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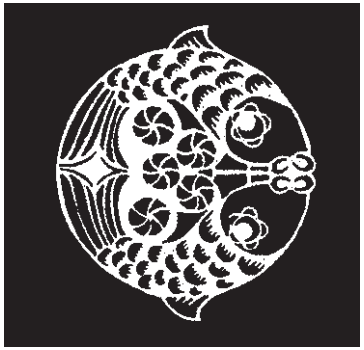

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From the Editor

This volume of the Chinese Theological Review consists of articles by Chinese Christian women writing about women's contributions to Christianity as well as some of the remaining obstacles to their full participation in church life in China. It partially reflects the ongoing celebration of the pathbreaking international UN Women's Conference that took place in Beijing in 1995 and the positive changes it introduced. That memorable event raised women's consciousness about gender inequality in society and in the church to a new level. Today, male students tend to be outnumbered by female students in seminaries and the percentage of ordained women and female church leaders have risen to new heights. The authors of this volume, while acknowledging that churches are changing for the better, also point out that patriarchy and male domination continue to be embedded in the thoughts, values and practices in the church and especially in parts of the Christian bible.

Writing as a participant of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Rev Cao Shengjie, who had led the CCC delegation in the landmark event, shows how impactful it had been with more than 17,000 participants in the main event and another 30,000 participants at a parallel NGO Forum. Globally, it had a groundbreaking effect on ecumenical work among women in the World Council of Churches (WCC). In her article, Rev. Cao, the first woman President of the China Christian Council, reminisces about the impact of that meeting and some of the transformational outcomes it had on women's roles in the church and in the

global ecumenical movement. She relates how encounters with the WCC played a major role in transforming her views on gender equality as well as feminist theology, helping to open doors in East-West dialogues on women's emancipation.

Jiang Qianli's article entitled "Women are not inferior" gives us an insightful introduction to the early years of the YWCA in China. Its tradition of service and empowerment may be traced to the early 20th century, when pioneering Chinese Christian women shaped it into a vehicle for social liberation. The organization straddled the divide between church and society and championed causes such as women's physical and educational emancipation, setting the tone for decades of progressive social work. Her article about the YWCA spotlights its significance in continually championing women's rights and advocating women's empowerment through its pioneering programs directed at liberating women from unjust social structures and practices.

Included in this volume is Lin Manhong's prayer and opening reflections on "Women bearing witness to hope" delivered at the WCC Executive Committee Meeting held in Hangzhou in December, 2025. Drawing from the Book of Ruth for inspiration, Lin describes how Ruth and other women in the bible defied the odds against them in patriarchal societies to create positive and life-enhancing roles, even as migrants and widows, who count as some of the most socially marginalized groups. She emphasizes the fact that women in many parts of the world still suffer, inordinately more than men, from discrimination, violence in their homes and in areas of conflict and war. In these contexts, the story of Ruth and Naomi, their courage, and resilience remain highly relevant to the vision and action of the ecumenical movement today.

The Story of Dinah in Genesis is used by Meng Yanling to analyse how early Biblical writers viewed violence against women. She briefly introduces the history of Feminist theology in the 20th century, identifying major orientations and approaches of well-known feminist theologians, including those from Asia and Africa. Relying on feminist hermeneutics she then moves on to the treatment of Dinah in Genesis by biblical writers, drawing attention to how women, whether in ancient or modern times, have been instrumentalized and used as political scapegoats. Meng highlights the vulnerability of women and the potential for violence in androcentric responses to perceived sexual transgressions. The challenges posed by Meng is how to interpret these biblical passages bearing in mind they were written in an era of patriarchal dominance and more important, how to overcome uncritical biblical interpretation that can continue the injustices committed against women.

In her contribution, Li Wenyan takes on the biblical narrative on Eve in the book of Genesis and the blame heaped on her as the "mother of original sin." Using textual analysis and feminist hermeneutics, her article challenges the view that it was Eve who was singularly responsible for Man's fall. She argues that Adam was equally a culprit in eating the forbidden fruit. Her arguments bear significance in a context where male church leaders have resisted and prevented women's ordination and denied them leadership roles on the basis that women, as perpetrators of original sin, cannot be allowed to assume leadership roles in the church.

In her article entitled "Gender, space, order and division," Zhao Qiufen focuses on the text in I Corinthians 11 - 14 where women are initially allowed to participate in church ministry but then are seemingly admonished and

strongly advised to keep silent in I Corinthians 14. This has been a source of great debate over the role and status of women in the church. Zhao explicates on the tension and contradictions found in the text using a different perspective that takes into consideration issues concerning gender, space, order and division. She raises questions about how the roles of women in the church were connected to conceptions of sharply divided gender roles in the home and in public spaces. As long as Christian worship and fellowship took place in the privacy of homes, women were conceded more active roles in Christian ministry. Once they had to move to "public spaces," women's freedom to participate became restricted. Zhao raises concern about the public space being gendered space, where gender roles are sharply differentiated, restricting women to passive roles.

Yu Yin uses the dialogue between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in the book of Mathew to spark a discussion about ultra-nationalism rooted in ancient history and involving faith and religious ideology. She uses the encounter to emphasize the Canaanite woman's resilience, courage and faith in refusing to accept a nationalism that is exclusive and discriminatory. Yu argues that the Christian faith emphasizes the universality of Christ's redemption, and yet, on the other hand, it makes Christians think that they are God's chosen people. From a religious perspective, she observes that ethnic and racial conflicts caused by religious nationalism can seriously hinder the establishment of God's kingdom. Her warning against ultra-nationalism has great relevance for understanding how scripture can be weaponized to justify the excesses of nationalism.

It has been a great pleasure and privilege for me to have been of help in editing this special collection by women in the church in China. I wish to thank all the authors for

their thought provoking and inspiring contributions. As always, I am deeply grateful to Rev Dr Lin Manhong and Mr Zhou Xuebin for their leadership and support in identifying articles, overseeing translations and mobilizing the very capable team of translators. My appreciation goes to Dr. Wati Longchar, Executive Director of the FTEAP for his patience and support in the production of another issue of the Chinese Theological Review.

Editor: Theresa Carino

The Growth of Gender and Role Awareness among Christian Women in China

中国基督教妇女性别和角色意识的增长

CAO SHENGJIE 曹圣洁

A Memorable Event

The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing from September 4th to 15th, 1995, was the largest global conference ever held in China, gathering participants from 188 countries and regions representing governments and a wide-ranging array of women's organizations. It was a significant manifestation that gender equality is a basic national policy of China. With its theme of "Action for Equality, Development and Peace," the conference aimed at raising their status and eliminating all forms of gender-based discrimination against women. Importantly, prior to the official conference, an NGO forum had been convened where over 15,000 participants could freely select topics of their choice in dozens of workshops held around the theme.

The Young Women's Christian Association of China, a group member of the All-China Women's Federation, organized a 28-member delegation to attend the event, that included national YWCA General Secretary Shi Ruzhang and Associate General Secretary Jin Wei, as well as CCC & TSPM Vice Chairwomen and female Vice Presidents Wang Juzhen, Liu Nianfen, and Wu Aien. I was a member of the delegation as the Vice President of the China Christian Council (CCC) and the Vice President of the National Committee of the China YWCA. Both Jin Wei and I attended the main Conference

as non-voting participants. It was the very first time for us to encounter so many women of different colors and costumes gathering together in our country to exchange ideas and appeals on women's greatest concerns in different workshops—it was indeed an eye-opening experience.

The conference also received much attention from religious women. Many Christian women were present, including the President and the General Secretary of the World YWCA. Representatives of the Program for Women in Church and Society of the World Council of Churches (WCC)[1] and various denominational delegations hosted a variety of workshops. These workshops mostly discussed women's issues in the context of the Christian faith which was very inspiring.

When the China YWCA was invited to chair a workshop by the conference organizers, there was a joint decision for the CCC&TSPM's Women's Work Commission, established in 1992, to cohost the event which led to the workshop having two halves. Chairing the first half of the workshop, YWCA President, Zheng Huaimei, delivered a keynote speech entitled "Forward in Faith," offering reflections and proposals on contemporary women's issues from an NGO perspective. In the second half of the workshop, as the Vice-President of the China Christian Council, I spoke on "The Role of Chinese Church Women in Education and Development," focusing on how the church was helping to raise women's literacy through Bible study classes and through the various services rendered by women in church and society. A lively atmosphere was created by the large crowd of participants. In addition, a 150-strong international delegation of YWCA representatives visited the Beijing YWCA and watched a slideshow on the work of the YWCA in China. When considerable numbers of overseas Christian women joined the Sunday worship service at Beijing Chongwenmen Church, they fully demonstrated the Christian bond in the

1 Editor's note: In the 1990s, the primary department responsible for Women's Ministry and issues in the World Council of Churches (WCC) was the Program for Women in Church and Society.

global ecumenical family. It is notable that the active support of Chinese Christian women for this global conference was highly commended by the All-China Women's Federation.

Gender Equality as a Social Issue

The stereotype that women are inferior to men has been deeply entrenched in Chinese cultural tradition over thousands of years. The founding of the People's Republic of China has emancipated women, with their rights stipulated and enshrined in the Constitution, the Marriage Law, and the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, all entitling women to enjoy the same rights as men. The establishment of the concept of gender equality in China should be credited to the social revolution. Women's status enhancement has been prominently reflected in the fact that they have stepped out of the home, developed their own career lives, obtained economic income and are no longer subordinated to their husbands. They have also gained more say within the family. On the other hand, with the deepening of China's reform and opening-up, Western multiculturalism has made inroads, with its negative influences emerging and spreading in society such as the pursuit of a materialistic life and loose sexual morality. Some young women have even gone astray. This shows that while women benefit from society, they must grasp the right idea of gender equality and realize self-value correctly.

