

GENDER JUSTICE IN THE BIBLE

James Gurudas*

1. Introduction

The very discussion on gender justice in the Bible presupposes suspicion and accusation of injustice to women, caused or perpetuated by the Scripture. Christianity, like any other organized religion, considers its sacred Scripture as its normative basis. Scriptural fundamentalism, which sticks to literal understanding and interpretation of its words, has certainly been detrimental to the cause of women throughout the history of the Church.

However, the other side of this fact is that the biblical passages are often ambivalent. They can be constructively or destructively translated and interpreted; they can be liberating as well as enslaving, hope giving as well as frustrating; they can give rise to feminism as well as antifeminism at the same time. Unfortunately, the passages dealing with women have been translated and interpreted in such a way that they have become unjust judges in the court for women. The scope of this article, therefore, is to ascertain how unjust the Bible has been to women, and whether it can be a source of inspiration for feminist liberation movement.

While discussing the issues of gender-related justice and injustice, we have to keep in mind the relativity of justice and injustice. What the modern human finds unjust may not have been unjust in ancient communities. It may be unfair to measure Jewish-tribal jurisprudence and early-Christian socio-religious customs with the standards of present-day human awareness. However, undeniable is the fact that the claws of Jewish and early Christian biblical hawks are still held deep-driven in the neck of a helpless Christian. In other words, the poison of biblical vipers is still

***Dr. James Gurudas** (Naduvilekutu) cmi, the present Director of Snehavani, an inter-religious dialogue centre in Kottayam, Kerala, holds a doctorate in theology from Bochum University, Germany. He is the author of *Christus der Heilsweg* (St. Ottilien, Stuttgart: EOS Verlag, 1987), and is a Professor of Christology at various theological institutes in India.

there in the bloodstream of Christianity; hence, the relevance of our discussion on gender justice in the Scripture.

2. The Fact of Bible-based Injustice

No honest Christian would deny the reality of injustice being done to women in the name of faithfulness to the Bible. For validation and justification of all its teachings and actions, whether justifiable or unjustifiable, logical or illogical, the Church has always looked into the Bible, and sought out "*dicta probantia*," proving pronouncements. Not only dogmas and moral theology, but also the whole ecclesiastical structure, are declared to be based on the Scripture. Consequently, husbands, pastors, preachers and teachers along with timid and conservative women have made use of the Bible as *weapon* against women.¹

a. Current Forms of Injustice

Prohibition of divorce even to women enslaved and tortured by husbands who are incorrigible is a clear form of injustice to women, maintained in the name of loyalty to the Bible. Another form is denial of ordination to women. Weak representation of women in legislative and administrative bodies like synods and pastoral and parish councils is believed to be ultimately supported by biblical stand. The ruling of priests in many eastern churches that women should cover their head in the church is also considered to be a command of the Bible. Husbands who demand servile obedience from their wives also refer to the Bible as the basis of their rights and authority.

b. Injustice Bolstered by Church Fathers, Doctors and Exegetes

The unjust dealing to women by all male groups in the Church is caused by the traditional interpretation of biblical texts, which was nothing more than pronouncements based on their literal understanding. Until the encyclical *divino affante spiritu* of Pope Pius XII came out in 1943, no historical critical study of the Bible was permitted. Therefore, the Fathers, Doctors and Bible scholars never thought of the particular socio-cultural context in which the biblical pronouncements took their origin.

¹Marga Buehring, *Die Unsichtbare Frau und der Gott der Vaeter: Eine Einfuehrung in die Feministische Theologie*, Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1987, 34.

These interpreters who were all male, made use of the Bible to assert male superiority and to highlight female inferiority. "History of biblical interpretation is the history of biblical interpreters."² This is true, in as much as the above-mentioned interpreters became the real instrument of women's subjugation to man in the two thousand years' history of the Church.³

Tertullian, in the course of his fight against Montanism and basing his arguments on the Bible, has made derogatory and disparaging statements against women: "You are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first forsaker of the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him, whom the devil was not brave enough to approach; you so lightly crushed the image of God, the man Adam; because of your punishment, i.e., the death, even the Son of God has to die."⁴

Augustine also accuses women of having caused the fall of humankind as narrated by Genesis (chapter 3), and considers women valuable only as a means for procreation.

