

Woman in the New Testament, II

In this concluding article started last month, Dr Anand presents first a study of the “biographies of Jesus,” i.e., the classical “synoptic questions,” enlarged to include John’s gospel. He explains why there are different accounts, at times clearly having a common literary text. Then he goes to the testimony of Paul and later authors of the New Testament and early church. He shows how Jesus broke with many unnecessary cultural traditions that were in conflict with the new sense of freedom, universality and equality promoted by the early church, after the disciples’ experiences of risen Lord.

The Biographers of Jesus

We have four ‘biographies’ of Jesus and the picture they have presented of Jesus is historically fairly accurate. Based on what we find in their writings, we can confidently say that “Jesus was a reformer of patriarchal society, sometimes making suggestions that would have been considered radical in a Jewish context.”¹ The evangelists were aware of this. Hence when they wrote their gospels they were guided by the liberal vision of Jesus. Even though what they say may be their own creation or that of the early communities for whom they were writing, it is not merely an invention from their imagination, with no foundation in history.

Though women did not usually figure in Jewish genealogies, Matthew mentions four women in his genealogy of Jesus: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba (1:3,5-6). Matthew had a definite theological concern, because his genealogy of Jesus “is above all an artistically devised theological statement.”² All the four women “showed initiative or played an important role in the plan of God.”³ By mentioning the four women, Matthew prepares the Jewish - Christians “to expect the unexpected. At the beginning of the gospel they function as part of a theme that runs through the entire text:

the tension between tradition and newness.”⁴ He presents the community of Jesus as a community of equals (23:8-10): men and women, Jews and Gentiles, all are called to be Jesus’ disciples.⁵ Part of this newness is precisely to give women equal dignity within the church. This will happen only when women are equally involved in the decision-making processes, be it in matters of doctrine or discipline. Many will oppose this move in the name of tradition, but this is to be expected.

Luke’s Infancy Narrative brings women and men in equal measure in the picture. Women act, and they talk. Matthew’s version is dominated by men. True, he does mention five women—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary, but they are all quiet. Matthew prepares us for the acceptance of the unexpected. Joseph, “the central character in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth,”⁶ knows that the child Mary is carrying is not his. He can disown her quietly or even get her stoned to death (Deut 22:25-27). He ignores his patriarchal right and accepts Mary as his spouse. Matthew declares him a just man (1:19), presenting him as open to the surprises our creative God has in store for us. Without being aware of it, Joseph sets the ball rolling: accepting the unexpected. Without realizing it, he gives us an example: we need to disown our ‘rights’ if we wish to work for an egalitarian society. Many of our ‘rights’ are our own constructions: the exploitative ideology of the dominant group.

On the other hand Herod, the chief priests, and other leaders are disturbed when they are told that the king of the Jews has been born (2:2). They are the ones who gain from patriarchy and

¹ (Notes 1-54 in Part I) Donald A. HAGNER, *Matthew 1 - 13*. Word Biblical Commentary: 33A. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995, p. 12.

² Jane SCHABERG, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*, 2nd. Ed Sheffield Academic Press (1990) 1995, p. 21.

³ HARRINGTON, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 33.

⁴ Rahab and Ruth are certainly Gentiles.

⁵ HARRINGTON, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.42

hierarchy. Herod pretends to be eager to visit Jesus. The chief priests and other leaders disappear from the scene. The wise men (*magoi*) from the East have two surprises: they do not find the future king of Israel in a palace but in an ordinary house (2:11), and they are told to return home by a new route (2:12). The Magi “originally referred to a caste of Persian priests with special claims to interpret dreams.”⁷ In Matthew’s Infancy Narrative, God communicates his wishes through dreams (1:20; 2:12,13,19,22). Thus, we may say that the wisdom of the Magi was precisely in their ability to know and accept God’s will, however strange it may seem to them. They are open to the new possibilities, seeing in them the challenges God offers God’s children, the God who is “active unobtrusively and ambiguously behind the scenes.”⁸

Matthew (1:18-23) and Luke (1:34-35) tell us that Jesus was born from a virgin mother. I believe the claim of virginal birth shakes the very foundations of a patriarchal culture. In a patriarchal society, a woman finds her fulfilment in marriage and childbearing, that too understood primarily in terms of mothering a son. That is her greatest honour (Jn 2:1). The evangelists present to us a woman who attained the highest honour marked out for her in her society without depending on man. In and through her, God “has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree” (Lk 1:51-52). Mary proclaims to us that for women to find their highest fulfilment must be aware of their strength. She proclaims something more: humans attain their highest fulfilment, their highest honour, in submitting themselves to God, because for God nothing is impossible (Lk 1:37). Luke and John give a special place to women in their narrative. There seem to be some historical reasons for this.