The status of Christian women in China has improved along with the general improvement of women's status in society. However, most church women are only concerned about personal salvation and are less involved in solving social issues in comparison with the YWCA. Espousing its Biblical motto :"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:32), the YWCA China is a social service organization with a Christian background that has been in

the country for over a hundred years. Currently, ten local YWCAs have been set up in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, which consciously serve Chinese society in the spirit of Christianity.

YWCA leaders are mostly women elites. For instance, the late President Zheng Huaimei was an expert in gynecological endocrinology. She had been leading volunteer teams to provide medical services in rural areas over the years and was a consultant to the Science and Ethics Assessment Council of Human Reproductive Planning for the WHO. In addition to carrying out service projects in cooperation with YMCAs, local YWCAs have always attached importance to activities that are beneficial to women, such as caring for elderly women in the community and promoting self-protection education for girls.

Feminist hermeneutics enlighten church women

The introduction of Christianity to China helped to eliminate some harmful social customs that had oppressed women at that time. For instance, it encouraged women to abandon foot binding and to accept education. However, historically formed misconceptions were not easy to eradicate. In the early years, men and women would not even sit side by side during worship services. Currently, women believers account for up to 70% of the church population in China, mostly in rural areas and towns.

Women love the church and Bible reading. However, due to their relatively low "cultural level," they could only understand the Bible in a literal way. Certain Bible passages that seem to belittle women reinforce the concept of female inferiority such as 1 Timothy 2:12, in which Paul stressed that women should be quiet and submissive.

Growing up in a church environment, I rarely concerned myself with the issue of gender equality in

the past until 1991, when I attended a course at the WCC Graduate School of Theology (the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey) with the theme: "Towards an Inclusive Community". What impressed me most was the feminist theology that was taught, especially in regard to reading the Bible from a woman's perspective. It illuminated me with new insights: for example about how both women and men bear the image of God (Genesis 1:27); male and female are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). There is a subtle balance between the order of redemption (Out of a woman Jesus was born, and women were the first to report the message of the resurrection.) and the order of creation (From Adam came Eve). The status of Eve as Adam's "helper" does not necessarily mean she was inferior in status, rather, this term of helper" is also the exact same term applied to God's help to humans in Exodus 18:4. Certain writings in Paul's letters should also be understood using a historical, comprehensive, and spiritual, Biblical overview. My paper titled "Chinese Christian Women's Experience and Struggle in Building up Our Church and Society" was later published in the July 1993 Issue of the WCC publication "Ministerial Formation." It was then that female teachers in Chinese theological seminaries began to study how to apply feminist theology to the Chinese context.

Delegations of overseas church women have exchanged ideas directly with Chinese church women. For instance, delegations from the Asian Church Women's Conference (ACWC) visited us twice, with members from South Korea, India, Japan, Malaysia, and so on. I accompanied them on the journey to Shanghai, Beijing, Nanjing and other places. The visit of feminist theologians Lettie Russell and Guo Peilan (Kwok Pui Lan) was very enlightening.

Since 1998, Chinese Christianity has promoted the construction of a distinct theological thought that encourages a rethinking of Western theology while remaining committed to core Christian beliefs and contextualizing theology for the

Chinese setting. After 2003, it began to advocate the overall requirement for the Sinicization of Christianity which meant the further contextualization of Christianity at the time. What we need to inherit is the excellent legacy of Chinese culture, and what we need to explore is the current socialist core values, which includes equality. The implementation of those agendas and church work must revolve around in-depth hermeneutical methods, including the achievements of feminist hermeneutics. I believe that Chinese Christian women will benefit even more in the days to come.

The Visible Increase in Women's Ordination and Leadership

In the past, female preachers in church held a low status in China and could not be ordained as pastors. In 1944, Bishop Ronald Owen Hall (also known as Bishop Ho Minghua) of the Anglican Diocese of Victoria in Hong Kong ordained Li Tian'ai (Florence Li Tim-Oi) as a pastor due to the emergency needs in Macao arising from the Anti-Japanese War. However, she resigned after the war because of her non-acceptance (as a priest) by the worldwide Anglican Communion. In fact, she was the very first female Anglican pastor to have been ordained. In 1979, when Chinese churches resumed activities, Union Worship was implemented and decisions were made to grant women holy orders. The number of female pastors began growing fast. According to incomplete statistics in 2020, they accounted for 42% of the total number of pastors across our country.

To show concern and recognition for women, prior to the 5th National Conference of Chinese Christianity in 1991, the CCC & TSPM stipulated that women delegates should account for 30 percent of the total. However, the actual proportion only hit 21.3 percent due to the fact that few women were in leadership positions in grassroots churches

of various provinces, making it difficult for more women to be recommended. It was not until the 10th National Conference in 2018 that the proportion reached 31.2 percent.

Although the intervening 17 years seems long, the situation has indeed improved significantly, and during that period, I was elected the first female president of CCC for the years 2013 to 2018. Currently, there are eight women serving as the main leaders (such as the chairperson of local TSPMs or the presidents of local Church Councils) in 27 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions, while 77 women hold deputy positions. In my understanding, more women who have been ordained or chosen for leadership in recent years have been bearing witness in responding to God's call and to congregational trust. They have no desire to compete with male co-workers for power. At the beginning, some female pastors were even inclined to retreat in the presence of men, while certain male ministers were not accustomed to being ranked side-by-side with female co-workers. Nowadays, such phenomena have been generally outdated. God created men and women and endowed each with different characteristics. I think gender equality does not mean that women should act exactly in the same way as men. Rather, each should apply his/her respective talents and complement one another in serving church and society with one accord. As women, we have shortcomings such as timidity, narrow-mindedness and indecisiveness which need to be overcome. We also have strengths such as meticulousness, tenderness, and compassion, which we need to advance. The position of leadership requires women to be far-sighted with an overarching view, be inclusive and resilient, confident and persevering, all of which are not innate qualities but are the fruits of dedicated prayers, learning and practice. I believe God shows no partiality. He will raise up more women as suitable vessels in China and

around the world, to fulfill His good will for humanity in the future.

The author, Rev. Cao Shengjie, is an outstanding woman leader in the Chinese Church. She was the first woman to serve as President of the China Christian Council, holding this position from 2002 to 2007. She later served as Vice-Chairperson of the China Committee on Religion and Peace from 2004 to 2009, and as Director of the Advisory Committee of the CCC&TSPM from 2008 to 2013.

Women are not inferior to men: Reflections on the Chinese YWCA

巾帼不让须眉

JIANG QIANLI 姜茜莉

Introduction

Throughout human history, the emergence and evolution of the women's movement has served as both the defining characteristic and expression of social civilization. The essence of the women's movement is to encourage gender equality and women's self-realization, and to advocate equal opportunities for everyone in realizing their potential as active participants in social construction. Born alongside the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal national liberation movements, the Chinese movement for women's liberation was closely integrated with movements for national independence and social reform.

On the other hand, the idea of an "international community" has its roots in individualistic values, with the women's suffrage movement serving as the impetus in the early stage, and later developing pluralistic schools (such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, and the promotion of civil society, emphasizing individual rights and demands for inclusiveness and multiculturalism). The difference between the two is that the Chinese women's movement emphasizes gender equality under collectivism and promotes women's rights and interests to be protected by law under the leadership of the government. In its approach to attaining gender equality, China has tended to rely on organizations such as the Women's Federation that has combined policy

promotion with mass mobilization in a way that perfectly mirrors the characteristics of state-led, pragmatic and gradual social reform.

Despite these differences, synergies have been formed at the international level through working with UN Women, the World Conference on Women and other international organizations. The Chinese Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) adheres to the principle of "keeping pace with society and walking with the times." Not only has it been participating in the women's movement at various junctures in Chinese history, but it has also projected and interpreted the characteristics of the Chinese women's movement on the international stage, telling the Chinese story well, and making sure that China's song: "Women are not inferior to men" (巾帼不让须眉)[1] is heard all over the world.

Early Years

In its promotion of educational development in China, the Chinese YWCA founded, in 1915, the Physical Education Normal School, the first Chinese school to train women as specialized teachers and coaches in athletics, martial arts and health. In 1923, its students were sent to participate in International Games setting a precedent for Chinese women to participate in international atheletic and sports competitions. The mobilization of people and communities was also carried out through exhibitions and public briefings to promote the concept of public health and hygiene.

In 1927, the Chinese YWCA established a Rural Department to nurture rural women's capabilities and leadership through health and civic education. By 1930, a night school for female workers had been jointly

1 This is a Chinese idiom that means women are just as good as men.

established by the National Association of YWCAs and the Shanghai YWCA. The campaign to empower women that ensued, "Giving women workers a key" ("给女工一把钥匙"), supported the training of a large number of female workers, and became an important force in China's democratic revolution, developing women's talents for the establishment of a New China. In 1926, the YWCA launched a column entitled "Women and Careers" igniting discussions on women's careers and economic independence. To support this, an "Introduction Department" was established by the Shanghai YWCA to assist women in finding jobs together with the setting up of technical training courses. Through the setting up of nursery schools and dormitories for women, facilities were provided that enabled women to find jobs and enhanced their ability to become socially active. The Chinese YWCA paid special attention to changing social attitudes, establishing a sports club in 1911 to encourage women to participate in sports activities and to "go out into society." Placing emphasis on enhancing women's independence, family reform campaigns were carried out that included holding exhibitions on "sports for family reform." Attention was focused on fostering women's independence and carrying out "family improvement" movements through the holding of "family sports" exhibitions. There was a campaign to oppose the vile customs of having concubines and maidservants, through promotion of the 1928 bill to abolish the "mui tsai system," which had endorsed slavery, human trafficking and the selling of daughters due to extreme poverty.

YWCA and the All-China Women's Federation

In 1949, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, in response to the government's call, the Chinese YWCA became one of the three founding members of the All-

China Women's Federation. Since the ACWF's creation, the Chinese YWCA has continued to be an active group member, participating in the growth and development of the Women's Federation, laying the organizational and personnel foundation for its establishment and playing a vital role in the historical development of the Women's Federation.