Although in his historical context, he perceived himself to be defending the goodness of sex and marriage against dualist heresies, he was deeply suspicious of sexual passion, was incapable of seeing men and women as equals in sexuality or anything else, and found the only sure justification of sex in procreation.⁵

Even Thomas Aquinas holds the view that woman is subordinate to man and her role is that of an assistant in procreation. He, too, bases his arguments on Gen 3.⁶

Following suit, Martin Luther argues for women's subjugation to men on the footing of Gen 3 and 1Tim 2:11-15.⁷ Almost all the Bible

²Herlinde Pissarek Hudelist, "Gerade wir duerfen nicht schweigen," in Karin Walter, ed., *Frauen entdecken die Bibel*, Freiburg: Herder, 1987, 164.

³See Pauline Chakkalackal, *Discipleship – Space for Women's Leadership: A Feminist Theological Critique*, Mumbai: Pauline Publications, 2004, 60-72.

⁴Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum*, C.197-200, CSEL 70.59, cited in Chakkalackal, *Discipleship*, 62.

⁵Lisa Sowle Cahil, *Woman and Sexuality*, New York: Paulist Press, 1992, 7.

⁶See Chakkalackal, *Discipleship*, 68-69.

⁷Buehring, *Die Unsichtbare Frau und der Gott der Vaeter*, 92-93.

scholars who were unaware of the need of historical-critical approach have branded Eve as the first sinner and seducer of man. The dangerous belief that woman by nature is a seducer motivated even the witch-burners in the Middle Ages to get rid of many fair women.

c. Charges Levelled by the Feminists: Androcentrism, Patriarchy, Masculinization

Feminists, who are "women committed to the struggle for the liberation of women,"⁸ argue that the Bible interpreters and through them the Church authorities have either engendered or kept up several sorts of wrong to women, which could be summarized as androcentrism, patriarchalization and masculinization of God.

Androcentric – male-centred – translation and interpretation imply prejudice towards women and favoritism towards men in finding out, explaining or highlighting the meaning of biblical passages or words. For example, the personal name Junias (Rom 16:7), which is a well-known female name, and to whom Paul refers to as "*apostolos*" (apostle), has been considered and rendered as Junia – female – even in several modern Bible translations. The presupposition behind it is that a female could not have been an apostle. According to Rom 16:1, Pöbe is a "*diakonos*" of the church of Cenchreae. It is translated as "helper" or "servant," whereas the same word is translated "deacon" when it stands with Appollos, Timotheus, Tychicus, etc.⁹ So also, Paul's encounter with Jesus in the vision is given far more importance than Mary Magdalene's meeting with the risen Lord.¹⁰

Another form of Bible-based injustice according to the feminists is the patriarchal social order. Patriarchy (*pater + arche* = rule of the father) is a violation of gender-equality. "Women today are attempting to

⁸Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SCM, 1993, 3.

⁹See Monica Fander, "'Und ihnen kamen diese Worte vor wie leeres Geschwaetz, und sie glaubten ihnen nicht' (Lk 24:11): Feministische Bibellektüre des Neuen Testaments – Eine Reflexion," in *Handbuch Feministische Theologie*, eds., Christine Schaumberger, Monika Maassen, Muenster: Frauenbuchverlag, 1986, 299.

¹⁰See Marianne Dirks, "Gesandt zum Zeugnis," in Karin Walter, ed., *Frauen Entdecken die Bibel*, Freiburg: Herder, 1987, 158.

exorcise the demon of patriarchalism."¹¹ As example of biblical patriarchalization the genealogies are put forth: only four unimportant women, and that too from outside Judea – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uria – are incorporated; this may be explained as universalism, or inclusion of all people in the economy of salvation, although it is more an evidence of patriarchy than of universalism.¹² Even that quantum of male-female equality sanctioned by Paul was revoked by his disciples through the 'household-code' (Eph 5:22-33; Col 3:18-19).

Masculinization of God, projecting God exclusively as a male, is another evil that has its roots in the Bible. Yahweh is male; God is Father in the New Testament; he is the male Almighty; he is the Lord of Lords, King of kings, Ruler, etc.; 'Spirit', which was female in Hebrew (i.e., *Ruah*) and neuter in Greek (i.e., *pneuma*), became masculine (i.e., *spiritus*) in the hands of the translators! "The over-whelming majority of male Jewish and Christian theologians and Church leaders have made arrogant sexist decisions and judgements at the expense of women. They did this in the name of that unique and exclusive God who, despite lip service to his otherness, was viewed as a male."¹³ Suffocated by the comprehensive masculinization of God, the feminists ask: "... is it still appropriate to hold up only this one image of God in the creed?"¹⁴ Masculinization, patriarchy and *kyriarchy* or rule of the lord, go together.