Apparently, various 1st century churches struggled with the teaching of Jesus, Paul, and others about the new role’s women could assume in the Christian community. This can be inferred from the fact that when the third and fourth evangelists set down their gospels in the last quarter of the first century they felt it important to stress the new roles of women and the equality of women with men as objects of God’s grace and gracious endowments.⁹

Luke is the evangelist of women.¹⁰ In his infancy narrative besides Elizabeth and Anna, Mary is a very active figure. She does a lot of talking, and even recites a hymn of praise and thanksgiving. Her husband is totally silent. She is portrayed as the Ark of the Covenant—a thought that would sound blasphemous to traditional Jews.¹¹ A woman could never come anywhere near the Ark of the Covenant, much be portrayed as its symbol. In the Palestinian society of her time, “as a young girl, Mary would not normally have left her home without accompaniment—either to browse in her own hometown or (especially!) to travel some seventy miles to the hill country around Jerusalem. Until she entered the bridal chamber, a girl lived in seclusion in her home.”¹² She had to present her husband virgin soil for his seed—even if he himself was not a virgin.

In the past we have heard many speak of Mary as a model of faith, obedience and humility. This sort of discourse has been very handy for patriarchs and hierarchs. We need to note that Mary does not accept what the angel tells her without raising a question. She does not blindly submit to the expectations of her community, but daringly goes out of her house and travels quite a distance to meet Elizabeth. She is deeply conscious of the wonders God has done for her, and says so quite audibly. She thus presents us a new approach to faith, obedience and humility. She is also a mighty prophet, proclaiming the new order that God is about to usher in. She proclaims her faith in that God who, on the one hand, has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden, exalted those of low degree; and filled the hungry with good things; and who, on the other hand, has scattered the proud,

⁷ BORING, “The Gospel of Matthew,” p. 143b.

⁸ WITHERINGTON, “Women: New Testament,” p. 959b.

⁹ Joseph A. FITZMYER, *Gospel of Luke*, AB: 28 & 28A. New York: Doubleday, 1985, pp. 191-2.

¹⁰ Subhash ANAND, “Mary: The Ark of the Covenant,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 77 (2013), pp. 269-91.

¹¹ Joel B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT. Grand Rapids B. Eerdmans, 1997, pp. 94-5.

¹² FITZMYER, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 1061.

put down the mighty from their thrones, and sent away the rich empty (Lk 1:46-55).

The Lucan concern for women is also noticeable in the life and ministry of the Lukan Jesus: he is keen to give equal importance to men and women. Luke begins with two annunciations, one to Zachary (1:5-22), and the other to Mary (1:26-38). After his birth Jesus is recognized by Simeon and Anna (2:25,36). Jesus was moved with compassion for the centurion whose servant was sick, and for the widow of Naim who lost her son (7:1-17). He told the widow of Naim not to weep for her son, but he himself wept over Jerusalem (7:13; 19:41). He was at home with a Pharisee and also with Martha and Mary (7:36; 10:38). He is praised by a woman who is taken up by his preaching (11:27). He healed a cripple woman and a man with dropsy on the Sabbath (13:10-17; 14:1-6). On his way to Calvary, he accepted support from Simon of Cyrene and compassion from the women of Jerusalem (23:26,28).

In his parables, the Lucan Jesus gives equal importance to women and men. He compared the Kingdom of God to a man sowing a seed, and to a woman putting some leaven in the dough (13:18-21). The latter parable is found only in Luke. When the end comes, there will be two men in one bed, and two women at one mill (17:35-36). In teaching us the need to persevere in prayer Jesus gives the example of a man who keeps on knocking on the door of his friend to get the bread he needs, and of a widow who kept on coming to a judge to get justice against her adversary (11:5-8; 18:1-8).

Jesus portrayed God as the shepherd who goes in search of his lost sheep, and also as a woman who sweeps her house to find her lost coin (15:3-10). On finding what was lost, both have a celebration. In describing the invitation to the celebration, Luke composes his text with great mastery. Both call their friends and neighbours: the man calls his male friends and male neighbours; the woman calls her female friends and neighbours. In the Greek text, “*tous philous kai tous geitonas... tas philas kai geitonas*,” we have the article (“*tous*”), even though it could function for both the nouns. But *geitôn* is common gender, and Luke wants to make sure the reader gets his point: the shepherd called his male neighbours, while the woman invites her woman friends. The two genders are represented equally in the parable.