It can be said that one can find important imprints of the YWCA's role in decision-making and management in all important activities throughout the history of the ACWF. No matter what kind of important activities have taken place in China at any time, there is evidence that Chinese YWCA members have participated in the relevant meetings and activities of the Women's Federation and played an active role, winning accolades from all sectors of Chinese society. Representatives of the YWCA have participated in practically all of the previous national congresses of Chinese women and have been active participants in the governance of the Women's Federation. Its ability to make suggestions in promoting the vision of the Chinese Young Women's Congress is the best evidence that the Chinese YWCA has inherited this tradition and passed on the torch from generation to generation. The YWCA adheres to the tenet of "serving society and benefiting the people" in the field of social services, paying special attention to the rights and interests of women and children in community services. It has contributed extensively to women's empowerment and to education and training in constructing child-friendly communities. As a group member of the Women's Federation, our areas of work are aligned with those of the Federation. As the scope and influence of the Women's Federation in related fields have expanded, it has worked with local government departments to actively support the work of the YWCA. On its part, the Chinese YWCA has engaged in the organization of the Women's Federation at all levels, jointly contributing to the development of women

and children under ACWF's leadership.

When the UN-organized Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995, the Chinese YWCA played an active role, exerted great influence, and also performed well in the field of public diplomacy. During the conference, a seminar on Christianity was held, the only one of the 44 forums with a religious theme, so that the world could understand the positive contributions made by the Chinese Protestant Church and the Young Women's Christian Association to the healthy development of women and children in China since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Dr. Zheng Huaimei, President of the National Association of Young Women's Associations, delivered a keynote speech, introducing the response of the YWCA to contemporary women's issues and the social programs that were being implemented. These included skills and confidence training programs for laid-off female workers in the face of new challenges and programs to help "foreign daughters-in-law" to adjust into the family in new social environments, to name a few. Also mentioned were widely applauded "one-child education programs" and health management services for the children of migrant workers. Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, the ACWF and the Chinese YWCA have closely collaborated in delivering effective social services, greatly expanding public knowledge and understanding of the women's movement in China since 1978 when reform and opening began.

Conclusion

During the 1995 meeting, the YWCA hosted a social reception at the site of the Beijing YWCA to welcome participants from different parts of the world, promoting international exchanges and cooperation and exchanging views with women representatives of international Christian

organizations such as the World Council of Churches and Christian women from more than ten countries in Europe, America, Asia and Africa.

The YWCA has showcased the progress of Chinese women on the world stage through strengthened communication and international exchanges that have enhanced China's influence in global women's affairs. By contributing to the global women's movement, it has played an active role in the field of public diplomacy.

Focusing on the present, the Chinese YWCA will further integrate with the Chinese women's movement through the inherited tradition of successful cooperation with the Women's Federation, combining the following:

1. practical needs and policy orientation in social development,
2. the group's own institutional guarantee with strict compliance with national laws and regulations,
3. participation in the social economy,
4. participation in the promotion of Chinese culture,
5. social support and international cooperation,
6. and the strategic goals of the United Nations for sustainable development.

The China YWCA will mobilize YWCAs in various cities, uniting under the Women's Federation at all levels, joining hearts and minds. Using a multi-dimensional approach, the China YWCA will seek to play a greater role in the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind. We aim to do well in the "Go Home and See" activity for young people in Hong Kong and Macao,[2] in the discussions and exchanges on the theme of peace between

2 Editor's note: "Go Home and See" is an initiative aimed at fostering connection between young people in Hong Kong/Macao and mainland China, encouraging visits often involving exchange, cultural tours, and family visits.

Chinese and Japanese youth, and the environmental protection projects in Nepal and Cambodia, so as to make them the new responsibilities of the Chinese YWCA in the new era.

We should participate in the work of consolidating the foundation of women's rights and interests, give full play to the advantages of the YWCA in various cities at the grassroots level, do well in social education and community mobilization, and continue to improve the legal system for gender equality. This will require deepening the implementation of the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, the Anti-Domestic Violence Law and the 75 main goals put forward in the 2021-2030 "Chinese Women's Development Program" in the fields of education, employment, health, and so on. We need to carry out our social services, and through the policy of "advocacy and innovation," make effective laws and policies.

The goal of gender equality is implemented in the social context of China. In the "14th Five-Year Plan" (2021-2025) while focusing on the promotion of "family style construction"[3] in the practice of strengthening special content such as family construction and childbirth support, the China YWCA is encouraged to set up "early childhood education" services and physical services of childcare institutions, and internalize the characteristics of "loving women and children's services."[4] Under the guidance and

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3 "Family style construction" refers to promoting family values, stability, and education to address demographic challenges, such as a falling birth rate and an aging population, which disproportionately affect women's career and family roles.

4 Editor's note: "Loving Women and Children's Services" refers to the policy goal of creating a supportive, safe, and respectful environment for women and children, improving maternal and child health, and providing high-quality, affordable care services to ensure women's rights are protected.

help of the All-China Women's Federation, the Chinese YWCA will take root in society, continue to "be salt and light", and make new contributions to the development and progress of women's cause in the new era and to the new momentum of women's work.

The author, Rev. Jiang Qianli, is the Senior Pastor of Shanghai Christian Mu'en Church and President of the National Young Women's Christian Association of China (YWCA of China). She is also a member of the 13th Executive Committee of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF).

Women Bearing Witness to Hope
为希望做见证的女性

LIN MANHONG [1] 林曼红

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, good morning.

To my dear executive committee members, welcome to China, welcome to Hangzhou, welcome to this opening prayer!

The theme of today's morning prayer is Women Bearing Witness to Hope, and today is WCC's Thursdays in Black. So, it may be appropriate for us to reflect briefly on the Book of Ruth—one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman. I have chosen to reflect on the Book of Ruth from a Chinese perspective, not only because its story helps us draw connections to the experiences of women today, but also because it carries important messages that are relevant to the church in China, and even churches around the world.

I trust that we all know about the Book of Ruth well, so I did not select any verses for us to read. For many women in the world, whether or not they are familiar with the Book of Ruth, the story of Naomi and Ruth has become their

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1 This prayer was delivered at the World Council of Churches Executive Committee meeting held in Hangzhou, China in November 2025 and posted on the WCC website on Dec 2, 2025. Available at the WCC website https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/women-bearing-witness-to-hope-by-rev-dr-manhong-lin

collective stories. When life grows harsh—such as when they lose their means of support, as depicted in the Book of Ruth—so many women refuse to be crushed. Instead, they summon the courage and resilience to fight persistently, seizing every chance to survive and even to strive for a better life. They exercise wisdom to make sound decisions when needed and lay thoughtful plans for their future. They are steadfast, hardworking, humble, compassionate, and with many good qualities. Because of who they are and what they do, their lives are filled with hope. They are able to make a profound impact not only on their own lives, but also on their communities and even on human history.

Women have borne such witness to hope across all walks of life in countless ways, contributing greatly to human development. In China, for example, women account for 43 percent of the total employed population and 45.8 percent of scientific and technological professionals. Chinese women have made outstanding contributions in fields like aerospace, biomedicine, ocean expeditions, and artificial intelligence. Women have also excelled in sports: women athletes have won over 60 percent of medals for China in the past four Summer Olympic Games. In 2024, female students made up more than half of the total student population in higher education in China.

Within Chinese churches, women also hold leadership roles in seminaries and congregations. Of all ordained pastors, 42 percent are women, and numerous women serve as elders, deacons, and volunteers in church ministry.

Yet, not all women can embrace the same hope as figures like Ruth and Naomi, or the women we just mentioned. For many women worldwide, even sustaining basic survival is a struggle—let alone living a normal, decent life or enjoying

gender equality. According to UN statistics, 676 million women and girls currently live within 50 km of deadly conflict, the highest number recorded since the 1990s. In 2024, 64 million more women faced food insecurity than men. Without action, by 2030, 351 million women and girls will be trapped in extreme poverty, and 896 million women will lack access to clean cooking fuel and technologies.

As we all know, women's challenges cannot be solved by women alone. These are not just "women's challenges"—they are challenges for humanity and human society as a whole. Addressing them requires widespread awareness and collective effort. The WCC has set a strong example in this regard: over the past few decades, it has launched numerous projects and initiatives to promote gender equality, empower women, and advance social justice—bringing hope to women globally. Some of the WCC's ongoing efforts, include: Gender Justice: Just Community of Women and Men Initiative, the Pan African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network, the Women's Participation in Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, the Ecumenical Network of Global Actors for Gender Justice, Theological Reflection and Feminist Theology Projects, and Thursdays in Black.

WCC has also been deeply engaged in poverty alleviation.

Through direct action, advocacy, and faith-based development work, it addresses poverty and social injustice—rooted in a profound commitment to human dignity and care for creation.

The church in China has also taken significant steps to promote gender equality; my colleague will share more with you after our prayer session. For now, I will briefly highlight China's broader efforts in this area. After years of hard work,

China has achieved historic progress in advancing women's causes, lifting 690 million women out of poverty and meeting the poverty reduction targets of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ahead of schedule. The average life expectancy of women in China has risen to 80.9 years in 2025, and women's overall health has improved significantly. The World Health Organization (WHO) has listed China as one of ten countries with a high performance in maternal and child health. China will also continue to support global women's causes. At the Global Leaders' Meeting on Women held last month in Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that over the next five years, China will: donate an additional 10 million U.S. dollars to UN Women; allocate 100 million U.S. dollars from China's Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund to implement women and girls' development through collaborative projects with international organizations; invite 50,000 women to China for exchange and training programs; and establish a Global Center for Women's Capacity Building.

I am certain that many of you, your churches, denominations, and home countries have also done a great deal to promote gender equality and improve lives of both women and men. I look forward to learning more from you during our meeting.

The Book of Ruth is more than a story about women—it carries messages relevant to our church, society, and global community today. Because of the time limit, I will highlight just a few points.