It is to be noted that there are theologians who are of the view that God's image in the Bible is not totally male. They point to passages like Is 49:15, where God is "a nursing mother that can never forget her suckling."¹⁵ However, such exceptions do not weaken the arguments of feminists and their supporters.

¹¹Sheila D. Collins, *A Different Heaven and Earth*, PA: Judson Press, 49.

¹²See Kyung-mi Park, "Genealogy and Woman," in *Reading the Bible*, Seoul: AWRC, 1992, 154-155.

¹³Erhard S. Gertenberger, *Yahweh the Patriarch: Ancient Images of God and Feminist Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, 82.

¹⁴Elizabeth Rankin Geitz, *Gender and the Nicene Creed*, PA: Morehouse, 1995, 93.

¹⁵See Denise Lardner Carmody, *Responses to 101 Questions among Feminism*, London: Geoffry Chapman, 1994, 45.

3. Mothers of Injustice: Passages Breeding Discrimination to Women

After mentioning the accusations of women against androcentrism, we now catalogue the important verses or pericopes which have fostered injustice to women, which could be called 'mothers' of injustice. At the very outset the method followed in our analysis and commentary has to be specified.

a. Validity and Suitability of a 'Phenomenological' Approach

In our observations about the biblical texts that have been causing subjugation, humiliation and discrimination of women we prefer a phenomenological method to historical-critical and linguistic-analytical methods. What is meant here is: we take those passages as they have been perceived or apprehended by the readers who have not asked themselves, in what particular situation a particular advice or injunction to women was given or a remark on their behaviour was made, and have not felt obliged to find out if the author really meant discrimination or subjugation of women. For these readers it did not matter whether their understanding of a verse or passage corresponded to its inner sense. One could say: literal sense was the only sense they sensed, with the exception of allegorical sense attached to them by the Fathers of the Church like Augustine.

Such a method is, in fact, imperative because it is not historical critical analysis or literary, form, redaction, and semiotic criticisms that have turned deleterious to the womenfolk as a whole, but the naïve exegesis of literal-minded pastors, preachers, male chauvinists, and despotic, domineering and disciplinarian husbands. In other words, what has turned disastrous to women is the blind loyalty to the Bible considered as revealed and inspired by God.

The naïve have always outnumbered and overpowered the clever, the imprudent over the prudent, the dull over the discerning. This is applicable to the present Church too: critical understanding of biblical statements remains subdued by literal understanding by the mass; scholarly approach is eclipsed by 'pastoral' approach. The latter, however, is very often a way of domination and exploitation. Therefore, it is easy to confront the so-called pastoral-practical approach with the same method. That is why in the following section passages perpetuating injustice against women are almost phenomenologically analysed. Only axiomatic verses or pericopes used against women are considered here.

b. Old Testament Passages

If superiority of man to woman has been taken for granted as a fundamental theological principle, it has its roots in the second creation narrative (Gen 2:7-8, 18-25), which we could call a notorious mother of gender-based injustice. It is true that the man calls woman "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (v. 23) and his attraction and attachment to her is so powerful and invincible, that he leaves his father and mother and clings to her (v. 24). Still she is inferior to him by way of origination, nomination and instrumentalization. i). Origination: God takes one of man's ribs and shapes it to a woman (v. 24). Thus, she is extracted or derived from him and has her direct origin from him. ii). Nomination: Man calls her *ishshah*, woman. Undoubtedly, *ishshah* is not a personal name. Before conferring the personal name "*howah*" (Gen 3:20), he calls her *ishshah*. However, against the background of the statement "whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (v. 19), this calling means naming, and it is more than specification, particularization or categorization. Naming is a way of conquering, subduing or subordinating. iii). Instrumentalization: God makes woman a means for remedying man's loneliness; his main consideration is reflected in the following verse: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (18). Moreover, woman is made a "helper" of man even though she is also "a partner" (v. 18).

The overall impression the Yahwist narrative makes on the readers is certainly disadvantageous to women. Fortunately, the creation narrative by the 'Priestly' tradition mitigates its results to a certain extent, which will be dealt with later.

Another Old Testament 'mother' that has brought forth and nurtured injustice to women is the injunction regarding ritual purity of women." "If a woman conceives and bears a male child, her "time of blood purification shall be thirty three days; if she bears a female child ... her time of blood purification shall be sixty six days" (Lev 12:2-5). Then, conception and delivery are by these standards mean! Moreover, giving birth to a female child is doubly mean!! Just imagine the impact of such ignorance-, taboo-, and superstition-based religious rulings on the psyche of believers. It is such biased and discriminatory laws that have motivated Jewish Rabbis like Judah Ben Ilay to praise and thank God for not having given them a female birth!

