

Let's go biblical on Gender?

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Introduction

Today (9 August) we celebrate/ commemorate "Women's Day" in South Africa.

Why August 9th?

One small difference between the theme of this conference (Let's go Biblical on Gender) and the title of this paper, is the question mark in the title. With that I want to raise two questions, viz. "Who is *us*?" and "Can we go Biblical on gender?"

1. Who is "us" in "let's" (let us)?

The obvious answer to such a question would be, "us – Christians!" But given our past as South African Christians, we ought to be aware of the multiple and ambiguous interpretations of Biblical Scripture that have led to oppressive traditions and practices within the Christian faith communities. It is no longer a state secret that the "world" of apartheid in South Africa was primarily shaped, influenced and sustained by ways of interpreting Biblical texts. But, at the same time, references were also made to Biblical texts to argue against apartheid and its oppressive and dehumanizing policies and practices. It is thus obvious that the Bible has influenced the imaginations and languages¹ of different groups of people in South Africa in diverse (different), and often conflicting ways.

Biblical texts have thus become a 'site of struggle'. Debates and arguments evolving around the question of, "Who has the power to construct the message?", have emerged in various Christian communities in different times. Thus, besides being concerned with the text (Biblical message) itself, questions to ask are, "Who constructs the message?" and "For what purpose?".

¹ Particularly how people speak about themselves, God, others and the environment.

The Bible is often used as a weapon in social struggles and as such the Bible “serves purposes of legitimation”.² Being part of a struggle means that there are at least two sides – us and them!

The “us” factor is further problematised by the distance between the “them” present in the text written centuries ago, and “us” in the 21st century. This distance has many variables which include not only history in a broad sense, but life situations, traditions, culture, language, translations, interpretations, doctrines etc.³

Thus we, who read the Bible today, have to keep in mind the fact that we do so from a particular place, a particular time in history, from particular circumstances and life-situations and often for a particular purpose.

2. Can we “go” biblical on gender?

What is the point departure of such a statement? But more important is the question, “Where do we want to go?” Both these questions can only be explored by recognizing the reality of sexism in traditional Christian theology. Influenced by a Hellenistic worldview, men have been identified with the “spiritual, rational principle of the world and women with the physical and sexual, irrational and emotional principle”.⁴

“Male-headship” of early Christianity was influenced by both Roman law and Jewish tradition. Although the Hebrew Scriptures give account of strong women such as Deborah, Esther and Ruth, these women were excluded from the religious offices of Israel. Only men were full members of the covenant, through circumcision.

But I want to argue that, in the beginning God created humankind in God’s own image ... male and female God created them (Gen 1:27). God blessed them - both male and female (verse 28). God was pleased with everything that had been created because it was very good (verse 31).

² Dirkie Smit 1991.

³ The ways people express their understanding of God in human terms.

⁴ Denise Ackermann 2003.

How then, can we go back (to the Bible) to retrieve the “goodness” which God had seen, and with which God was pleased? How can we return to “the likeness of God”?

I want to suggest that God shows us how: by becoming human - through a woman!

And at this point I invite you, “Let’s go biblical on gender”!

I start at the beginning: a new beginning. God became flesh and made “his” dwelling among us. (Jn 1:1-14).

I now want to turn to the Gospel of Luke. The author of this gospel acknowledges that many others have written about the things that have been fulfilled, but that he⁵ felt it necessary to write an “orderly account so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught”.⁶ The scene opens with two women. Luke tells of Elizabeth, who was shamed into silence by a society that sanctioned motherhood as the primary source of honour for her. Zechariah’s disbelief (that it was possible for him and Elizabeth to become parents) resulted in him being silenced as priest, as father and as head of the family. Instead, Elizabeth becomes visible and she is given “voice” and she is the one who gets to name their son (Lk 1:59). The husband’s voice only returns when he acknowledges publicly (and in writing) that he is in agreement with his wife’s decision.

It is then that Zachariah’s silence is broken and filled with the Holy Spirit, he sings (Lk 1:67 – 79). Thus, God is pleased with relationships of mutuality - mutual recognition of the ‘other’ as worthy.

The other woman in the opening scene of Luke’s Gospel, is Mary. The angel went to her (Mary) and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The lord is with you” (Lk 1:28).

Now, whether there were two angels - the one who visited Joseph (according to Matthew 1:20) and another who visited Mary (according to Luke 1:28) OR whether the same angel (Gabriel) also visited Joseph, we do not know. But what we do know (from the biblical text) is

⁵ I follow scholarly tradition in assuming that the author of Luke’s Gospel was male. If not, I apologise to “her”.