When Elimelech's family fled from Bethlehem to Moab because of famine, the Moabites did not shun them for being Israelites of a different faith. The family found shelter in Moab, kept their beliefs, and Elimelech's two sons even married Moabite women. Later, when Ruth arrived in

Bethlehem, the townsfolk did not look down upon her for her Moabite identity. Instead, they welcomed her, protected her, and secured her livelihood. Although Ruth followed Naomi and took the Lord God as her own, her Moabite ethnic heritage and identity remained unchanged. In her faith, Naomi clung firmly to the Lord God with unwavering devotion. Even after losing her husband and two sons, she never abandoned her faith. Yet she did not force her daughters-in-law to convert to her religion, nor did she pressure them to follow her back to Bethlehem. Instead, she respected their freedom of choice. In hardship, these three women of different faiths lived harmoniously, showed mutual kindness, and prayed for each other's blessings.

Such a message is particularly important for the Chinese church, as it calls on some Chinese Christians to liberate themselves from a fundamentalist theology brought by some Western Protestant missionaries, which taught that Christians had little to do with non-Christians, Christian identity mattered more than cultural and national identities, the goal of evangelism was to convert as many people as possible by all means, including coercion, and other religions were simply "nonsense" or even "of the devil." The Book of Ruth will help renew Chinese Christians' theological thinking, making it more open, inclusive, and balanced. This renewal aligns with the theology of evangelism developed over the past 100 years through 14 world mission conferences, organized by IMC, DWME and CWME, addressing the matters of the gospel and culture, mission and evangelism, and interfaith dialogue.

It will also help Chinese Christians better appreciate and embrace the "theology of love" initiated by Bishop K. H. Ting, which aims to rectify the theological perspective of some Chinese Christians. As a preeminent leader and

theologian of the Chinese church, Bishop Ting argued that love is God's highest attribute: God creates and sustains the world through love, so Christian love must be expressed in loving all people, including those of different faiths and of no religious faith. He believed that God's love is present in all cultures, so Chinese Christianity should respect and integrate into Chinese traditional and modern culture, and theology should be contextual. His hope was that Chinese Protestantism, being a post-denominational church, would continue to transcend doctrinal differences, appreciate diverse theological perspectives, and actively engage in society and thereby promote church unity and social harmony.

The theology of love and the Book of Ruth both offer insights into how to live as Christian witnesses in our world. In fact, God's love is strongly emphasized in the Book of Ruth—though not directly mentioned, it is implied in the verses that speak of God's blessings and kindness. Love is visible in the compassion and kindness shared not only by Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, but also between Naomi and Orpah, and between Ruth and the people of Bethlehem.

When people have love, compassion, and kindness, they are more likely to be willing to respect differences in tradition, culture, race, ethnicity, religion, and ideology—rather than seeking to ignore, criticize, or diminish those differences. Of course, love, compassion, and kindness are not merely concepts, ideals, or visions; they demand actions—bold, tangible actions, just like what the countless women and men, the WCC, the churches worldwide, and the sectors in society and governments around the world have demonstrated.

As we commit ourselves to promoting church unity, gender equality, and social justice; to engaging in interfaith dialogue and strengthening interreligious trust and respect; and praying for, advocating for, and building peace and hope in a divided world—may the Book of Ruth speak to us. Amen.

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Approaches to Evangelical Women's Hermeneutics: The story of Dinah in Genesis 34

福音派妇女释经的进路:以《创世记》第34章底拿的故事为例

MENG YANLING 孟艳玲

Abstract. When Christians study the Bible, they usually try to find ethical guidance in it. It is traditionally believed that the scriptures are beneficial in ethically shaping and influencing believers, and that Christians' attitudes toward Biblical texts should be first and foremost believing and trusting. However, this is not the case with women theologians toward the Bible. They are first and foremost skeptical: they believe that the passages of the Bible are first and foremost patriarchal and male-centric, and therefore potentially harmful to women. Readers should not uncritically open themselves up to the stories of the Bible but rather expose some of them as oppressive and harmful, so that women can read the Bible with an emancipatory mind. From the perspective of evangelical beliefs, combined with the methods and approaches of women's interpretation, the author attempts to start a dialogue between tradition and women theologians hoping that an innovative approach towards evangelical women's interpretation can be the result.

Keywords. women's exegesis, the story of Dinah

Introduction

Women's hermeneutics can be said to be a challenge to traditional evangelical hermeneutics. For us, this challenge cannot simply be ignored or dismissed, but rather should be taken as an effort to uphold the canonical authority of the Bible while at the same time taking seriously the issues of biblical patriarchy and androcentrism. This article will begin with an outline of women's hermeneutics, and then take Genesis 34 as an example in studying the biblical text and its hermeneutical history in conjunction with women's hermeneutics. The focus on reinterpreting Genesis 34 from the perspective of marginalized women who have experienced sexual violence will show readers the benefits of reading and interpreting the Bible in a woman's hermeneutical way and to discover the feasibility of evangelical women's hermeneutics.

I Evangelical Women's Hermeneutical Approaches:

Women's exegesis may seem to challenge and question the text itself and its traditional interpretations, but it is undeniable that it also opens up new modes of Christian reading of the Bible. Women's exegesis, as the name suggests, is based on women's experiences. In the light of women's situation and experience, how can the Bible be a resource for supporting women in their quest for emancipation? The writing and interpretation of the Bible has largely been done by men, so how can women break through this limitation? The following are some of the most groundbreaking figures in the history of women's hermeneutics:

1. The History of Women's Exegesis

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's important starting point in

the history of women's hermeneutics is the Bible (The Woman's Bible). Its origins were not traced to a reformation movement but rather to its roots in the suffrage movement of the 19th century, when women began demanding equal voting rights with men, thus coming into conflict with conservative church beliefs. The greatest resistance to women's right to vote came not from elsewhere, but from the politically influential churches of the time. At the time, women basically believed that their role should be one of obedience, humility and forbearance, and that they should not strive for equality with men in everything. Elizabeth Staunton began to think there was something wrong with the church's teachings. She concluded first, that the Bible is not a neutral text, but a patriarchal and male-centered text; Second, that there is a problem with the church's interpretation of the Bible, because throughout the history of hermeneutics, men, as the subject of hermeneutics, have simply ignored women' s voices and perspectives. Her views were very shocking and challenging to existing Church traditions consequently stimulating the historical prelude to the women's hermeneutical movement at the end of the 19th century .

Katharine Doob Sakenfeld summarizes the four bases of dealing with the biblical text from women's experiences.[1] She tried to sort out some context to try out the approach of women's hermeneutics, and strictly speaking, she only provided some basis for future thinking. Her approach was to:

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1 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* ed. L. Russell. Philadelphia: Westminster,1985. 55-64

a. Focus on positive, encouraging, and positive stories and scriptures for women to counter negative examples.
b. Take a biblical approach to establishing a principle of whole-person deliverance as a standard for exegesis.
c. Use the method of cultural comparison to explore the similarities and differences between the lives of women in biblical times and in modern times, and analyzing and studying patriarchy.
d. Question the absolute authority of certain biblical texts.

Phyllis Trible is another important pioneer of women's hermeneutics who has provided important ideas for women's exegesis and practical and concrete hermeneutic practice. She summarizes the essential elements of women's exegesis in the following way:

a. Explore the social culture of biblical times, with a particular focus on the social realities of patriarchal inferiority.
b. Focus on unearthing the stories of forgotten women, especially the stories of victimized women in the Bible.
c. Redefine the image of God, eliminate the use of androcentric vocabulary, and develop a more inclusive language.

Trible is best known for her 1984 book *Text of Terror* which opened a new dimension in women's hermeneutics.[2] She pays particular attention to biblical situations of discrimination, abuse, and subordination of women. Her horror stories about women in the Bible are reinterpreted from the perspectives of oppressed women in order to remember those who have suffered in the past and in

2 Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadephia: Fortress Press, 1984).

the present. She focuses on textual analysis using textual discrimination, and she tries to use her research on the original text of the Bible and the culture in which it is set to give readers an idea of the role and situation of women at the time.

There is a richer understanding of the suffering of the women in these horrific texts. The purpose of re-reading and excavating women's tragic stories is to avenge their past and present suffering so as to serve as a warning that such tragic stories should not continue to be repeated.

Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza is another prominent woman theologian who focuses on the New Testament. Her magnum opus, *In Memory of Her*, published in 1984[3] is also an important landmark in the history of women's hermeneutics. The title *"In Memory of Her"* is taken from the story of the woman who anointed the Lord with perfume in Mark 14: "And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mark 14:9 RSV). In this book, three characters stand out in particular when it comes to the crucifixion of Jesus: Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, Peter who denied the Lord three times, and a woman who anointed the Lord with fine perfume. But while Judas and Peter were remembered by Mark's community, the woman didn't even have a name. Ironically, Jesus had explicitly said, "Wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mark 14:9). Fiorenza stood on the idea that we would not be able to preach the message of Christianity if the deeds of a faithful follower of Jesus were not remembered. We want to thank Fiorenza

3 Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

for her sensitivity to the words of Jesus. She argues that the biblical text is sexist and male-centered. We can, today, reconstruct women's stories in the light of the fragmentary accounts of women in the Bible as she suggests.

The main objectives of her method of "historical reconstruction" are to reconstruct the history of women in early Christianity and to make them an important part of the Christian tradition. It is to reconstruct a history in which women struggled and made significant contributions to the establishment, propagation and development of Christianity. She reasserts that the history of Christianity is the history of both men and women. Her most controversial proposition is that the principles of biblical interpretation do not come from the text itself, but from the scriptures of today's women's struggle for liberation. The importance of text: She argues that only texts that challenge and critique patriarchal cultures are worthy of theological revelation.

2. Classification of Women's Hermeneutics

Women's hermeneutics is a very broad concept, and the methodologies and conclusions of women's exegesis differ from each other depending on the position of the interpreters. According to Carolyn Osiek's analysis, women's hermeneutics can be divided into five basic categories.[4]

a. **The Rejectionist:** This sect rejects the authority of the Bible and the Christian tradition associated with it, if the Christian tradition is unchangeable.