The story of the first sin and its punishment (Gen 3:1-22) also has begotten injustice to women. Woman is depicted as seducer of man (6:12), and delivery pain and desire for husband as curses to women by God; God gives man domination over woman as a punishment: "he shall rule over you" (v. 16). Historical critical exegetes would say that the story of the fall of man is rabbinic symbolic aetiological explanation of the downfall of Israelite kingdom after the death of Solomon, its division into two, and the following miseries and catastrophes which the Jews experienced in the course of history. Accordingly, Solomon's deviation from Yahwist monotheism is the ultimate reason for the collapse of the Davidic kingdom. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1Kg 11:3), many of whom were pagans who worshipped their own gods; his first wife, namely the queen, was Pharaoh's daughter who continued her snake-worship in Solomon's palace; since he ruled according to the counsel of snake-worshipping pagan wife, God punished them and the whole people; the most cursed are Solomon's pagan wife and the snake who cheated her directly and Solomon through her.

Unfortunately, there are only very few pastors, preachers, Church authorities and authoritarian husbands who are enlightened and guided by modern biblical scholarship. For these unenlightened groups, Eve is every woman, and not Solomon's snake-worshipping wife; so they will continue to "rule over" women!

For want of scope in this article I shall now just mention some points that are discriminatory to women, and the corresponding passages: Marriage is a kind of purchase; the girl is bought with dowry (Dt 22:28) or with equivalent services (Gen 29:14-30; 1Sam 18:25); she becomes property of the husband through this contract (Job 7:13). Also the listing of wife under the goods that should not be stolen creates the impression that she is a property of the husband, like cow or sheep (Dt 5:17-21). Legal requirements concerning premarital purity are discriminatory to women (Dt 22:13-21). Childlessness is a punishment of God on women (Jer 18:21). To summarize, there are several passages in the Old Testament, which have been utilized to make women inferior and subordinate to man.

c. New Testament Passages

The main passages within the New Testament that maintain injustice

against women could be categorized into three groups: Pauline, Deutero-Pauline, and Petrine.

i). Pauline Passages

While discussing Paul's remarks on and advices to women, we should keep in mind that his statements are often ambivalent or unclear because of our distance from their socio-cultural milieu. What is certain is that they have been used to degrade and subjugate women.

Two pericopes to be taken seriously are, 1Cor 11:3-16 and 14:34-36. As regards the first one, what has turned out to be disastrous to women is not Paul's strict injunction to women to cover their heads during prayer and prophesying, but the theology with which he elucidates and corroborates his arguments, and its catastrophic misunderstanding by the readers of later generations. First of all, he presupposes derivation of woman from man according to Gen 2:8-25, pertinently verse 8. Even though biologically man proceeds from woman (v. 12) theologically it is the other way around. In this context, "*kephale*" in verse 3 could be translated as "source" rather than "head," because it is used in Greek to designate also the source of a river. That means, theologically man is the source of woman, just as Christ is the source of man and God the source of Christ. With his "theology of derivation" Paul is unconsciously fabricating a "theology of humiliation" for women! Besides, he cements this theology with "theology of utility." Thus, "man was not created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man" (v. 9)!

In fact, what Paul demands from women is a little modesty, which is understandable both against the background of the socio-cultural circumstances in Corinth which was notorious as a city of prostitutes, and according to the custom prevailing in other churches. Undoubtedly, he never foresaw the adverse effects of his "veil-, derivation-, and utility theology," though the sad truth is that they have been quite devastating, and plague the Church even to this day.

The second Pauline periscope (1Cor 14:34-36) concerns women's obligation to keep silence in church assemblies. Since these verses are found in all important manuscripts, there is very little doubt that they are

genuinely Pauline, though there are authors who hold the opposite view.¹⁶ Many clerics and disciplinarian husbands have used this passage as a “silencing machine” against women, and there are still many clever operators of *silencing* among Church officials and laymen. If we consider Paul’s amazing appreciation of his women associates (Rom 16:1-4) and his admirable theology of equality between men and women (Gal 3:28) it will be unjust to judge him as a women-hater on the basis of these verses. They are to be reviewed in the context of the whole chapter 14, where the point discussed is order and discipline to be kept by those who are endowed with charismata like *glossolalia* – speaking in tongues – and prophecy. It seems that there were women who were too impulsive in their queries about revelations made by the prophets and lessons given by the teachers. Paul’s injunctions to prophets and *glossolalians* are polite and conditional (vv. 27-28), whereas those to women too blunt and unconditional (vv. 34-35). However, when we keep in view that in almost all manuscripts verses 34-35 are found after v. 40, it becomes almost clear that Paul’s commands and prohibitions to the prophets are stricter than to women, because it is to the former he says: “what I am writing to you is command of the Lord” (v. 37).

