



"GIVE ME A DRINK" (JOHN 4:7): RE-READING THE BIBLICAL TEXTS OF INEQUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Some parts of the Christian Sacred Scripture present women in a manner that many today would consider contradictory to Christian beliefs. Thus, modern translations of these texts endeavour to attenuate this apparent unjust depiction of women as physically and morally feeble, and as protagonists of evil in the world. In this paper, the author succinctly examines some of these Biblical passages. It is the male-dominated background of the sacred writers that influenced their thought and scripts. There is, however, newness in the life and teaching of Jesus whose attitude towards women evokes the primordial intention of God. The Creator instilled equality in human nature when he made the first parents of mankind male and female and both in the divine image and likeness.

KEYWORDS

Bible, women, inequality

Introduction

Proliferating among contemporary translators (see The New Revised Standard Version 1993) of the Sacred Scripture are the varied attempts to attenuate the obvious patriarchal language that dominates both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Many readers are no longer comfortable with terms and expressions that tend to exclude half of humanity (Chittister 2004). In spite of the significant roles many women played in the history of the Chosen People (Vamosh 2007), this history, especially the cradle sphere, is generally called the "The Story of the Patriarchs"; the Matriarchs remain in the background steering silently the history that is meant to integrate them unreservedly. This paper highlights some of the crucial texts of the Bible that are relatable to our theme. It is a re-reading that is far from a re-writing of the Sacred Text for it simply seeks an interpretative key in the events of Jesus Christ.

Highlights of Inequality in some Biblical Texts

Barely have the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1-2 enunciated the equality of God's most treasured creatures, human beings, and a follow up to those narratives presents the woman as the cause of the fall of man (Robinson 2012). In its shrewdness the tempter was able to outwit the woman (cf. Genesis 3). When God created human beings he made both male and female in his image and likeness. Genesis 1:27 cast in almost a tristic poetic line underscores this equality of our primordial parents; "male and female he created them". A close reading of another account of their creation in Genesis 2:18-24 should not elicit man's superiority over woman for the sense of the inherent etiology in this text is well articulated in these words: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). Unity of the first human couple is the central theme of the text (Collins 1986). From the time of creation, according to the Sacred Scripture, man and woman were capacitated to enter into relationship with God; this is the true meaning of Genesis 1:27 (Clines 2001). Again the divine blessing and command of procreation (Genesis 1:28) were bestowed on both of them (Ortlund 2005). However, the Bible, especially the Old Testament, which was predominantly written by men under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, projects principally men's viewpoints.

According to these writers and the narrators in the Old Testament, God's promises of salvation were addressed to men, although women continued to play important role in the realization of these promises. Of all the children of the four co-

horts of Jacob, only men, twelve sons became the eponyms of the twelve tribes of Jacob. This is reflected in the choice of the twelve apostles of Jesus for their number corresponds to the number of Israel's tribes. Besides this, some women are given negative portraits that evoke the role of Eve in the fall of the first couple of humankind. The story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50), for instance, is heightened with the figure of Potiphar's wife who became a seducer and a tempter (Kizhakkeyil 2009). Samson was specially called to deliver the Israelites from their oppressors (Judges 13-16); his life was solemnly introduced as the elaborate space given to the account of his birth testifies. A woman, Delilah, became instrumental to his fall. Similar pattern of portraying women can be reckoned in the life and carrier of Israel's first successful king, David. Bathsheba's beauty turned him into an adulterer and murderer as well as destabilizing his family (2 Samuel 11). Solomon's idolatry was instigated by women, especially those from foreign nations (1 Kings 11).

Some of the women who manifested prominence in a male-dominated monarchy in Israel, for leadership was reserved solely to men, received deserved description from the narrators. King Ahab had a dictatrix in his palace, in the person of his wife Jezebel, who attained the status of an epitome of wickedness (1 Kings 18-2 Kings 9). She died a violent death and had no burial site "according to the word of the Lord" (2 Kings 9:30-37). Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, made her way to the throne in Judah and became the first and only woman monarch in that kingdom (2 Kings 11). She was first deprived of the usual stereotyped regnal formula that introduces all the kings of Judah. Like her mother, she was eliminated by an organized treason.

An inventory of such unconstructive picture of women in the Old Testament can continue ad infinitum but a quick look at how some passages from the Book of Sirach has articulated this will highlight the picture vividly: "Do not give yourself to a woman and let her trample down your strength" (Sirach 9:2). This is reminiscent of the dissolute Eve and her children who were instrumental to the fall of "men of strength". Sirach 25:24 further articulates it sharply: "From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die". Another text compares both genders: "Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; it is woman who brings shame and disgrace" (Sirach 42:14). For similar texts in the Book of Sirach see Sirach 9:3,8; 25:13,16,21 and 42:13. In spite of these, the author of Sirach has a beautiful ode for women (cf. Sirach 26:13-18).