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4 Carolyn Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives." in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (ed. A.Y. Collins, Atlanta: Scholars, 1985), 93-106.

b. The Loyalist: Since you cannot reject the Bible under any circumstances, there are two possibilities for loyalists: one is to reinterpret women in a non-oppressive way. Those identifying "repressive" scriptures believe that the problem is not the text itself, but the reader. Strictly speaking, this is not a position of women's theology.

c. The Revisionist: The Bible and the Christian tradition were written in the context of a patriarchal culture, but they are not patriarchal in nature and can be reformed. Latent women's voices are hidden beneath biblical texts and traditions, and through the study of linguistic, rhetorical, and narrative evidence, they can be unearthed in order to reconstruct as much as possible the lives of ordinary women in Israel at different times. One way to do this is to do your best to study the scriptures that have been overlooked, and to present women in a positive way.

d. The Sublimationist: Women's theology is admired as a living and nourishing discipline, and both God and the Church are described in the image of women.

e. The Liberator: The Bible is often studied from a theological point of view, in order to critique the patriarchy in it. The central message of the Bible is emancipating humanity from an eschatological point of view [e.g., the New Creation, Shalom, the Prophet's critique of oppression]. Letty Russell found that the basic principle and motivation of the Bible was that "it is God's will to repair all creation"[5] which became the message of her liberation theology.

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5 Letty Russell, "Feminist Interpretation" in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honour of Letty Russell* (ed. M. Farley & S. Jones, Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox, 1999), 138.

On the other hand, Rosemary Radford Ruether critiques patriarchal culture from the prophetic perspective.[6] Both Russel and Ruether proceed from feminist ideologies outside the scriptures and bring them to the scriptures in the hope that the principles of women's theology can enter into a dialogue with the scriptures of the Bible.

Obviously, the resistance and the loyalists are seen as two rather extreme positions, conflicting and irreconcilable. However, the rest of the revisionists, sublimationists, and liberationists can be combined with one another and indeed have used each other. Revisionists, emancipators, and sublimationists have all emphasized the male-centric and patriarchal nature of biblical texts in order to reveal that women were often overlooked, or were presented from a male perspective, and thus have applied different approaches to women's hermeneutics in the interpretation of the Bible.

3. The Usual Three Levels of Women's Exegesis

a. Gender relations in the scriptures

To put it simply, for a passage to be interpreted from a woman's perspective, it is necessary to identify the gender relations represented in the text and the gender roles and values displayed in the text's message. It depends on how the scriptures construct gender, how women speak of men, and how women and men are confined to a box. In the Book of Ruth, Naomi is described as living with her husband in the land of Moab. When Ruth returned with Naomi to Bethlehem from Moab, after both had been widowed, Naomi had to find a husband for Ruth to *rely on*— reflected in the scriptures as the dependence of women on men. The way for this to happen was

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6 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 1983).

through the process of marriage and procreation. The same is true of Hagar and Sarah, who quarreled over their positions and power in their husband's family. Sarah was childless and, in accordance with ancient customs, gave her Egyptian slave Hagar to her husband Abraham to bear a child for them. The child produced by the slave would legally be considered the child of the main wife, Sarah. When Hagar became pregnant she began to look on Sarah with contempt. Sarah complained to Abraham and his response was: "I'll leave it to you." It is evident here that the role of men is clear: they are not responsible for women; and women fight (among themselves) for the benefits that come from men.

b. Rediscover the Illustration of the Female Subject

Tamar in Genesis 38, Rahab the prostitute in Joshua 2, and women such as Ruth and Esther are examples of female subjects. Through the reading of the scriptures, one can discern the prevailing gender values of the time and how, even in a male-dominated world, women can find various modes of change. As a woman, Ruth was able to leave her homeland, renounce her own gods, take someone else's hometown as her own, worship the local gods, follow the local customs, fulfill the local laws, and fully participate in the local community, which was not possible for a man. In those times, wherever a man goes, he must affirm his land, his possessions, his identity, or his name, and he will seek continuity until he dies. In contrast, women could go to different places and combine different traditions to create their own. While Ruth was clearly limited by patriarchy, she took an initiative within the established value system: when she returned to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, she took the opportunity to go into the fields to gather ears of wheat and find a living for herself and her mother-in-law. Naomi took advantage of an opportunity for Ruth to transform

herself, thus changing her own fate. As a result, the two women changed their fates together. So in a male-dominated world, women are not entirely subordinate and at the mercy of others, but have their own ideas and abilities to alter their fate.

c. Rebuilding Submerged Female Traditions

Because patriarchal society was dominant in biblical times, its culture must have exerted an influence on the writers of the Bible such that Biblical texts have always ignored women's voices and positions, whether consciously or unconsciously. In the story of Dinah in Genesis 34, the biblical text ignores Dinah. Her thoughts and feelings are completely drowned out by the male voice. Similarly, in the long history of hermeneutics in the past, men, as the main interpreters, have tended to interpret the story of Dinah from the standpoint of men and in a way that defends their interests. So, one of the tasks of women's exegesis today is to unearth the voices of women who have been drowned out of biblical texts, and to challenge the hermeneutical traditions that have been dominated by men throughout the long history of hermeneutics.

II Taking the Story of Dinah in Genesis 34 as an Example

Most feminist readings of biblical texts tend either to challenge the text itself or to oppose the long-standing tradition of male-centered interpretation. Both evangelical and radical feminist theologians have been critical of the androcentric history of biblical interpretation. Evangelical women interpreters, however, maintain an attitude of affirmation and respect toward the biblical text. While Scripture is understood as divine revelation, it is also

inseparable from its historical and cultural contexts. Ancient Israel was a patriarchal society, and biblical texts are products of their time rather than deliberate attempts to discriminate against women. Evangelical women's hermeneutics therefore does not seek to condemn the biblical text itself, but rather to reread it from alternative perspectives.

When examining the interpretive history of Genesis 34, one is struck by a troubling fact: male interpreters have shown little interest in addressing the core of the narrative. Instead, their attention has often been directed toward secondary details. In Genesis 34:1, "Dinah ... went out to see the daughters of the land" has become the focal point of concern for both Jewish and Christian interpreters.

In contemporary society, although strong patriarchal cultures still exist in certain regions or ethnic groups, gender inequality has generally been on the decline. Many women today enjoy economic and psychological independence. In this context of awakened female consciousness, modern readers instinctively perceive Dinah as a victim and respond with sympathy and compassion when reading Genesis 34. Yet a survey of traditional interpretations reveals a disturbing contrast: Dinah was not pitied but frequently blamed. Some interpreters even held her responsible for the subsequent massacre. This tendency reflects the fact that biblical interpretation in earlier periods was dominated by male interpreters deeply embedded in patriarchal church and social structures.

Influential theologians such as Augustine—who, prior to his conversion, lived with women and fathered a child—later came to associate women with moral downfall. In medieval theology, discrimination against women

intensified, supported by theological, medical, and physiological arguments asserting female inferiority. Under such conditions, biblical interpretation inevitably absorbed misogynistic assumptions, transforming Dinah, a victim of sexual violence, into an object of blame.

In fact, Chinese history is no exception in this regard. The tendency to attribute the guilt of national collapse and familial ruin to beautiful women is itself a reflection of male-centered ideology in traditional culture. The fall of the Shang dynasty, for instance, was blamed on Daji（妲己）, who was subsequently demonized as a seductive "femme fatale" and portrayed as the arch-villain of moral corruption for all ages. Likewise, the collapse of the Western Zhou（西周）was imposed upon Bao Si（褒姒）, even though King You of Zhou（周幽王) had already become markedly incompetent before she entered the palace. Apart from enjoying the king's favor, Bao Si was hardly associated with any concrete moral wrongdoing. Yang Guifei（杨贵妃）was similarly cast as a quintessential "femme fatale", accused of having triggered the An Lushan Rebellion（安史之乱）and thereby causing the Tang dynasty to decline from prosperity to decay.

In reality, political decay stemmed from the moral failure of rulers, yet women bore the blame. Modern scholarship has begun to reassess these narratives and rehabilitate the reputations of such women. In the same spirit, this study seeks to vindicate Dinah within the history of Christian interpretation, where androcentric readings have unjustly transformed her from a victim into a perpetrator.

Reconsidering Two Key Hebrew Terms in Genesis 34:1

1. Reconsidering "ראה to see"

In the history of interpretation, exegetes have often focused their attention on Genesis 34:1. The clause "Dinah … went out to see the daughters of the land" (Gen. 34:1) thus became a central concern for both Jewish and Christian interpreters. Victor P. Hamilton translates Genesis 34:1 as: "Dinah, Leah's daughter whom she bore to Jacob, went out *to be seen* (ראה, implying by men) among the daughters of the land (בְּבְנוֹת)."[7]

In the Hebrew text, however, the word order places "ראה" (to see) in the *Qal* infinitive form, immediately followed by "בְּבְנוֹת"(among the daughters). Because the noun "בְּנוֹת" (the daughters) is prefixed with the preposition "בְּ" (in/ among), Hamilton argues that the combination is unusual and therefore renders it as a passive — "to be seen." Yet this inference lacks strong theoretical support. The *Qal* infinitive of "ראה" occurs a hundred and eleven times in the Hebrew Bible, and in accordance with standard Hebrew grammar, it is consistently translated in the active voice, with no clear instances requiring a passive rendering. If a passive meaning were intended, the appropriate form would have been the *Niphal* infinitive.

Moreover, the preposition "בְּ" is semantically flexible and can carry a range of meanings. Many scholars therefore maintain that if emphasis is to be placed on the "בְּ" prefixed to "בְּנוֹת" (daughters), the most accurate translation would be "among some of the women," rather than adopting a passive construction that violates basic principles of Hebrew grammar. Accordingly, Genesis 34:1 should be translated: "Dinah, the daughter of Leah whom she bore to Jacob, went

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7 V.P Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18—50* (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1995), 351; Aalders, Genesis, 154; L.R.Kass, "Rearding Daughters and Sisters: The Rape of Dinah," *Commentary* 93 (1992): 31.

out to see (or visit) some of the women of the land." Thus, this verse does not imply that Dinah deliberately went out in order to be seen by the local men.

