

Many books and studies in recent times have described the women of the Bible or the position of women in biblical times. With a freshness in his approach, Professor Terrien addresses the question of whether there is a biblical view of womanhood that is organically predicated upon biblical faith. The principle of canonical hermeneutics is suggested as a method for approaching the study.

Canonical hermeneutics seeks to discover the motivating principle of continuity which binds biblical texts. The importance of historico-critical investigation is recognized and maintained since canonical hermeneutics allows for the divergencies and diversities that exist in the variety of writings and the span of time. There is no steady line of development which can be traced. Rather the texts reveal intricate movements, fluctuations, and conflicts. Yet, there is a distinct style of praying, thinking, and living which binds the gospel of Jesus to the faith of Abraham across the centuries of biblical time.

Canonical hermeneutics attempts to delineate the distinctiveness of this style. It is a distinctiveness which springs out of an existential knowledge of the Lord God. Far from being only a system of intellectual beliefs, this theology formulates the total response of human beings to a God who is free from human particularism or human self-interest. In the face of the complexity of Israel's religion and of the life in the early Church, it is legitimate and possible to point toward a biblical theology of womanhood which is based on a theology of creatureliness.

The Yahwist account of creation presents woman in an exalted position and in a function of creative complementariness. It is the woman who brings man to completion. Woman is presented as the accomplishment of man's creation. Woman is held in so high an esteem that the responsibility of man towards her takes precedence over other communal ties. Inasmuch as the ancient Hebrews participated in a patriarchic culture, it is noteworthy that the Yahwist epic has preserved the archaic poem on the superiority of the bond uniting man and woman. The intention was likely to emphasize that woman, far from being merely a part of man's household, or only a child-bearer, occupies in Yahwistic faith a unique position of communality with man.

It is this exalted picture of woman which is confirmed in many ways by the theological language of the great prophets, the psalmists, and the wise. The covenant between Yahweh and his people could never have been described under the ideology of marriage if the notion of womanhood had been in any way demeaning. The many allusions of the prophets to Israel as an adulteress and a prostitute indirectly pay homage to the dignity of womanhood.

The wise could not have compared wisdom to an attractive woman if they had not shared an unrestricted approval of the feminine sex. They detected in the cosmos a certain quality of order, harmony, equilibrium, charm, and even playfulness which suggested to them the realities of the feminine principle.

Until the time of the Babylonian exile, a theological view of womanhood was in no way demeaning or overbearing. Like man, woman shared in the purpose of creation and in the corruption of history. In the sixth century, B.C., however, a disturbing transformation occurred. The prophet Ezechiel employed the language of sexuality no longer as a metaphorical tool but in the sense of ritual purity and impurity. Sin awareness tended to be associated with ritual uncleanness. The laws legislating ritual life assumed an unprecedented authority. While the Palestinian form of Judaism continued to honor national heroines like Esther and Judith and entertained the highest respect for motherhood, women were segregated in the temple and synagogue. Legislation led to complex and refined rituals of restriction, prohibition, and cleansing.

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It would be unfair to the plurality of trends within Judaism in Hellenistic and Roman times merely to state that cultic rules grossly favored men over women. The rabbinical literature contains a wide variety of sayings, some of which may represent the tradition of early teachers. Some of these explicitly affirm the equality of woman to man, especially in the light of a dynamic view of creation. Jesus and especially Paul may have been exposed to conflicting schools of thought on this subject.

The attitude of Jesus toward womanhood reveals on the one hand the breadth of his hermeneutics in general and on the other hand the boldness of his hermeneutical principles. The Synoptic and Johannine traditions alike show that he entered into conversation not only with women at a level of equality with men, but also with women who were prostitutes and foreigners (Mt 15:21ff and par.; Jn 4:7-30; Lk 7:36-50).

The views of Jesus on divorce reflect his respect for the dignity and the rights of women. His attitude indicates that he did not hesitate to challenge the Deuteronomic law on divorce, which was entirely male-oriented (Deut 24:1-4). By quoting Genesis (2:23-24), Jesus made it clear that he understood the reality of mutual responsibility and the obligation of love between a husband and a wife (Mt 19:3ff and par.).

Jesus believed in the liberation of women -- and of men. The whole of his message and of his activity points to a realistic appraisal of the ailments of human character, whether of men or of women. Womanhood, like manhood, was for him an aspect of the theology of creatureliness.

The attitudes of the early Church toward womanhood reflect the tension of the eschatological fever in which the first Christians lived from day to day, waiting for the imminent Parousia. Paul therefore recommended celibacy rather than marriage (1 Cor 7:1-4). At the same time, he saw no legal impurity related to married life, nor did he acknowledge the subordination of woman to man in sexuality. On the contrary, he recommended a mutuality of love which is ideologically akin to that of the Yahwist myth of creation (vs 4; cf. Gen 2:24). Paul the apostle understood the explosiveness of the gospel: "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" (Gal 3:28). Paul was concerned with the whole of the missionary enterprise in the pagan world. Inasmuch as a man or a woman had "put on Christ" there was no longer any distinction of class, status, race, nationality, or sex.

This survey shows a remarkable homogeneity which stands above the fluctuations of historical change. From the Yahwist theology of creation and the semantics of the feminine in theological expression to the prophetic analogy of covenant and marriage and the sapiential prosopopeia of wisdom as a woman, the Bible moves across the centuries toward a theology of womanhood organically related to a theology of manhood. Man and woman, created equal, fall under the same dimension of tragic finitude in historical existence, and both are in need of a radical renewal and regeneration.

It is from the perspective of their destiny that man and woman discover not only their equality and their complementariness but also the paradox of their freedom. The Bible does not contain a ready answer to the question of the role of women in the Church and in society. Biblical faith, however, from Abraham to Jesus Christ, lays the basis of a theology of womanhood which goes counter to the traditional attitudes and practices of Christendom and challenges the Church today to rethink critically and creatively the respective functions of man and woman.