A feminist reader may draw my attention to something that may escape a male reader and yet may not be without some significance. The man went in search of the lost sheep (*probaton*: neuter), while the woman in search of the lost coin (*drachma*: feminine). There was a time when the drachma had a high purchasing power, “enough to buy a sheep, or the equivalent of day’s wage. In the days of Nero, however, the *denarius* replaced the *drachma*, which equaled it.”¹³ Nero had brought down value of *denarius* (Latin) from about eighteen cents to about eight cents.¹⁴ Luke wrote after the death of the Nero. In 20:24, he uses *d̄nariion* (Greek, neuter). Had he done so also in 15:8-9, not only would his text make more sense to his readers, but also bring out better the poverty of the woman, who lost the *drachma*. Hence the use of a feminine noun may not be without some reason: the parable of the lost coin is totally peopled with females!¹⁵

The Johannine Jesus makes his first public manifestation urged by a woman, even though his hour had not yet arrived (2:4). Using water as a symbol, he had a long discourse with a Pharisee and with a Samaritan woman (3:1-21; 4:2-27). He presents the Samaritan woman as a missionary: many Samaritans believe because of her testimony (4:39). He defends the woman accused of adultery, subtly suggesting that his accusers were equally guilty of the same crime (8:7). He shatters the patriarchal pride of some of his hearers by telling them that they were illegitimate children (8:40). In urging his disciples to draw life from him, Jesus compares himself to a vine and the disciples as its branches (Jn 15:1-7).

The metaphor of the vine suggests a radically non-hierarchical model for the church... no

¹³ Walter BAUER, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich & Frederick W. Danker. University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 179a.

¹⁴ If Luke wanted to balance the two parables fully, he could have used *annos* (masculine)—lamb—in place of *probaton*. The little lamb would also be symbolic of Luke’s special concern for the weaker sections of his society.

¹⁵ O’DAY, “The Gospel of John,” p. 760.

branch has pride of place; no branch can claim precedence or privilege over any other... There is neither status nor rank among the branches. Hierarchy among the branches is precluded, because all members grow out of the one central vine and are tended equally by the one gardener.¹⁶

Paul had explained this approach in his first letter to the Corinthians. One of the reasons for tensions within this community was that some were claiming to be superior to others because they thought that the gifts given to them were of a higher nature (12:1-31). He then tells them what really makes them great: love for one another. Without this gift all other gifts are useless (13:1-3). The Lord gives many gifts to this church “but the greatest of these is love” (1:13). It is precisely the characteristic of love that it discounts hierarchy. Within the Trinity, Who is Love itself and the source of love, there is the perfect communion precisely because there is no hierarchy.

All the four evangelists tell us that some women were witnesses to the crucifixion of Jesus. The synoptics tell us that they stood at some distance (Mt 27:55; Mk 15:40; Lk 23:49), While John says they were close to the cross of Jesus (19:25). The Twelve are nowhere in the picture.¹⁷ “As we see, in this most arduous test of faith and fidelity the women proved stronger than the apostles. In this moment of danger, those who love much succeed in overcoming their fear.”¹⁸ While there is “an almost total discrepancy” in the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection,¹⁹ yet on one point there appears to be total agreement: women are the first witnesses of the Risen Lord (Mt 28:1-10; Mk 16:7-9; Lk 24:1-10; Jn 20:1-18). It is they who are “the first ones to receive the angelic account of Jesus’ resurrection and commission to go and tell the male disciples of this event.”²⁰ This “means that women were welcomed into the innermost circle of his friends, something that indeed signalled a new shift.”²¹

This unanimity of the gospels points to a tradition that was so well known that the evangelists just could not ignore it. That tradition itself could not have been the construction of the early Christians, who were largely of Jewish origins. They would not have chosen women to be the first witnesses and messengers of Jesus’ resurrection, had it not been for some compelling historical fact. But as it so often happens, the male disciples, either due to their foolishness or their arrogance or to both, refused to believe those first witnesses just because they happened to be women (Mk 16:11, Lk 24:11). Consequently, when we have a list of the official witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection, women are not even mentioned (1 Cor 15:3-8). This is also because in the legal process women and slaves could not appear as witnesses.²² In like manner the Jewish Christians could not think of women as priests, because “no women ever held a place among the Israelite clergy.”²³ The exclusion of women from presiding at worship may imply the acceptance of a cultural patriarchal framework and not the consequence of sound theological reflection, much less of critical biblical exegesis.

The Pharisee from Tarsus²⁴

If we do not read the writings of Paul carefully we may get the impression that Paul too was a patriarchal thinker and an irreformable misogynist. “No NT writer has been more criticized for his

¹⁶ It has been presumed by many that the disciple whom Jesus loved, and who was with the women near the cross of Jesus, was John, one of the twelve apostles. However, not all scholars are agreed on this (See BROWN, *The Gospel according to St. John*, pp. xciii-xcviii). I too am not inclined to accept that John, the son of Zebedee, was the beloved disciple, who is presented as the author of the fourth Gospel, above all because, as modern exegetes note, “the developments of Christology and the realized eschatology of the Fourth Gospel are well beyond what would be likely for a Galilean fisherman” (PHEME PERKINS, “The Gospel according to John”, *NJBC*, pp. 942-985, here p. 947a).

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (15 August 1988), no. 15.

¹⁸ CROSSAN, *The Historical Jesus*., p. 395

¹⁹ SCHOLER, “Women”, p. 883b.

²⁰ BENEDICT XVI (in conversation with Peter Seewald), *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010, p. 160.

²¹ Roland de VAUX, *Ancient Israel*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd: 1961, p. 156.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 384.