2. Reconsidering "יָצָא to go out"

A survey of the history of interpretation of Genesis 34 reveals that exegetes have shown little interest in the narrator of the story itself. Instead, their attention has often centered on the verb "יָצָא" (to go out). In Genesis 34:1, this second verb became a focal point of male interpreters: "Dinah, the daughter of Leah whom she bore to Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land."

Nahum M. Sarna argues that the Hebrew root of "יָצָא" carries connotations of coquettish behavior or promiscuous sexual conduct.[8] Jacob Neusner similarly comments that when this verb is applied to women, it can imply prostitution.[9] Gordon Wenham notes that in *the Code of Hammurabi Law* §141, the Akkadian cognate *wasû* is used to describe a married woman who behaves improperly outside the home. Later Hebrew Bible Targums even translate "cult prostitute" as "one who goes out into the countryside."[10] Yet the fact that this verb sometimes carries negative connotations does not mean that it always does, nor does it require that the author of Genesis 34 intended a negative sense when using it in this passage.

A comprehensive examination of all occurrences of the verb "יָצָא" (to go out) in the Old Testament, specifically in the *Qal*

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8 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 233.

9 Jacob Jeusner, Genesis Rabbah: *The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis* (3 Vols.; Atlanta: Scholars, 1985), 146.

10 Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16—50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 310.

form when applied to women, shows that its usage can be classified as follows:

1) General and neutral usage.
   The verb "יָצָא" appears 1,068 times in the Bible, and, in most cases, it simply means "to go out," that is, to move from one place to another. This neutral sense also applies when the verb is used with regard to women. For example, Genesis 24:13 records women going out to draw water. In Exodus 15:20, Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. In such cases, "יָצָא" carries no implication of improper behavior. The verb is likewise used of Leah (Gen. 30:16), Dinah (Gen. 34:1), Jael (Judg. 4:18, 22), and Michal (2 Sam 6:20) without any necessary negative connotation.
2) Extended legal or social meanings.
   In some contexts, a woman's "going out" refers to divorce (Deut. 24:2). In other passages, it denotes release from slavery and the attainment of freedom (Exod. 21:3, 7, 11).
3) Association with prostitution (a rare case).
   The only instance in the Old Testament where "יָצָא" is explicitly connected with prostitution occurs in Proverbs. There, an adulterous woman is described as coming out to meet a young man: "Behold, a woman came out (יָצָא) to meet him, dressed as a prostitute, wily of heart" (Prov. 7:10). Similarly, she says, "So now I have come out (יָצָא) to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you" (Prov. 7:15).
4) Later rabbinic interpretations.
   Genesis Rabbah, a rabbinic commentary on

> Genesis composed between 300 and 500 CE, along with later commentators such as *Rashi*, draws a connection between Leah's "going out" (צָאָה) to meet Jacob—interpreted as a desire to sleep with him—and Dinah's going out. Such a linkage, however, lacks persuasive force. First, Leah's "going out" (צָאָה) to meet Jacob represents merely a preparatory act. Second, Leah was married to Jacob, and sexual relations with him were legitimate and appropriate. Leah's "going out" (צָאָה) is therefore not comparable to Dinah's "going out" (צָאָה). Nevertheless, Charles Aalders, in his 1981 commentary on Genesis, ventures an unwarranted speculation: "We may infer that Dinah was by nature eager to be seen by the men of that city… Dinah so recklessly exposed herself to the men of a pagan city… This fact makes Dinah's fault greater than that of anyone else involved."[11]

From the examples discussed above, it is evident that the verb "יָצָא" (to go out) most often does not imply, when applied to women, that they are engaged in unchaste sexual behavior or in the licentious practices of pagan ritual. The meaning depends entirely on what the woman is going out to do; when used with regard to women, the verb does not in itself necessarily carry a negative connotation.

In the past, many interpreters focused their attention on the question of whether Dinah should have gone out on her own.

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11 Charles Aalders, *Genesis* (*Vol.2* of Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 154,159.

Figures such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jerome[12] approached Genesis 34 primarily from a male perspective and in defense of male interests. John Calvin and others even held Dinah responsible for the ensuing massacre.[13] Martin Luther likewise regarded Dinah's going out as an act of disobedience toward her father.[14] More extreme still are interpretations that locate Dinah's "sin" in her alleged enjoyment of an illicit sexual relationship with Shechem.[15]

What these traditional exegetes perceived was not Dinah's suffering and trauma, but an opportunity to blame a vulnerable woman who had been subjected to sexual violence. To be sure, some interpreters expressed a measure of sympathy for Dinah, suggesting that her actions had been permitted by her parents and therefore shifting the blame to Jacob for allowing her to go out alone. Nevertheless, the dominant focus of traditional interpretation was not the harm inflicted upon Dinah, but the question of whether she ought to have gone out at all.

The ethical lessons from such readings generally fall into two categories. First, for the sake of safety, parents should

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12 Jerome, *Letter* CVII, 6, XXII.25; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 93. John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis* (ETJ, King, London: Banner of Truth, 1965, written 1554), 218. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Works*, 124—25; Ancrene Wisse, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, 68—69.

13 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Selected Works* (ed. G.R. Evans, New Yrok: Paulist, 1987, written 1125), 124. Ancrene Wisse, *Anchoritic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, A. Savage & N. Watson, 1991, written between 1200 and 1230), 68. John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis*, ed. J. King (London: Banner of Truth, 1965, written 1554), 218.

14 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (Vol.6, St Louis: Concordia & Philadelphia, 1986, written in 1542/43), 187—88.

15 J.A. Schroeder, "The Rape of Dinah: Luther's Interpretation of a Biblical Narrative," *Sixteenth Century Journal* XXVIII/3 (1997): 779—80; Genesis Rabbah LXXX: XI. *Genesis Rabbah* LXXX: XI.

ensure that their daughters remain at home. Second, women should avoid curiosity and refrain from going out alone, lest they be seen by men. While it may be conceded that, within the social context of the time, it was rather unwise or insufficiently cautious for Dinah, a young and beautiful girl, to venture into a foreign environment, we reject interpretations that portray her as deliberately provoking, or even deriving pleasure from, sexual violence.

From the examples discussed above, it is clear that when the verb "יָצָא" (to go out) is applied to women, it does not necessarily carry a negative meaning. In most cases, its use with reference to women does not imply blame or moral reproach; its significance depends entirely on what the woman is going out to do. The closest parallel within the tradition of male-centered interpretation is Proverbs 7:10, 15, where a prostitute is described as going out to entice men. Yet we know that Dinah went out in order to meet the local girls, not men.

In *Genesis Rabbah* and in later commentaries such as *Rashi*, the rabbis draw an analogy between Leah's "going out" and her subsequent sexual relations with Jacob, and on this basis infer a similar meaning for Dinah's going out. Such a connection, however, is unconvincing. First, it is inappropriate to associate Leah's behavior with prostitution, since she was lawfully married to Jacob. Second, Genesis 30:16 is not itself a narrative about sexual intercourse; although Leah proposes that she should lie with Jacob, her "going out" (צָאָה) functions only as a preliminary action. Third, Leah's "going out" (צָאָה) and Dinah's "going out" (צָאָה) are not comparable and should not be interpreted as carrying the same implications.

In the Old Testament period, it was not absolutely forbidden for women to go out on their own. Rebekah went out alone to draw water (Gen. 24:15), and Rachel likewise tended her father's sheep by herself (Gen. 29:9). At most, we may say that Dinah's lack of prudence lay in the fact that going out alone in a foreign land significantly increased the risks she faced.

When the two angels came to Sodom, the men of the city—from every quarter, young and old alike—surrounded the house and called to Lot, saying, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may do as we please" (Gen 19:5–6), precisely because these two angels were foreigners in Sodom. Similarly, the Levite's concubine was abused to death in Gibeah, a town inhabited by the Benjaminites, far from her own tribal territory (Judg. 19).

When Ruth returned with Naomi to settle in Bethlehem, Ruth was also an outsider, and her mother-in-law was aware of the risks she faced. Thus, the book of Ruth records Naomi's warning: "Yes, my daughter, it is better for you to stay close to Boaz's female servants; if you go to someone else's field, you might be harmed." (Ruth 2:22) This does not imply that going to another field would have been immoral for Ruth, but that it would have placed her in a dangerous situation. Dinah's circumstances may be compared to Ruth's at this point: when she and her family were living among a foreign people, the risks of going out were correspondingly heightened.

For this reason, the Old Testament places special emphasis on the virtue of hospitality toward strangers. Because Lot welcomed distant guests (the angels), his family was rescued when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. When

the Lord appeared to Abraham, Abraham likewise assumed they were travelers from afar. His sincerity and humility are deeply moving: he ran to meet them, bowed low to the ground, called himself their servant, brought water for them to wash their feet, instructed Sarah to prepare bread, selected a calf for the meal, and personally set a feast before them. It was precisely at this moment that God granted him a great promise—that his wife Sarah would bear a son (Gen. 18:1–15).

I agree that, within the social context of the time, it may not have been wise or sufficiently cautious for Dinah, a young and beautiful girl, to venture alone into a foreign environment. The only responsibility that can be attributed to her is that she went by herself into the territory of another people. Yet at that time she was merely a teenage girl, lacking social experience. This cannot serve as a reason to blame her. She was an innocent victim and deserves the sympathy of every one of us, not condemnation.