Whatever be Paul’s intentions and however guiltless he may be, his pronouncements such as “women should be silent in the church,” “they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says,” “it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church,” etc., have made many women subjects, subaltern, slave-like and silent listeners to domineering males in the Church.

ii). Deutero-Pauline and Petrine Passages

In these categories the main texts that have been disastrous to women are Eph 5:22-27, Col 3:18-19, 1Tim 2:8-15 and 1Pet 3:17. They are often known as “subordination passages,”¹⁷ because they openly enjoin women to be obedient and subservient to their husbands.

Eph 5:22-27 is an essential part of the household code (5:22-6:9) or code of conduct which is common to the Letters to the Ephesians and to the Colossians. What is most offensive and humiliating to women is verse

¹⁶For a list of scholars who doubt the authenticity of these verses, see Chakkalalal, *Discipleship*, 89, note 168.

¹⁷Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 14.

22: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord." It has been instrumental in subjugating women by men, even though in the overall context it is not so. The author advises all to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ" (v. 22). When he specifies the different pertinent groups, however, he makes an unjustifiable distinction: Wives should be subject to husbands, whereas husbands are expected only to love their wives ardently! There is evident discrimination in this distinction. Besides, wives owe respect to their husbands and these are not expected to reciprocate (v. 32).

Col 3:18-19 demands the same attitudinal difference from wives to husbands: she must be subject to him, whereas he must love her. 1Tim 2:8-15 surpasses all other passages in strictness and rudeness towards women. In addition to insisting on modesty and decency, it obliges woman to "learn in silence with full submission" (vv. 11, 12); it categorically forbids her "to teach or to have authority over a man" (v. 12). Prohibition of exercising authority over man seems to presuppose that the church presided over by Timothy had the problem of some women trying to dominate their husbands; the emphatic pronouncement "I permit no woman" justifies such a conclusion. However, the change of milieu does not seem to have touched the mindset of males in the Church.

Presupposing the authority of the second creation account, the author asserts chronological and theological priority of man to woman, her naivety and stupidity and her despicable and contemptible status as the first sinner in human history: "Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." The ability to mother children is the only blessing given to her under the condition that she leads a holy life.

Tit 2:5 is also a "subjugation passage." Here older women are exhorted to encourage young women to be "submissive to their husbands." 1Pet 3:7 presupposes man's natural superiority to woman and labels her as *weaker sex*. Whether the weakness is physical or mental is not specified; but the advice to the husbands to show special consideration to wives because of their natural debility is sheer humiliation to women as a whole.

The overall impact of such woman-degrading theology on believers is imaginable. The Fathers of the Church were the main carriers of the anti-feminine viruses from biblical passages like 1Tim 2:8-15.

4. Biblical Basis for Restoring Justice to Women

In the last section we have analysed the issue of gender justice from the viewpoint of the plaintiffs and put forth the arguments of the feminists and their supporters against the Bible. Now we put forward the arguments of the defendants who may be anti-feminists or those who are balanced in their criticism of the Bible. Ours is an attempt to show that, to a great extent, Bible itself can be used in the fight for justice to women. In this approach, again, we take the biblical passages as they have been read and understood by Christians in general, because it is their 'phenomenological' approach to the Bible that has motivated them to use biblical statements as torture tools against women.

a. Declarations of Equality

There are several passages in the Bible which proclaim equality between men and women. An important one is Gen 1:26-27, which is the creation narrative by the 'Priestly' tradition. According to this, God created humankind as male and female who are equal in all respects, with regard to their origin from and resemblance to God and to their dominion over the subhuman creatures.