²³ C.S. KEENER, “Man and Woman,” in GF. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin & D.G Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993, pp. 583b-592b, here p. 583b.

²⁴ Paul is the earliest written source about the traditions of Christian origins.

allegedly negative portrayal of women than the apostle Paul.” He gives the impression that he still holds the Old Testament view about adultery: a married woman is always guilty of adultery if she is involved in an extramarital relation; but a married man can get away if his partner is not married.

Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress (Rom 7.2-3).

Paul says this to explain how a Christian belongs to Jesus, and ought to remain loyal to him. On the other hand, husband and wife have an equal right and obligation with regard to intercourse “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise, the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does” (1 Cor 7.3-4). Thus, within the most intimate sphere of marriage, husband and wife are equal—not all patriarchs would concede this.²⁵ Paul even gives the unbelieving wife a privilege: if she wishes to continue living with her believing husband, he may not divorce her (v. 12).

In 1 Cor 11.3-16 we have the impression that Paul is too harsh and oppressive with regard to the way women should dress up for worship.²⁶ It was then believed that woman’s hair was a distraction and even a source of temptation for men. Granted, it was men’s problem, but the society then laid down that when coming for worship women should cover their heads. Paul believes that during worship we need to help each other to enter an atmosphere of prayer. We can share Paul’s concern, though we may not agree with his solution or with the reasons given to back it. Paul also maintains that the story of Genesis is literally true: “For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” (vv. 8-9). Though in principle, women may attend the community worship with heads uncovered; they’re so doing may bring about some division in the community, as all may not be ready for such a move. Here some woman may even insist: “All things are lawful for me!” Paul would reply: “[I agree] but not all things are helpful... [hence] I will not be enslaved by anything... [because] not all things build up” (6:12; 10:23). Paul’s intention is not to limit women’s freedom as such. He believes that prophets are second only to apostles (12:28), and he accepts women prophesying in the church (11:5).

In Eph 5:22-33, the writer admonishes women to submit to their husbands.²⁷ Here we need to take the text in its totality. First, the husband is expected to love his wife as Jesus loved his Church: like Jesus he too should be prepared to lay down his life for his wife (v.25). The love Jesus has for his Church is liberative: Jesus sets her free from all bonds of oppression so “that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (v.27). Second, for the sake of his wife the husband should be prepared to give up all other human relations (v.31). Or to put it differently, a man is expected to love his wife more than all his other relatives. It is within this frame of love that the submission expected of women has to be understood. Third, on her part, a woman must submit to her husband ‘as to the Lord’ (v.22), ‘and as is fitting in the Lord’ (Col 3:18). These qualifying words are significant: what is expected of a wife is not servile obedience but religious respect.

In discussing Paul’s attitude towards women and their role in the Church, Rom 16.1-16 is a very significant text. He begins by naming Phoebe, who is a deaconess (*diakonos*, v. 1) and patroness (*prostatis*, v.2) of many.²⁸ The latter is not merely a polite compliment, but indicates “a

²⁵ This “is one of the most difficult passages in the entire letter... [It] is so problematic and employs much vocabulary that is not used elsewhere in Paul’s undisputed letters” that some think it is not authentic (Raymond F. COLLINS, *First Corinthians*, SP: 7, Collegeville (Minn): Liturgical Press, 1999, p. 393).

²⁶ I have, on purpose, used ‘the writer’ and not ‘Paul’. Many modern scholars do not consider the Letter to the Ephesians and the Letter to the Colossians authentically Pauline. See Maurya P. HORGAN, “The Letter to the Colossians”, *NJBC*, pp. 876-882, here p. 877b; Paul J. KOBELSKI, “The Letter to the Ephesians”, *Ibid.*, pp. 883-890, here pp. 883b-884a.

²⁷ Paul uses *diakonos*, a common gender term, as *diakonissa* would emerge only in the Patristic period. See Joseph J. FITZMYER, *Romans*, AB: 6, New York: Doubleday, 1993, p. 731.

²⁸ *Idem.*

person of prominence in the ancient Greco-Roman world.”²⁹ Paul acknowledges his indebtedness to her. He then mentions seven women and five men “as active in the service of the gospel.”³⁰ This fact “may indicate his sensitivity to the opposition women undoubtedly faced for their ministry in some quarters.”³¹ Among the women mentioned, we have Junias, who was a person “of note among the apostles” (v.7). The church Fathers took this name to mean a woman. Starting from the 13th century, scholars began to propose that it indicated a male.³² This “proposal rests on the assumption that a woman could not be an apostle, rather than on any evidence inherent in the text itself.”³³ Paul names his female fellow-workers or women who lead the houses churches in other texts too (Phil 4:2-3; Col4:15; 2Tim4:21; Phlm 2).