The history of interpretation of Genesis 34 has often proceeded from male perspectives and in the service of male interests. Dinah's going out on her own reflects her naivety rather than any moral flaw in her character. Moreover, the text never states that Dinah acted against her father's wishes, nor does it offer any rebuke of her for going out. This raises an important question: does the narrator of the story condemn Dinah at all? Traditional interpreters do so, yet in fact there is not a single sentence in this chapter that censures her. All words of blame are directed instead at Shechem. As the text states, "Shechem saw her, seized her, lay with her, and violated her" (Gen. 34:3). Shechem treated her as if she were a prostitute and violated her, yet the narrative nowhere suggests that Dinah's behavior was like that of a prostitute (cf. Gen. 34:31).

Did she know what would happen? Did she know that she would be raped? Did she know how her assailant would act, or how her brothers would later respond? Innocent and naïve, Dinah should in no way be held responsible for the massacre that followed. Traditional interpretations have failed to recognize that Dinah is first and foremost a victim.

III. Interpreting the Biblical Text: Attending to Dinah's Silence

1. Male-centered Narration and the Silencing of Dinah

The Bible is a divine book, yet it is also a human book. "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16–17). Because Scripture is inspired by God, we must acknowledge its transcendence and authority and cannot treat it as an ordinary book. The Holy Spirit exercised a supernatural influence upon the biblical authors, such that their writings possess a sacred character and thus provide instruction for faith and practice.

At the same time, Scripture cannot be separated from ancient historical contexts, linguistic conventions, geographical and cultural settings, or literary styles. Composed over approximately 1,600 years by around forty authors from different historical backgrounds, the Bible emerged within concrete human history and reflects the social conditions and cultural realities of its times. The formation of Scripture took place over a long period that was undeniably male-centered and male-dominated. Consequently, some biblical texts inevitably bear traces of patriarchal ideology.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that "the authors of the Bible were male, writing in male-centered language, reflecting male experience; the selection and transmission of the tradition were also carried out by male religious leaders, without questioning that the Bible is a male book."[16] This does not mean that Scripture intentionally excludes women; rather, it simply reflects the culture of its time and deeply rooted gender biases.[17] This view is not unique to Fiorenza but represents a consensus among feminist theologians.

With regard to the narrative of Genesis 34, it must be acknowledged that this is an account of a woman's sexual violation, yet it is told as a male-centered story. Without the defilement of Dinah, none of the subsequent events would have occurred. Dinah is the central figure of the entire episode; nevertheless, the passage is not truly her story. Rather, it is the story of her father, the story of her brothers, and even the story of the rapist.[18]

The biblical text itself offers no description of the personal harm Dinah suffered, nor of the physical, emotional, and spiritual pain she endured. In this sense, the text is silent concerning Dinah's own experience. Instead, the narrative focuses on the reactions of the men—those who were not themselves directly violated. These men speak on behalf of a victim such as Dinah, while Dinah, as a woman, has no right

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16 A. Thistleton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1992), 442—43.

17 C. Exum, "Murder They Wrote: Ideology and the Manipulation of Female Presence in Biblical Narrative" in *The Pleaseure of Her Text* (ed. A. Bach, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 59.

18 Ita Sheres, *Dinah's Rebellion: A Biblical Parable for Our Time* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 94; Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 47.

to enter the male-dominated negotiations and conversations, nor does she have the capacity to challenge the narrow, patriarchal understandings of sexual violence prevailing at the time. Her own voice and feelings are submerged and erased.[19]

This leaves readers of Genesis 34 with pressing questions: how are we to address and correct the imbalance of patriarchal dominance embedded in the biblical text? How can Dinah's silence be broken? In other words, how can this experience be narrated from the perspective of Dinah herself, as a victim? Biblical scholars have offered differing answers to these questions.

2. Sternberg's Narrator-Centered Hermeneutic

Among biblical scholars, Meir Sternberg represents a negative response to this question. In his highly influential work *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, he articulates a key exegetical principle: correct interpretation of the Bible is exceedingly difficult as readings tend to be insufficient, excessive, or simply mistaken. Readings marked by ignorance, obstinacy, presuppositions, or ideological bias may display imaginative ingenuity, but they inevitably distort the text. By contrast, following the biblical narrator without critical deviation at least allows the reader to grasp, to an acceptable degree, the

19 Ulrike Bail, "The Breath after the Comma: Psalm 55 and Violence Against Women," Journal of Religion and Abuse 1(1999): 7; Esther Fuchs, Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Women (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 219.

world being presented; this, for Sternberg, constitutes the core task of interpretation. [20]

Accordingly, Sternberg is skeptical of any interpretive approach that does not proceed from the perspective of the biblical narrator. In Genesis 34, although Dinah is the central figure of the story, the biblical text remains silent about her. It offers no description of her suffering after the rape, nor does it recount her thoughts or future prospects. Sternberg argues that interpreters must simply accept this silence as maintained by the text itself—even though it reflects a male perspective and a patriarchal understanding of sexual violence and its conventions.[21]

If interpreters find such perspectives disturbing, Sternberg contends, they must nevertheless accept them, since they are products of a particular social and historical context; the only consolation available to contemporary readers is that society has since progressed.[22] If readers still refuse to accept this and persist in seeking to break Dinah's silence and recover her voice, Sternberg maintains that their only option is to abandon biblical interpretation altogether and invent an alternative text of their own.[23]

In short, Sternberg's exegetical approach can be summarized as follows: we should understand what the Bible says, and where the Bible is silent, we too should remain silent.

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20 Meir Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading (Bloomingtong: Indiana University Press ,1985), 50—51.

21 Meir Sternberg, "Biblical Poetics and Sexual Politics: From Reading to Counter-reading," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992):436—488.

22 Ibid., 480.

23 Ibid., 481.

Undoubtedly, this approach is faithful to the biblical text and represents the safest method of interpretation.

Genesis 34 clearly differentiates among the perspectives of Jacob, his sons, Shechem, Hamor, and the men of the city of Shechem. Sternberg demonstrates how the narrator skillfully weaves together the various voices of different characters and guides readers toward a particular way of understanding the story. This means that the narrator himself also has a perspective and a voice and seeks to draw readers into sharing his viewpoint.

Should we then equate the narrator's voice with the voice of God? Sternberg argues that the narrator's voice is in fact analogous to that of a prophet and can therefore be identified with the voice of God.[24] This claim, however, is open to question. Even if Sternberg is correct to an extent, from a canonical perspective, God's will cannot be fully disclosed through the voice of a single narrator, even if that narrator is able to reflect God's intentions in part. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are diverse and multi-perspectival in their approaches to events. No single account can exhaust moral and theological meaning; rather, multiple perspectives are brought together in dynamic interaction.

God speaks to God's people through Scripture, yet we cannot claim that any one biblical narrator has spoken all that is valuable or has encompassed the totality of God's will. God addresses God's people through the whole of Scripture, not through one isolated passage. Each part of Scripture is revealed by God within its original context and conveys God's intention in that setting. At the same time, when these

24 Ibid., 117.

parts interact with one another within the canon, they are reconfigured and mutually interpretive. Consequently, any given passage exercises authority for the church only when it is read within its own context and in relation to the broader canonical witness.

3. Beyond Sternberg: Integrating Reader-Oriented and Feminist Approaches

With the development of the times and the diversification of exegetical approaches, an increasing number of biblical scholars have proposed alternative perspectives. Broadly speaking, contemporary biblical interpretation may be divided into two approaches.

The first is an inside–out approach. Methods commonly used today—such as historical and cultural background studies, analysis of the original languages, archaeology, and literary or rhetorical criticism—are all aimed at answering the question: What does the biblical text itself seek to communicate? What was the author's intention? This is, essentially, the exegetical approach upheld by Sternberg.

The second is an outside–in approach, which reads the text through one's own experiences and social location. Because readers differ in identity, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and social class, their perceptions and insights when reading Scripture also differ. One's personal experiences inevitably shape how one reads and understands the text. Approaches such as feminist interpretation and reader-response criticism exemplify this mode of reading. Seeking the intention of the biblical author must always remain the primary task of the interpreter, yet interpretation does not end there. To an extent, the perspective of the biblical author reflects God's will, but it does not exhaust the totality

of God's will. The biblical author is not identical with God. While the author conveys a particular viewpoint through a given passage, God may intend to reveal more through that same text. Consequently, different readers may receive different insights and illumination from the same passage.

The narrator of Genesis 34 may be speaking directly or indirectly from the perspective of a particular community—perhaps from the viewpoint of the inhabitants of Shechem, or from that of Jacob and his sons, or from the perspectives of Shechem himself or others. Each perspective yields a different story, and each story has its own rationale. This inevitably affects the selection of material and the organization of the narrative. Because of differing focal points, every narrator intentionally downplays certain characters while emphasizing others. The marginalization of Dinah as a character does not imply that the rape was insignificant; she is, in fact, the greatest victim of the event. Rather, it indicates that the narrator's focus lies elsewhere. The absence of Dinah's perspective does not mean that her experience is unimportant, nor that it was irrelevant to the author, but that it was not central to the narrator's thematic concerns. We should not conclude that the voice of a rape victim is unimportant simply because it is not directly articulated in the text.

When we read Scripture cross-textually or intertextually, a clearer understanding emerges. The situation most comparable to Dinah's is the account of Tamar, the daughter of David, who was violated by Amnon; both were unbetrothed young women. In 2 Samuel 13:13, we see vividly the pain and helplessness of a raped woman. The narrative exposes the deep trauma caused by sexual violence: "Where could I carry my shame?" (2 Sam 13:13). "Sending me away would be a greater wrong than what you

have already done" (2 Sam 13:16). "Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe she was wearing; she put her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went" (2 Sam 13:19).

4. Reconstructing Dinah's Experience

In ancient Israel, the most viable future for a violated woman was often to marry her assailant, since a non-virgin was unlikely to marry otherwise. Thus, for many women, marriage to the rapist was regarded as the least disastrous outcome. This is why Deuteronomy contains specific laws to protect violated young women: "If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, seizes her and lies with her, and they are discovered, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman's father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her, he may not divorce her as long as he lives" (Deut 22:28–29). Fifty shekels of silver was a substantial sum at the time. Although it is difficult to calculate its modern equivalent, some scholars estimate that the annual wage of an Israelite man was about thirty shekels. The significance of this amount is underscored by the fact that David purchased Araunah's threshing floor and oxen for fifty shekels of silver in order to build an altar and stop the plague (2 Sam 24:24).