Another text, perhaps the most important from the New Testament, which declares equality between male and female is Gal 3:27-28. It asserts unequivocally that Christians' solidarity with Christ which results from baptism is the basis for a comprehensive equality; racial, social, gender, and other differences are abolished through baptismal inclusion into Christ; therefore, the disciples of Christ have no valid identities other than the Christian; they are not only one in Christ; they loose even their external identification marks stamped on them, because they "have clothed themselves with Christ." This theological foundation is strong enough to nullify all traditions that are discriminatory to women. Besides these two most important proclamations of gender-equality, there are some that are worth mentioning: Sir 3:1-16 obliges children to show equal respect to father and mother. Some verses praise clever, benevolent and pious women (Prov 31:10-31; 11:16; 12:4). There are others which extol sensible and prudent women as gifts of God (Prov 19:14; 18:22). Men and women are equal in their covenant relationship to Yahweh (Dt 20:10-12). Song of Songs as a whole is not only glorification of love between man and woman but also of women in general. Justice meted out

to Susanna by Daniel against the two elders (Dan 13) can be very well held up as an example of equality of men and women before the law.

b. Jesuan Justice: A Paradigm Shift

A close look into the Gospels will reveal the paradigm shift carried out by Jesus with regard to justice towards women. Even the feminists joyfully agree that it is not Jesus who oppresses the woman but the church authorities and domineering men. Jewish Rabbis' contempt for women is infamous. The Gospels themselves testify to the worthlessness of women in the Jewish society at the time of Jesus. For example, in the bread-multiplication narratives only the men who ate are counted: "those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children" (Mt 14:21; Mk 6:44). In such a society, where the women are not even worthy of being counted, Jesus fights for justice to women and that too with a love-and-tenderness-filled heart. He castigates the scribes "who devour widows' houses" (Mk 12:40), scolds those who criticize the woman who, according to them, wastes the perfumed ointment by pouring it on Jesus' head: "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me" (Mk 14:6). To ensure social security of women who used to be divorced by their selfish and despotic husbands even for trivial reasons, he forbids divorce categorically and declares it indissoluble (Mk 10:11; Mt 19:3-9). Out of respect and compassion to women he allows them to touch him (Lk 7:38; Mk: 5:28), which was quite scandalous and provocative to all, because no decent Rabbi would do it at that time. In order to heal women he lays hands on them (Lk 13:13; Mk 5:41), which too was considered outrageous in Jewish society.

Jesus also pardons the woman caught in adultery allegedly by discarding even Moses' Law (Jn 8:3-11). He speaks to a woman in secret against the custom of his time; it was shocking even to his disciples (Jn 4:7-27).¹⁸ He values friendship and hospitality of women like Mary and Martha (Lk 10:38-42; Jn 12:1-3). As example of ideal generosity and spirit of sacrifice he extols a poor widow (Mk 12:41-44). In his healing

¹⁸The author is aware of the historical critical view, that the story of Jesus and the Samaritan women is most probably a narrative of the history of evangelisation in Samaria by the Johannine Community through an unknown Samaritan woman. However, I think that, contrary to those who use Bible against women, our 'phenomenological' approach is more effective.

ministry and raising the dead to life women are given special consideration (the cripple woman, Syro-phoenician woman, the woman with hemorrhages, Peter's mother-in-law, daughter of Jairus, son of a widow at Nain). It is noteworthy how sincerely he admires the faith of a simple woman (Mt 15:27). By using women's life context in his parables Jesus shows his appreciation of their social situation: woman and the yeast she mixed with flour (Mt 13:20), woman and her lost coin (Lk 15:8-10), the widow's persistence (Lk 18:1-5), etc. He never speaks low of women. The only one apparent exception to this is his reference to the Canaanite woman as a dog. However, in fact, Jesus is ironically referring to the ridiculous belief of his own people that they are the only chosen people of God and that the Gentiles are all outcastes (who were treated as if dogs), and had no real faith. It is the absence of exclamation mark as a sign of irony at the end of the Greek verse "It is not fair to take children's bread and throw it to the dogs," that causes the whole misunderstanding against Jesus. His final words to the woman "O, woman great is your faith" shows that his ultimate intention was to praise the woman for her extraordinary faith.

A challenging act of Jesus that deserves special mention is taking women into his company along with the twelve male disciples in his mission as an itinerant preacher. Though not officially qualified, he was a Rabbi, and a Jewish Rabbi with women around him would have been a shocking experience to the Jews. Luke's verses are worth quoting: "... he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources" (Lk 8:1-3). It is to be specially noted that the women personally named there are those who had been cured by Jesus of psychosomatic diseases like hysteria and epilepsy. Mary Magdalene might have had the severest hysteria, because "seven demons had gone out" of her! That Jesus - a Jewish man - was not ashamed of being dependent on women's material support was uncommon. The Greek word used in the text to denote the service done to Jesus by the women is *diakonein* which means "to serve," "to minister," etc. In whatever way we translate it the important role women played in the ministry of Jesus

cannot be overlooked.¹⁹ The courageous presence of women at the time of his passion testifies to the intensity of their faithful discipleship to him (Mk 15:40; Mt 27:55). Their unwavering loyalty must have been a response to Jesus' love, concern and respect to them.