There are two texts that give the impression that Paul curtails the ministry of women in the church. He even tells them to be silent in the churches, and if they have some questions to ask they should do so through their husbands (1 Cor 14:33-35). Some scholars think that these lines are taken from a letter addressed to Paul, to which he is responding in vv. 36f. Others take them as an interpolation. Some others maintain that they are a digression dealing with a specific problem, and Paul “was fond of digressions.”³⁴ We find a similar admonition to women in 1 Tim 2:9-14: they are expected to be submissive and quiet in the church; and they will find salvation through child-bearing. Paul seems to have forgotten what he wrote elsewhere: a virgin lives totally for the Lord (1 Cor 7:34). Here it should also be noted that the Pastoral Letters (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus) are not considered authentically Pauline by many.³⁵

Before we come to our final judgement about Paul’s thinking about the place of women within the Christian community, we need to keep some things in mind. First, “Paul’s instructions specifically address institutions as they existed in Paul’s day.”³⁶ Hence when it comes to questions regarding the behaviour of Christians, we need to keep in mind the situation that prompted him to write, and discern what practical guidelines flow from the core message of Jesus, and what apply to a particular context, a context governed by its own socio-cultural setup. Second, the passages cited above are either of doubtful authenticity or from Deutero-Pauline letters. Some modern scholars think that the disciples of Paul, who authored these texts, have “increasingly subordinated women’s roles to fit the standards of their culture.”³⁷ Third, it is possible that in the situation Paul had in mind, most of the women disciples were not educated. The situation is so different today. Fourth, Paul not only admits the possibility of women remaining unmarried, but even encourages them to do so (1 Cor 7:7-8,25-26). We can see the radicality of this approach when we keep in mind that Jewish girls married “shortly after the onset of menstruation.”³⁸ They had no say in this matter. Paul is implicitly saying that the worth of persons is determined not by some social setup, much less by biological fertility, but by their inner disposition—to receive and live in love: the highest gift given by God (1 Cor 13:13). Fifth, by making circumcision irrelevant Paul states the fundamental equality of men and women within the community of Jesus, as both are equally able to keep God’s commandments (1 Cor 7:19); as both are equally able to express their faith through love (Gal 5:6). Men and women equally carry the mark of the covenant sealed by death and resurrection of Jesus (Gal 6:17). This is the true circumcision (Rom 2:29). Sixth, in the time of Paul—as also in our days, “teaching roles naturally would fall on those who could read and speak well. Nearly all our Jewish sources suggest that these roles were, with rare exceptions, limited to men.”³⁹ This is

²⁹ Ibid., p. 734.

³⁰ KEENER, “Man and Woman”, p. 589b.

³¹ FITZMYER, *Romans*, pp. 737-738.

³² KEENER, “Man and Woman”, p. 589b.

³³ Ibid., pp. 590.

³⁴ See Benjamin FIORE, S.J., *The Pastoral Epistles*, SP: 12, Collegeville (Minn): Liturgical Press, 2007, pp. 15-18.

³⁵ KEENER, “Man and Woman”, p. 589a.a.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 587b

³⁷ C. C. KROEGER, “Women in Greco-Roman World and Judaism”, in Craig A. Evans & Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, Downers Grove (Ill): InterVarsity Press, 2000, pp. 1276a-1280b, here p. 1277b.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 589a.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 1276b.

understandable because in the Palestinian Jewish families of the New Testament era, “girls were afforded limited opportunities for education. They were schooled by their mothers in the household arts and in those parts of the law that dealt with purity issues and the responsibilities of women.”⁴⁰ Thus most of them were not able to read and write. The situation was a little more liberal in the Diaspora communities. Seventh, Paul has many favourable comments to make about women, some of whom he cherishes as his co-workers. Here again he is far ahead of his times. In those days even in matters of religion women could be ignored. “Attendance at Jewish rites was allowed to women but not particularly encouraged, while men were carefully instructed from childhood in the faith of Israel and expected to participate in the services.”⁴¹

Eighth, in Gal 3:28-29, Paul gives us a hermeneutical norm that should guide us to interpret whatever he says about women elsewhere in his writings: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The “baptismal formula reflected” here,⁴² is not merely a statement of Paul. The pairs we find here— Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female—“were originally formulated in a baptismal liturgy of the early church.”⁴³ We have already seen that circumcision was *the* mark of belonging to the Covenant People. Through our Baptism we put on Christ (3:27). Each one of us can say with Paul: “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (6:17). As this is enough “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love” (5:6). It is for this reason that all distinctions are subservient to the law of love. In the First Covenant circumcision was very important. This was a very special reason for men to claim a priority over women. Now this claim is no longer valid.