⁶ Addressed to Theophilus.

that Matthew chose to record Joseph as the one who is consulted and who has to take care of Mary and restore her “honour”, while Luke chooses to tell his readers that Mary (herself) is the one who is consulted and “agrees” to be “with child”. I am the Lord’s servant ... May it be to me as you have said (Lk 1:38).

Thus, women are not objects, and Luke’s version challenges the notion that women were under the control of their “fathers” who received a “bride price” if they were virgins; after which they became the possessions of their husbands, who, if they were not “happy” with the wife, could send her back to her father.

Attitudes and practices that discriminate and alienate are challenged.

An unwed woman who “was with child” in those days (and in many societies today), was a “bad woman” - a prostitute, a whore, or an adulteress. Such a “bad” woman was sinful - and the verdict? To be stoned to death.

Perhaps that’s why Mary went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, “in the hill country of Judea” (Lk 1:39) - to save herself and her unborn baby. She risked the danger of traveling alone. In essence she risked, not only to save herself from insult and harm. She risked not only for her own sake, but for the sake of all humankind - for you and for me.

Luke, throughout the gospel, presents women as a group of people who, in exceptional ways, combine social insecurity and exclusion with autonomous energy and resources. And so Mary’s voice is heard as she breaks into song (Lk 1:46-55)- also known as *The Magnificat*. There is immense power in this Biblical text, but the power is not self-evident because Mary’s attitude is one of gentleness. However, to be gentle doesn’t mean that one is powerless and willingly accept anything- that could result in a “victim mentality”. This often results in either an attitude of “the world owes me” so we expect to be “empowered” as entitlement; or we lament being the victim - the oppressed. While being aware of our “oppressive” circumstances could encourage us “to struggle”, it often leads to a continued entanglement in “struggling” until we surrender because the problem is so big that we remain victims.

Instead of being victims, we should be creative agents of change - in a gentle reconciliatory way that is revolutionary. Biblical images of reconciliation are at the same time shocking and surprising.⁷

The Magnificat is identified (by many scholars) as the most revolutionary document in the world. Mary, a woman, a morally suspicious woman; a woman who became pregnant out of wedlock; a woman who had no right to speak publicly (not in the synagogue or the temple) - This woman proclaims the greatest moral, social and economic revolution in the history of the universe!

This hymn sung by Mary is often understood to be a composition of quotations from the Old Testament and it is possible that it was used during worship services back then. So it appears that Mary, a woman, was well versed in Scripture.

And Mary sings, "For the Mighty One has done great things for me" (Lk1:49). This has happened to a real human being, Mary – a woman; in a concrete country during a real time in history. It did not happen in a fictitious holy place somewhere in the bye and bye!

The Mighty One has done great things for Mary, who was a woman on the margins society. God has done a mighty thing for you and me when God became human through Jesus. Jesus brought people from the margins of society- the poor, the blind, lepers, the unclean, the 'sinful'. Jesus did not only make arguments on behalf of them, but he created the space for those who were perceived as "the other" to be (counted) and be seen. Jesus created opportunities for those who where silenced by societal norms, to be heard; and he created opportunities for those who were broken by oppressive attitudes and practices, to be restored.

In Jesus, God is found in places where God would not be perceived. In Jesus, God is particularly and dramatically present at the margins of human existence. This does not mean that God is not at the centre of life, but in Jesus the centre *shifts* to marginal people and places. Jesus is born in a place where no child was meant to be born; Jesus dies at a place where criminals were executed.

⁷ Mouton, Elna 2003.

God's gracious plan was a revolutionary plan- it turned things on it's side. God plan through Jesus exposed that which was concealed in hierarchies of power. How more revolutionary can God get than becoming a human being? Coming through the body of a woman who, according to the religious norms of society was perceived to be "unacceptable to God"?

It is in the Bible that we read that the body of a woman was the first dwelling of our God- who became flesh! Women's bodies are the 'temples' where the life of sons and daughters of God is nurtured. Through Mary, 'woman' was part of God's plan of salvation- and God continues to count on women and men in the ongoing plan of salvation.

This is evident in the gospel story according to Luke. Mary did not cease to exist in the story of Salvation. She was not kicked off the stage after giving birth to Jesus! What she sang about in the Magnificat, she experienced in the life and ministry of her son. Mary was part of his life and ministry, and she was near the cross when Jesus said to her, "Dear woman, here is your son", referring to the disciple 'whom he loved'.

Thus, being 'a mother' extends beyond being someone's biological mother.