In short, Jesus words and actions in favour of women provide a solid basis for re-establishing justice to the women folk as a whole.²⁰

c. Liberative Models and Traditions

Both in the Old and in the New Testaments there are model women who are capable of inspiring other women to fight for the justice due to them, and practices that can be upheld against the anti-women traditionalists.

i). Old Testament Models and Traditions

At a time when daughters had no inheritance right, the five daughters of Zelophehad courageously demand it from Moses, Eleazar, the leaders and the whole congregation, and gain it for themselves and for the posterity (Num 26:1-11). Miriam, Aaron's sister and prophetess is an example of boldness and courage, capable of giving leadership to the people (Ex 15:20-21). That she on another occasion criticized Moses for marrying a Cushite woman and was punished by God for that audacity does not diminish her importance. The argument she and Aaron put forward is important: "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also" (Num 12:2; see also 1-15)! Another woman who could instill bravery into women in their liberation struggle against male chauvinists is Deborah, prophetess and judge of Israel, who defended her country from Jabin, king of Canaan (Judg 4:1-15). The respect that Huldah the prophetess commanded from priests and kings of her people is conducive to inspiring women for prophetic leadership (2Kg 22:14-20). The practice of the Israelites to respect prophetesses as highly as prophets can be highlighted against men who doubt women's ability to give prophetic leadership within our present society.

ii). New Testament Models and Traditions

There were several women in the early Church whose leadership would certainly enhance the self-respect of all Christian women and inspire them

¹⁹See Buehring, *Die Unsichtbare Frau und der Gott der Vaeter*, 48.

²⁰It is beyond the scope of this article to initiate an inner-synoptic and inter-gospel comparison of passages concerning women.

to take initiative in promoting justice and equality in the Church. Those women are not passive types but able leaders whom even the male Church leaders respected.

Poebe (Rom 16:1-2) whom Paul qualifies as "*diakonos*" and "*prostatis*" must have been a prominent church leader in Chencreae. It is not quite clear, whether "*diakonos*" here means deaconess in the present-day sense, even though "*diakonos*" in Greek can be masculine or feminine. "*Prostatis*," however, shows her high position within the church community. It can mean patroness, sponsor, protector, guardian, minister, benefactress, etc. The important point, however, is that this title in Hellenistic religious associations denoted president, representative, leader, etc.²¹

Prisca/Priscilla is another woman who is able to inspire women to assume leadership roles in the Church. She, together with her husband Aquila, was leader of a house church in Ephesus (1Cor 16:19). It is certainly significant, that Paul places her name first, whenever he greets this couple (Rom 16:3; 2Tim 4: 19; 1Cor 16:9). Evidently she was exceptionally powerful and influential in her church. She was able and brave enough to correct Apollos' interpretation of Christian doctrines even though he was an "eloquent man well-versed in the scriptures," and "instructed in the Way of the Lord," and "spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus" (Acts 28:24-25). It cannot be a mere chance, that her name is mentioned six times in the Bible (Acts 18:2, 26; Rom 13:3; 1Cor 16:19; 2Tim 4:19). One can logically conclude that she and her husband were leaders of a house church, and in this sense, bishops. Priscilla and Aquila are also considered to be the authors of the Letter to the Hebrews.²²

Nympha of Laodicea is yet another leading woman, who can animate all women. The author of Letter to the Colossians sends greetings "to Nympha and the Church in her house" (Col 4:15); it indicates that she too was leader of a house church, which was same as a local church at that time.

²¹Fander, "*Und ihnen kamen diese Worte vor wie leeres Geschwaetz, und sie glaubten ihnen nicht,*" 299-300.

²²Fander, "*Und ihnen kamen diese Worte vor wie leeres Geschwaetz, und sie glaubten ihnen nicht,*" 300.

Lydia of Thyatira, who was a dealer of purple cloths, together with her whole household received Baptism (Acts 16:14-15), and was in all probability leader of a local ecclesial community: Paul and Silas visit her home and encourage the Christians there (Acts 16:40), which indicates that her home too was a local church.