The reason why circumcision does not count is because in Jesus we are a new creation: “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (6:15). Now Christ lives in us (2:20). We acquire “a new identity that lies beyond ethnic, social and sexual distinctions.”⁴⁴ In the first creation woman and man needed each other to overcome their loneliness through marriage. “Now the answer to loneliness is not marriage, but rather the new-creational community that God is calling into being in Christ, the church marked by mutual love, as it is led by the Spirit of Christ.”⁴⁵ What Paul was trying to tell the Galatians and all of us was that for our God it does not matter whether we are males or females. He insists that in the new community gathered by Jesus, we are all equal, “all one in Christ Jesus.” Hence, we can safely conclude that Paul can be “ranked among the most progressive of ancient writers.”⁴⁶

Other New Testament Texts

There are still three texts that need our attention. We can oppress people by what we say and do or by our refusal to speak and act when we should. We have an instance of patriarchal oppression through silence in the Letter to the Hebrews.⁴⁷ The author gives us a list of Old Testament figures whom he considers as models of faith. One name evokes an event in the Book of Judges. Deborah calls Barak and tells him that the Lord commands him to fight the Canaanites who are oppressing the Israelites. He agrees to go to war against the Canaanites only if she accompanies him. She agrees but tells him that even if he does go to fight, the road which he will take will not lead him to glory. Sisera, the leader of the enemies, is killed by a woman Jael (Judg 4:6-21). Yet only Barak is remembered among the great believers of the Old Testament (Heb 11:32). Deborah and Jael are conveniently forgotten. So too, Judith, Esther and Ruth are not mentioned. We have one woman,

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 1279a.

⁴¹ SCHOLER, “Women”, 886a.

⁴² Richard N. LONGENECKER, *Galatians*, WBC 41, Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1990, p. 155.

⁴³ J. Louis MARTYN, *Galatians*, AB: 33A, New York: Doubleday, 1997, p. 374.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 381

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 592a.

⁴⁶ We are not sure who wrote this letter, but “the author clearly was not Paul” (William L. LANE, “Hebrews”, in Ralph P. Martins & Peter H. Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development*, Downers Grove (111.): InterVarsity Press, 1997, pp. 443a-458b, here p. 444a.

⁴⁷ J. Ramsey MICHAELS, *I Peter*, WBC: 49, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988, p. 162.

Sara the wife of Abraham, figuring in the list. Her faith enabled her to fulfil the role assigned to her by patriarchy: she bore a son for her husband (v. 11). She is mentioned a few times more in the New Testament, but once again from a patriarchal perspective. Her barrenness did not prevent Abraham from trusting in the Lord (Rom 4:19; 9:9). She is a model wife, obedient to her husband (1 Pet 3:6).

The second passage is from the First Letter of Peter. The writer tells women that they should be submissive to their husbands. This may even bring about their conversion if they have not yet accepted baptism. He tries to give an added reason: they are children of Sarah, who was submissive to Abraham, whom she addressed as her lord. The letter tells the readers that a humble and quiet spirit is their real ornament, and that is very precious in God's sight (3:1-2, 4-6). The writer is quite patriarchal in his thinking, wanting wives to be submissive to their husbands, and trying to justify his position with some pious reasoning—a tactic so commonly followed by oppressive religious leaders. Granting that “there is nothing distinctly *feminine* about a ‘humble and quiet spirit’,”⁴⁸ the context in which this is presented as an ideal will make non-patriarchal readers uncomfortable. The patriarchal mindset of the author is also evident from the fact that he considers women the weaker sex (3:7). “The notion that women are ‘weak,’ or ‘weaker’ than men, was a common-place in the ancient world.”⁴⁹ Educated women today would resent men trying to be protective towards them. They believe they can do equally well what men think they can.⁵⁰ Christians are called to be critical towards ideas that shape their society.⁵¹ Wrong ideas generate unhealthy attitudes and lead to unethical behaviour. “Women have always been regarded as the weaker sex who had been and who continue to be trampled upon. This must change.”⁵² We are tempted to be violent and unfair towards people whom we consider weak and incapable of confronting us.

The third text found in the Book of Revelation disturbs me a lot of even legitimate sexual expression and experience seems to be rejected. The narrator tells us that he saw a crowd of men who bore the name of the Father of the Lamb on their foreheads. An unseen voice informs him that these men are virgins because they have not defiled (*melynô*) themselves with women. Therefore, they are the first fruits for God and the Lamb (14.4). Some commentators try to get out of the problem by saying that, following the Old Testament, the text is using the word *Parthenos* (virgin) as “a metaphor for fidelity to God.”⁵³ Three comments need to be made here. First, even if we are dealing with metaphorical language, we need to remember that so often our words and images tell people more than what we say. They reveal our unarticulated attitudes. Second, the writer could have achieved his purpose by simply stating that the crowd the visionary saw consisted of virgins, without adding that they had not defiled themselves with women. Third, by saying that they had not defiled themselves with women, the author gives the impression that the people who bore the name of the Father were all men and that women were not counted among the first fruits for God and for the Lamb.

Other scholars think that the text “deals with *ritualpurity*.”⁵⁴ This explanation could have been accepted were one to consider the Book of Revelation as a Jewish text, given the fact that it has “strong ties to the Jewish Scriptures.”⁵⁵ It is, however, a part of the Christian canon. Were we to

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 169

⁴⁹ Let me give just one example: “Today’s women have achieved a goal that social commentators have inveighed against for centuries: economic independence.” Sandra Tsing LOH, “The Weaker Sex”, *The Atlantic*, October 2012. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/10/the-weaker-sex/309094/>; a.o 07-31-2013.