Both Elizabeth's and Mary's motherhood does not discriminate against unmarried or childless women.

We are called to be new Marys- all of us women and men:

- who agree to give birth to God in this world, so we can continue to proclaim, "God Emmanuel!"
- whose love and care extends beyond our own kin.
- who challenge oppressive and exploitative norms in our communities of faith and wider society- all discrimination on the basis of race, class gender, etc.

Concluding remarks

Radical reversal of divine power through Jesus, reveals not only "who God is", but also what it means to be human, with radical implications for all forms of life. In showing compassion to women, children, tax-collectors, Samaritans, God, through Jesus, subverts the established values of power in the moral world of first century Palestine. In shifting the centre to the margins, and the margins to the centre, God's concrete presence in Jesus becomes a radical moment of shock and surprise, inviting people inside and outside those texts to *look* differently, to adopt new roles, to reorient their understanding of God and their traditions in the

light of God's liberating presence in Christ (2 Cor 5:17).⁸ This, in essence, is the transformative potential of the Christian Bible- the potential to transform those who read the Bible and those who teach from the bible and those who listen to teachings from the Bible. It is our (Christian) responsibility to do it in such a way that would give us **a new mind and a new heart that will quiver in response to any person's pain irrespective of race, class , gender or social standing.**

As we celebrate Women's Day 2005, Let's also commemorate the lives of women who had the courage to challenge the status quo; women who stepped out of their comfort zones of the 'natural order of things'; women who risked being labeled 'the other'; women like Mary, who risked her life for the freedom of all humankind - like the 20 000 women, who in 1956 risked their lives and contributed to freedom from apartheid.⁹

Let's also celebrate our lives- the fact that we, you and I, women and men, together have the opportunity to make a difference.

As we celebrate Women's Day, let's be reminded that the month of August is also known to be the 'month of compassion' in many Christian circles. Compassion is a deep awareness of, and sympathy for the suffering of all beings. But compassion goes much deeper than sympathy. It is the wish to free all beings from suffering. However, compassion goes beyond 'wishing' for something. The wish (or vision of goodness) is embodied by action. Compassion is action and words that communicate care, consideration, tenderness, encouragement, etc. Compassion is action that gives hope. To live life, from a place filled with compassion, is to:

- respect all life,
- live free of prejudice
- make choices in life that promote life-enhancing relationships
- respect the dignity and worth of others
- challenge attitudes and actions that are oppressive and discriminatory
- give voice to the "voiceless"

⁸ Elna Mouton 2003.

⁹ Albeit freedom forty years later!

To emphasise hope, empowerment or the transformative and liberative potential of the Bible, is a matter of choice as well as critical strategy. A close re-reading of the gospels will reveal a Jesus who does that. Jesus chooses to give hope from a position of power - he does so strategically in first century life-situations in Palistine- inviting us, followers in the 21st century globalising world, to do likewise.

On a personal note

At the time of this address my mother was recuperating at her home after spending a week in the intensive care unit of a Port Elizabeth hospital. On the day I had to e-mail this written version of the address to the organizer of the conference, Ethel Pittaway, my mother died - a month after celebrating her 70th birthday. I count my mother, Louisa Sophia Eliza Mc Quinto, among the remarkable 'Marys' who despite the social insecurity of being a woman in a church that excludes women from having a voice in leadership positions¹⁰ have questioned the absolute authority of "those in charge". Having been member of a faith community who (like many others) claim to possess the absolute truth, my mother, who for forty seven years claimed the belief that only those who have been 'sealed' by the hands of a 'holy apostle' will enter the Kingdom of God, had the courage to risk. Three months before her death¹¹ she said to me, "My experience in hospital has made me think and now my concern is not about the church (or its officers)¹² – whether they're right or wrong, but about my soul. And I pray that through God's grace that, that which I have believed and done, will give me access to eternal life when I die". This too is my prayer for all women and men – irrespective of race, gender, class¹³, or church affiliation.

¹⁰ See Pillay (2003), in Sporre, K and Botman, HR.

¹¹ On 6 August 2005 – the day she arrived home from hospital and the day I arrived in Port Elizabeth from Cape Town in preparation for this Women's Day Conference on 9 August.

¹² She said, "Dit gaan nie oor die (Apostoliese) geloof – of dit reg of verkeerd is nie, maar oor my siel. Ek bid dat God deur sy genade, dit wat ek glo en gedoen het, my die ewige-lewe sal laat ingaan".

¹³ Including all distinctions aimed at excluding others on whatever basis.