformation of society in general (e.g., Philemon 16-18; see also the references to the institution of slavery within the church in 1 Corinthians 7:20-24) and the establishment of gender equality in particular. However, Paul's colleagues and co-workers like Lydia, Phoebe, Prisca, and Junia are testimonies of women's active participation in the ministry of the gospel in the early Christian communities. It is therefore difficult to deny Paul's vision of a new society brought into being by the power of God's grace which transforms the old inequalities and discriminations (1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Galatians 3:26-28). It seems that it is the deutero-Pauline letters (e.g., 1 Timothy 5:3-16; Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18) and the writings of the apostolic fathers (e.g., 1 Clemens 1.3; 21.6-7) which forced women out of leadership role and compelled them to be submissive in conformity with their position in the patriarchal household systems.³⁵ Unfortunately it is this tradition that was handed down by the church for centuries until the reawakening of women in the 18th century. Now the time has come to

³⁴Rekha Chennattu, "Partnership of Equals: Paul's Vision of Women in the Church," in *The Relevance of Saint Paul: An Indian Reading of His Letters*, Kurien Kunnumpuram and Rekha Chennattu, eds., Mumbai: St Paul's, 2009, 274-290.

³⁵See also Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Virgins, Widows, and Wives: The Women of 1 Corinthians 7," 148-168.

recapture the vision of the apostle Paul and reclaim the rightful place of women in the church and in society.

In sum, the cumulative weight of the evidences found in the authentic letters suggests that (i) Paul was ahead of his time in promoting a dynamic and reciprocal partnership between women and men, and in appreciating and approving women’s leadership roles in the church; (ii) Women did play important leadership roles in the life and mission of the churches founded by Paul. These women apostles indeed reveal the universality of God’s blessings. However, the actualization of Paul’s vision of a new society characterized by gender equality and dynamic partnership between women and men still remains a task of the church in the unfolding history of salvation.

6. The Dignity and Mission of Women in the Church

The teaching of the Church respects the dignity of women and call for women’s active participation in almost all spheres. The members of the Second Vatican Council emphasized the dignity of women and their unique role in society: “It is fitting that they [women] are able to assume their proper role in accordance with their own nature. It will belong to all to acknowledge and favor the proper and necessary participation of women in the cultural life.”³⁶ Pope John XXIII articulates the concern of the Church for women as follows: “Women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons.”³⁷

The Apostolic Letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, underlines the ample evidence that we have in the history of the Church of the presence of women in the Church as “true disciples, witnesses to Christ in the family and in society, as well as in total consecration to the service of God and of the Gospel.”³⁸ It also underlines the absolute necessity and importance of the active participation of women in the life and the mission of the Church by citing the Declaration *Inter Insigniores*, “the Church desires that Christian women should become fully aware of the greatness of their mission: today their role is of capital importance both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the true

³⁶*Gaudium et Spes*, 60.

³⁷*Pacem in Terris*, 41.

³⁸*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, 3.

face of the Church.”³⁹ As the Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, concludes:

The Church gives thanks *for all the manifestations of the feminine “genius”* which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all *the fruits of feminine holiness*.⁴⁰

The dignity of women as equal partners with men was further emphasized by Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) in his Letter concerning the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Reply regarding a *dubium* concerning *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, “In any case it cannot be forgotten that the Church teaches, as an absolutely fundamental truth of Christian anthropology, the equal personal dignity of men and women, and the necessity of overcoming and doing away with ‘every type of discrimination regarding fundamental rights’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 29).”⁴¹ In the same letter, the Cardinal further assured that “the Word of God, in proclaiming the essential value and eternal destiny of every person, reveals the ultimate foundation of the dignity of every human being, of every woman and of every man.”⁴²

7. The Gender Policy Document for the Church in India

The Gender Policy document prepared and promulgated by CBCI in 2010 lists the following objectives:

- a. To facilitate change in the mindsets of women and men so that they relate to each other with respect and dignity.
- b. To ensure fulfilment of the human rights of women especially of the marginalized groups.
- c. To ensure that all Church ministries, policies, structures, procedures and programmes are gender sensitive and gender balanced.
- d. To make provisions for adequate human and material resources to achieve the objectives.⁴³

³⁹*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, 3.

⁴⁰*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 31.

⁴¹Letter by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, October 28, 1995.

⁴²Letter by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, October 28, 1995.

⁴³*Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India*, New Delhi: CBCI Center, 2010, 11.

The CBCI has taken a bold step forward by articulating the guiding principles of the Gender Policy, which include statements such as “equality and dignity of all human persons form the basis of a just and humane society”; “women’s empowerment is central to achieving gender equality”; and “gender equality is cross-cutting issue that needs to be integrated in all the commissions, church bodies, institutions, policies and programs of the Church.” What is praiseworthy is also the fact that the document short-listed eight important areas of concern and made policies and prepared strategies for implementation.⁴⁴ The implementation of this policy will definitely enhance the life and uphold the dignity of women in the Church and enable women to make a significant contribution to the life and mission of the church in India.

8. Conclusion

The stories of biblical women give us a glimpse of the actual creative power and wisdom of women as shapers of tradition and makers of history. These stories challenge us to uphold the dignity of women as God’s beloved daughters created in God’s image and likeness as well as to promote their active participation in the mission of the Church. The teachings of the Church recognise and appreciate the fact that women with their manifold resources devote themselves to the service of the Church.

No one disputes the fact that women make significant contributions in the process of liberation and community building.⁴⁵ However, the Indian Church has to go a long way in giving women their rightful place in the Church. Theological illiteracy is indeed one of the reasons for the subordination of women in the Church. Adequate biblical and theological

⁴⁴The areas include women and family; women and education; women and health; women and social involvement; special areas of concern such as rights of the girl child, Tribal and Dalit women, violence against women, women in difficult circumstances, and trafficking and sexual abuse; women’s life in the Church (women and CBCI; women and diocesan social service societies; women’s representation and participation in church bodies; formation of consecrated women and seminarians); research, documentation and dissemination of information; and networking. See *Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India*, 14-37.

⁴⁵For example, Pearl Drego, “Women Theologizing: Beginnings of Feminist Theologies and Their Concerns,” *Jeevadhara* 40, 237 (2010), 232-52; Shalini Mulackal, “Political Economy of Participation: Women in the Life and Mission of the Church,” in *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced*, ed. E. Monteiro and A. Gutzler, Delhi: ISPCK, 2005, 184-194 and Rekha M. Chennattu, “The Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* and Women’s Mission in the Church,” *Vidyajyoti* 74, 4 (2010), 300-304.

formation will empower women to play their rightful role in the Church. In addition to the ongoing theological formation and empowerment of women, what seems appropriate in handling these issues is the strategy of constructive dialogues in view of challenging and changing the gender stereotypes in the Church and society. An ongoing transformative process among women as well as men is an imperative for the realization of the full humanity of women proclaimed by Jesus as free daughters of God created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:28). In the present context of ever increasing alienation and brokenness in the world, a more dynamic partnership between men and women and an inclusive leadership can be a transforming grace in the life and mission of the Church.