About another woman, namely Junia (Greek: Younias) – who was wrongly considered a male, and whose name has been translated accordingly – and her husband Andronicus, Paul says: “they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (Rom 16:7). That Paul calls Junia an apostle is an important testimony to her high status. There is no reason to assume that he uses the word apostle here symbolically. Exactly as he recognizes the twelve and himself as apostles, he recognizes Andronicus and Junia too, and condemns the “boasters” as “false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (2Cor 11:13). It is worth researching into, why only the twelve, Paul, Andronicus and Junia are called apostles in the whole New Testament. Moreover, Paul’s acknowledgement “they were in Christ before I was” cannot be honestly disregarded as insignificant. The case of Junia justifies the accusation of androcentrism against Bible scholars and the church hierarchy.

Mother of John/Mark is another woman whose house functioned as a church. After escaping miraculously from prison Peter goes to her home, “where many had gathered and were praying” (Acts 12:12). Here she is more important than John/Mark. Was her priority merely by way of her legal ownership of the house!

The four unmarried daughters of deacon Philip at Caesarea, “who had the gift of prophecy” (Acts 21:9) also can be models for Christian women.

Against the biblical male fundamentalist who wield power against women by means of the Bible, Mary, mother of Jesus can be upheld, not as a docile, obedient and submissive handmaid of God but as a courageous woman whom all generations call blessed (Lk 1:48) and who prophesy about the dethronement of the powerful and enthronement of the weak (v. 52).

Apart from highlighting the above mentioned women leaders to inspire a sense of dignity among women, a few facts could be emphasized

to counteract androcentrism and masculinization of God. One such fact is the femininity of God's Spirit. The Spirit in the Bible is "a female, life-giving, empowering and educational disclosure of God's self;" this spirit cannot be manipulated; it comes and goes as it wills; it "is unpredictable, autonomous and powerful, as wind seemed to be to the ancient world."²³

Feminineness of God's Wisdom also is another biblical fact in favour of women.

Israel is the chosen people, among whom God is present in the female personification of Divine Wisdom. Woman Wisdom is leader on the way, preacher in Israel, architect of the world. She is called sister, spouse, mother, beloved and teacher... She offers life, knowledge, rest and salvation to all who will accept her.²⁴

Since knowledge and power, the most important dimensions of divinity, are feminine, women can legitimately consider God, the mother and address accordingly. This too is a basis for restoring justice to women.

5. Urgency of Liberative Hermeneutics

The best way to re-establish justice to women is neither substitution of patriarchy with matriarchy nor masculinization of God with feminization. A just and effective means would be a balanced feminist hermeneutics of the Bible. That means "reconstruction of women's history in biblical times."²⁵ What is needed is "a hermeneutics of suspicion to unveil the underlying effects of patriarchy and account for the androcentrism in many biblical texts."²⁶ Since it is meant for women's liberation from man-made shackles, it starts with the assumption of Bible-based evils done or supposedly done to women by males, like exploitation, oppression,

²³Johanna W. H. von Wijk Bos, *Reimagining God*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knocks Press, 1997, 71-72.

²⁴Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, New York: Continuum, 1995, 135.

²⁵Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 3.

²⁶Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Press, 2001, 56.

discrimination, marginalization, domination, powerlessness, silencing, humiliation, etc.

Indifferent and dispassionate historical critical study and interpretation of the Bible will not be helpful for empowering women to regain their lost rights. Undoubtedly, there is difference "between academic work and political societal forces and conditions, between so-called value-neutral scientific investigations and advocacy scholarship."²⁷ Just as men use Bible for their own advantage and to the disadvantage of women, those who are fighting for the cause of women can use it in favour of themselves. Such counter attack is warranted by women's situation in today's Church.

May be the males of today do not consider women as wretched as some Jewish Rabbis did.²⁸ Still their position is not what it has to be. Feminist hermeneutics will be at least a good beginning of a long process of women's liberation struggle. From that perspective works like *Women's Bible* (New York: Arno Press, 1974) by Elizabeth Candy Stanton are significant.

6. Conclusion

Bible has engendered different forms of injustice to women, both because of naïve and uncritical approach to it and because of skilful manipulation by interested parties. It is high time justice was restored to women. There are solid bases in the Bible itself for initiating a process of liberating them from the dehumanising clutches of the past, built with stones of ignorance and male egoism. Dispassionate and disinterested historical critical exegetes alone cannot help women win their fight for justice. Feminist hermeneutics also should be made use of, though in a balanced way. Justice has to be done to women, so that, as the whole redemption history and the Jesus event narrated in the Bible uphold, ultimately truth may have victory over untruth.

²⁷Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 3.

²⁸See Werner Neuer, *Man and Woman in Christian Perspective*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1990, 92-93.