⁵⁰ Here we can learn from Mahatma Gandhi. He is reported to have said: “To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man’s injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her, man could not be. If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?” (<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/204536-to-call-woman-the-weaker-sex-is-a-libel-it>; a.o 07-31-2013.)

⁵¹ Jennifer DKHAR, “Women are not the weaker sex”, *The Shillong Times*, 9 March 2013, <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2013/03/09/women-are-not-the-weaker-sex/>; a.o 07-31-2013.

⁵² “Jean-Louis D’ARAGON, “The Apocalypse”, *JBC*, vol. 2, pp. 467-493, here p. 484b.

⁵³ David E. AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, WBC: 52B, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998, p. 810; emphasis in the original.

⁵⁴ Adela Yarbro COLLINS, “Revelation, Book of”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, pp. 694b-708a, here p. 695a

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 1010a.

accept the above explanation, then the writer had not really understood Jesus, who consistently disregarded all rules concerning ritual purity. I do not think that ritual concerns are so all-pervasive. Another possibility is that “this characterization of an ideal group reflected and reinforced tendencies toward the practice of sexual continence.”⁵⁶ This explanation may be more acceptable, keeping in mind that some in the third century were uncomfortable with the Book of Revelation ' because it was “a favourite text of the Montanists.”⁵⁷ Montanism was “a mid- to late-second-century apocalyptic and charismatic movement” that advocated “extreme asceticism.”⁵⁸

Even though the Old Testament is deeply patriarchal in its religious and social outlook, sexuality was seen as a gift of God, as a blessing. There was no place for celibacy in this culture. Jeremiah was the only Old Testament person who was asked not to marry, at least not in his country: “You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place” (Jer 16:2). Here it was not because celibacy was a value in itself or sex was to be avoided. His remaining single was meant to be a parable in action: his people are heading for a doom (w.3-4). The obligation to marry and care for their family limited the options women had. At the same time, we have in the Old Testament three books that bear the name of women: Judith, Ruth and Esther. They walked beyond the patriarchal boundaries and created history. But patriarchy dies hard. These great women are almost forgotten by the succeeding generations.

By calling men and women to be eunuchs for God’s kingdom, Jesus gives us a possibility that takes us much beyond our biological productivity. The way he went about showed that he treated women as his equals and enjoyed their company. He was once willing to learn from a woman who was not even a Jew. He loved children. He enjoyed parties. The love of husband and wife is a dim reflection of the love Jesus has for his church. The New Testament was composed at a time when even educated Jews believed that women were to be subject to their husbands in all matters. Josephus Flavius, an elder contemporary of Jesus, believed that thus “says the Scripture, ‘A woman is inferior to her husband in all things.’ Let her, therefore, be obedient to him; not so that he should abuse her, but that she may acknowledge her duty to her husband; for God hath given the authority to the husband.”⁵⁹

God refuses to follow these norms. He chose humble women to be the *first witnesses* of the greatest event in salvation history: Jesus’ resurrection. He also made them the *first messengers* of the Good News. The New Testament community has its origin in their apostolic witness. “One can say that this fulfilled the words of the Prophet: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy’ (Joel 3:1).”⁶⁰ Speaking about Mary Magdalene in his *De vita beatae Mariae Magdaleneae*, Rabanus Maurus (780-856) said that Jesus sent Mary Magdalene as an apostle unto the apostles (“*ad apostolos apostolam*”). In his commentary on the gospel of John, Thomas Aquinas said that she was the apostle of the apostles (“*apoltolorum apostola*”).⁶¹ In the community of Jesus women and men are equal. They equally share in the mission and ministry of Jesus.

People in power positions will not easily cede power to others. The revolutionary movement set in motion by prophets slowly gets also blunted as the establishment succeeds in domesticating it. This happened to the church of Jesus. Even Paul appears to be somehow governed by patriarchy: he ignores women in his list of the witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection. Given the ambiguity of the New Testament, the old patriarchal mindset slowly returns, and a false asceticism is idealized. Virginity is seen as better than married life. This thinking was also fuelled by the belief that the end was near at hand. This negative tendency prepares the way for the return of full-blown patriarchy in the church. Many Christian writers for centuries will give the impression that sexual fulfilment is at the

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 695a.

⁵⁷ “Montanism”, Richard P. MCBRIEN (ed.), *HEC*, p. 890b.

⁵⁸ JOSEPHUS FLAVIUS, *Contra Apion* 2.25 <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2849/pg2849.txt>; a.o 31-07-2013.
The text quoted by him is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament.

⁵⁹ JOHN PAUL II. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 16.

⁶⁰ Ibid., endnote 38.

⁶¹ JOHNSON, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 42

most a concession, and women are second class citizens.