Who counts women in the Sacred Scripture? God freed the people of Israel (men and women) from their slavery in Egypt but when they had to take stock in their journey only men were worth counting (cf. Exodus 12:37). In the account of the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14), the New Revised Standard Version has to be faithful to the Greek text; among the beneficiaries of the miracle wrought by Jesus, those worthy of being counted were only "men". The Greek version does not mince words on this. It employs a word that has no ambiguity in its use, *anēr*, *andros* (cf. Matthew 14:21; Mark 6:44; Luke 9:14; John 6:10). Translated into English, this word means man (*vir* in Latin) as opposed to woman. All the Evangelists record the account of the feeding of the five thousand and strikingly all excluded women in their calculations. The Gospel according to Matthew adds a further emphasis that corroborates our interpretation of the use of *anēr*, *andros* in this gospel accounts: "And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children" (Matthew 14:21). In the feeding of the Four Thousand in the same Gospel 15:32-39 (compare Mark 8:1-10), the author repeats the same clause (cf. Matthew 15:38). This accentuation occurs only in the Gospel according to Matthew (Uzochukwu 2014).

Close to this patriarchal bias are some texts in the New Testament that are attributed to Paul. In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 women are allowed to participate in the public worship but only quiescently. "For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church". Parallel instructions are found in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 based on Genesis 1-2. These texts are provocative indeed but one has to bear in mind that Biblical writers composed their work in androcentric cultural contexts.

Understanding Inequality in the Bible

Overt traces of inequality in the Bible do not render these texts less divinely inspired, nor do they lose the truth that characterizes the Sacred Scripture. It was as true authors that the sacred writers consigned into writing whatever God wanted them to write (Vatican II 1965). Divine inspiration of the Bible that made the sacred writers true authors of the Bible allowed them to use their faculty and language; their cultural background is not excluded either. They wrote in a purely patrilineal society with patriarchal organization and family centred economy. It was a society where men had to decide for women and where women were defined either as the daughter of their fathers or as the wives of their husbands.

In a good number of the Biblical texts, however, women's importance is not overlooked. Those that composed the story of Moses underscored the importance of women in the life of this Israel's first leader. His father is barely mentioned at the beginning of the story (Exodus 2:1); the rest of the narrative stages women in the forefront. His mother and sister saved him from premature death to which other male children were destined. Moses was rescued by the daughter of his persecutor. When he was fleeing for his dear life, women helped him find an abode and one of them, Zipporah, became his life partner (cf. Exodus 2:11-22). The same Zipporah saved his life when he was again in danger (cf. Exodus 4:24-26). In the same line with the brave women in the life of Moses are Deborah (cf. Judges 4-5), other influential women in the Book of

Judges, Judith and Esther. The faithful woman, Ruth, should also be mentioned for she paved the way for the royal lineage. Her son Obed became the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

Newness in the Teaching of Jesus

In his public ministry Jesus' attitude towards women shows he has come to redeem a culture that apparently tilted to one side. His first miracle, according to the Gospel of John was wrought at the simple request of his Mother: "They have no wine" (John 2:3). She also saw to it that this first miracle was not obstructed; thus she prepared the would-be immediate executors of Jesus' command by the words, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). Jesus was obedient to her Mother (Luke 2:51).

Women were among his followers; they provided for him and his other disciples from their own resources (Luke 8:1-3). He spoke openly with a Samaritan woman who later became the evangelizer of her own people (John 4). Among his close friends were women (Luke 10:38-42; John 11). In order to console a grief-stricken widow whose only son was being carried for burial, he infringed on the Levitical law of purity by touching the bier of the dead young man (Luke 7:11-17). When the woman with the flow of blood touched Jesus, we are not told that he underwent the rites of purification prescribed by the law (Luke 8:42-48). At his resurrection, Mary Magdalene was privileged to be the first herald; he commissioned her to announce this good news to his disciples (John 20:11-18).

Conclusion

By "re-reading of Biblical texts of gender inequality", we do not intend to re-write the Bible nor to mutilate "God's word in human language". Many attempts by translators to mellow the patriarchal language of the Bible by employing inclusive terms may produce non-polemic readable texts of the Scripture but it will be a drift that obscures the background of the Sacred Text. Greater emphasis should be made rather on explaining how Jesus redeemed this culture for, indeed, he recognized women. His attitude towards them calls to mind the story of creation when the Creator made human beings, both male and female, in his image and likeness, endowing them with the singular privilege of entering into relationship with him. He publicly asked a woman: "Give me a drink".

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