Before I conclude I wish to make two comments. First, our reading of the New Testament must be holistic. We need to hold together the tension it presents: No doubt, men dominate the narrative, but they do not have an exclusive role. Also a person may figure little in a narrative, but may have a much greater say in shaping that narrative. We do hear Paul boasting of all that he did for the gospel (2 Cor 11:1-12:10). We come across a woman, who “occupied a position of poverty and powerlessness in her society,”⁶² and yet who makes an even greater claim. She is deeply conscious that generations to come will call her blessed, because God has done marvels for her. We have another woman who prepared Jesus for his burial; Jesus himself assures us that her memory will be part of the Gospel (Mk 14:9). Jesus had very good reasons for making that claim on her behalf.

The woman’s insight about Jesus and her love for him stand in sharp contrast to the attitude of the chief priests and elders... and to the attitude of Judas... She is also contrasted with Jesus’ own disciples who see her action as a waste of money that could be given to the poor. Only Jesus sees the timeliness [and the timelessness] of her action as preparation for his burial.⁶³

Yes, her action was timeless, because only people who see beyond the present can truly wish to be pilgrims. That is the only way we can be the church of Jesus.

Mary, the mother of Jesus and the nameless Samaritan woman cannot be ignored: with their feminine intuitive sense they saw the future. They will continue to remind us that in Jesus God made patriarchy stand on its head. For too long a time men have called the shots. They have determined what Scripture means. They have formulated the dogmas that have to be accepted without question. They have formulated laws that are meant to guide people, but not without advantage to themselves. It is time we allow women to talk more. It is time we men learn to listen.⁶⁴ This is Important because “from the beginning of Christ’s mission, women show to him and to his mystery a special sensitivity which is characteristic of their femininity.”⁶⁵ By listening to women we will understand Jesus more deeply. Then we will intuit better the tomorrow God wants to give us today. Then we will be pilgrims, constantly crossing narrow boundaries we have created for ourselves.

Second, however strong patriarchy may become, it cannot suppress history. We believe that God’s salvific revelation is through an event within history. “Once we forget the divine presence in that history and our lives, we may be merely manipulating concepts in our minds.”⁶⁶ I am aware it is not possible to know the full history of Jesus who lived two thousand years ago. But we know enough about his life and teaching to provide us the guidance we need in understanding the New

⁶² HARRINGTON, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 364.

⁶³ On 22 and 23 March 2014, I was in Jharsaguda (Orissa) to help out in a seminar: “Paradigm Shift in Vatican II; Implications for Women.” There were more than eighty participants, mostly women. Almost all of them were natives of Orissa. On the 23rd (Sunday) the women wanted to act out the gospel (Jesus and the Samaritan Woman) during Mass. I have always seen the woman as having a loose character. The women actors came out with their own interpretation. When Jesus accused the woman of having five husbands, she corrected him: “No, not five but seven!” Then seven women, carrying placards, walked to the stage in front of the altar. The Samaritan was not a loose woman, going from lover to lover. She was the victim of exploitation, and she went from man to man for shelter, only to be exploited again. The seven placards explained her plight. 1. Her parents were poor and unable to provide her dowry. They married her to a lame man. This guy was a loner. He wanted the woman in bed not only at night but also during the day. She had to do all the house work by herself. 2. She ran away and the guy with whom she took shelter wanted her to engage in unnatural sex. 3. The next man was running a brothel together with his wife. 4. The fourth man was an alcoholic. He came home drunk and beat her. 5. Then she fell in the hands of a man distilling liquor on the quiet. She was forced to carry it after nightfall to his clients. On two occasions she was accosted by the police who told her either to give them money or do what they wanted—*intelligenti pauca*. 6. Thereafter an elderly couple got her married to their son. He was impotent and wanted to hide his limitation by trying to get her pregnant through some relative of his. 7. The man with whom she was living now was twice her age! This interpretation was an eye-opener for me. Johannine scholars may not quite approve this interpretation, but they will surely appreciate fact that the women chose the number ‘seven’. The Samaritan woman’s cup of sorrow was brimming over.

⁶⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 16.

⁶⁵ Gerald O’COLLINS, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity*, New York: Paulist press, 1999, p. 200.

⁶⁶ John P. MEIER, *The Mission of Christ and His Church: Studies in Christology and Ecclesiology*, Wilmington (Delaware): Michael Glazier, 1990, p. 41.

Testament. Thus the Jesus of 1 provides us a canon within a canon. The Jesus of history provides us a canon within a canon. The Jesus of history subverts all our ideas and ideologies. Given the different situations of the early communities, there were bound to be differences in what was addressed to them. Hence within the New Testament while plurality is legitimate, every claim must be tested for legitimacy by being referred back to the historical phenomenon of the real Jesus of Nazareth... otherwise Jesus becomes a mere receptacle for our own predilections, an arbitrary cipher that we manipulate.

(Ref : *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol.78, No.7, July 2014, pp.33-52)