Another protective measure in the law is the prohibition against divorcing the violated woman for life, implying a lifelong obligation of provision. In the Old Testament context, where patriarchy prevailed and women generally lacked independent means of subsistence, divorce was common and often left a woman without livelihood.

After Dinah was raped, the biblical text remains silent about her personal experience. Yet through related texts,

readers can sense how horrific rape is, and they are inevitably led to think about Dinah. God is compassionate and merciful toward violated women; their situation is one of extreme suffering. In such circumstances, marriage to the assailant was often considered the most viable outcome. After Shechem raped Dinah, she would have been fearful and traumatized; thus Shechem spoke tenderly to her to comfort her (Gen 34:3) and promised to care for her. For Dinah, marriage represented the best possible future, which explains why she remained in Shechem's house awaiting marriage. The narrative presents a compromised yet pragmatic resolution.

In contrast to Shechem, who sought to compensate for his wrongdoing, Dinah's brothers acted aggressively. They were concerned only with their own honor, not with Dinah's well-being. They failed to recognize Shechem's attempt at restitution and did not consider how their vengeance would destroy Dinah's future. They did not ask what would truly be best for her. Against her will, they removed her from Shechem's house and killed her repentant fiancé.

This is precisely why we must reconstruct Dinah's situation, give voice to her experience, and refuse to allow her to remain forever silent.

Conclusion: Reading the Text Toward Justice

Sternberg maintains that we need only interpret Scripture in accordance with the intention and guidance of the biblical narrator, and that where the biblical author remains silent, we too should remain silent. With regard to acts of sexual violence, he suggests that interpreters and readers may find consolation in the fact that, since biblical times, human

understanding of sexual violence has made considerable progress.

Feminist interpreters, however, argue that we should not remain complacent, for much more progress is still needed. Without reinterpreting the biblical texts, further advancement is unlikely. Substantial evidence indicates that even today the experiences of many women who have been raped continue to be silenced, and their suffering is still denied. From the past to the present, there have been countless sisters like Dinah who have had no opportunity to articulate their pain, grief, and anger. The trauma they endure through sexual violence is either reinterpreted through patriarchal narratives that dominate society or suppressed altogether.

Therefore, as interpreters of the biblical text, when we encounter stories in which women are ignored, silenced, oppressed, or sacrificed, our task is not limited to interpreting what is explicitly written. The gaps and silences within the text themselves also demand interpretation. In this way, we do not merely seek comfort in the progress that human society has already achieved; rather, we are called to become active participants in fostering further progress within human society.

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Women's Status in the Church and the Patriarchal Narrative of Sin (Gen. 2:15–3:24)

从始祖犯罪叙事（创 2:15-3:24）反思女性在教会中的位分

LI WENYAN 李文燕

Abstract. Is Eve the mother of all beings, or is she the culprit who introduced sin to the human race? In the church, are women subordinate to men, are they equal to men, or are they now enjoying a higher status because there are more females than males? These issues are viewed with different perspectives in the church. Given China's social progress, women's educational levels have advanced, and their participation in business, trade, scientific research, and management have risen, so that their contributions are now more visible and appreciated. Additionally, the church's own understanding of women's status has changed. Women have gradually garnered more attention in the church, and more efforts have been made to enable them to play an active role in the church's growth. In both worship and service, women and men are unified in Christ, manifesting the life of Christ and serving as one of the foundations of church unity. Women and men in the church should thus enjoy the same status, even though the division of labor and talents may be different. Men and women, male or female, are united in love, in addition to living out the uniqueness that God created for each one of us.

Keywords: Eve; female; church; gender; original sin; patriarchy.

1. Introduction

Gender issues do not seem to be the primary issue in today's society, yet they appear in different forms across a wide range of social issues. In Christian churches, gender issues certainly exist. Believers from different eras and cultures have had their own different interpretations of gender issues in the Church. "Male superiority and female inferiority are widespread in human communities, with many women being oppressed and restricted by androcentric socio-cultural systems (or patriarchies) in which women are more often seen as ignorant and weak, needing to be protected and led by men."[1] And that, indeed, is the stereotypical view of women in the Bible.

What is considered as *the* Biblical view of women will definitely have a direct impact on the views regarding women by people in the church. One of the ideas that have made the rounds is that "women should *not* be leaders and *especially*, leaders of the church, but should be relegated to the back row." One male elder reasoned that "After all, it was Eve who first sinned and induced Adam to sin, so how can such a woman lead a church well?" This leads me to ponder about the position of women in the church: is this view due to the fact that the first Eve sinned, or was it influenced by a patriarchal culture? Did God originally create a man and a woman, with the woman as an equal or as a subordinate? What roles should women play in the life of the church? What positions should women be given in the church? Starting with Old Testament theology, this article will attempt to discuss the position of women in the church through an analysis of the original meaning of Genesis 2:15-3:24, taking into account the cultural background of the Middle

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1 Yang Keqin, *Eve, the Earth, and God*, Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2008, 3.

East and the religious background of the Israelites in the Old Testament, followed by a reflection on the contemporary church and how women's place in it should be viewed. The theme will be approached using textual analysis, beginning with the meaning of the original text and followed by a brief analysis of how this passage should be understood in its original context.

2. Scriptural Background

2.1 Ancient Middle Eastern Culture

In anthropomorphic depictions of God, the use of the masculine "he" is uncontroversial, but when someone uses the feminine "she", it causes a panic reaction. In other words, it is very much taken for granted that God is masculine and it is unsettling to have God described as a female. To trace the roots of the masculine image of the Godhead, one must return to the religions behind the monotheistic beliefs of Jewish patriarchal society which tended to treat the female deity as an equal of male deities or even ranked her as the dominant deity. In pre-agricultural societies, rather than raising animals or tending to plants, early humans relied entirely on the natural resources of the land for their survival. As such, the woman, who was capable of conceiving, was regarded as the center of the human capacity for survival.[2] The worship of the goddess was based on the illusion of the power and the source of life on which humans depended.

The Bible mainly describes the image of God in a masculine way, and the reason for this is that in the

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2 Yang Haqin and Leung Shuzhen, translators, Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*. Hong Kong: Tao Feng Books, 2004. 62.

pantheistic culture of the earth, the goddess is seen as the bearer of the gods. In the Mediterranean region, during the Old Testament period, the Israelites were unique in having a monotheistic faith. After the conquest of Canaan, their monotheistic belief neither conquered nor assimilated the goddesses in the minds of the Canaanites. On the contrary, for the Israelites, Yahweh was purely a substitute for Baal, as the husband of the goddess.....Asherah was worshipped alongside Yahweh ....The common caves of the Israelites show that the symbols of Yahweh and the goddess are placed together.[3] It was in this context that the Old Testament emerged, and it was in this context that Old Testament writers had to counter and oppose this phenomenon. Of course, this is not to say that biblical writers could not conceive of God as feminine, but that paganism often used feminine language to speak of the inner qualities of the goddess, and there is ample evidence in their religious environment that the feminine language of God leads to a fundamental distortion of God's nature and relationship with his creation. Biblical writers deliberately avoided using feminine words to express 'God' when they wrote.

2.2 The Jewish concept of the Old Testament

The Eden crime narrative is often cited as one of the grounds for women's inferior ranking, and "the story of Eden has had a deep religious influence on the suppressed status of women."[4] In the traditional understanding of Judaism and Christianity, men were created first, then women were created, and being created later indicates the inferiority of her position. Because Eve sinned first, and because she then

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3 Ruether, *op.cit*. 69.

4 Nangong Meifang, *Women in the Bible: The Text and Unspoken Text of Genesis*, Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2012. 51.

tempted Adam to sin, she became the "perpetrator of sin."

Professor Shu Ye has argued that men and women are often unequal in their relationship with God, and that women are often separated from God by men, and that the relationship pattern of "God-male-female" runs throughout the Bible. In Adam and Eve's conversation with God after they had sinned, it was always Adam who was speaking to God, and Eve was described as hiding behind Adam's back. In the religious affairs of the Israelites, the men had made a covenant with God through the practice of circumcision so that only the men were responsible for all aspects of religious work, while the sacrifices were required to be "communal." The absence of an equivalent religious ritual for a woman indicated that she had no place in religious affairs and that her relationship with God would always be separate from that of men. To make matters worse, the Bible often juxtaposed wives and concubines with cattle and sheep, and other possessions, indicating that women were practically indistinguishable from livestock.[5]

3. Textual Analysis

3.1 The meaning of the original text

3.1.1 To Help (Gen. 2:18, 20)

Some think that God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone, and I will make him a spouse to *help* him." (Gen. 2:15–3:24) In a word, women are destined to be men's helpers and men's subordinates, occupying a lower and inferior position to men. The original Hebrew word "help" or *ezer* (עֵזֶר) means "to support" or "to help." Although this

5 Shu Ye, *Cultural Interpretation of the Bible*, Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2010, 65-69.

word refers to help, it is more commonly used in specific meanings, and mostly in reference to helpers.[6] In the context of the original Hebrew text, the word is regarded as describing an equal rather than a dependent, or a subordinate relationship, and it is not about human identity but about human interrelationship.

"Helper" is not a woman's identity, but the nature of her service, which means that she is not a competitor, nor a bystander, but a human who complements and becomes one with another. Of all the things God has created, God says "it's not good" only when it comes to men living alone, and the first bad thing in the world is "living alone." From this point of view, of course, it is not that women are inferior in creation. Is it not true then, that women are helpers only because men are born with a defect—living in solitude—and it is only when women came that they could form a complete life? So, women and men are equal.[7] The term "helper" is also often used in the Old Testament to describe God's help to the Israelites (e.g. in Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7 ; Psalm 33:20,115:9-11,124:8). If this word is interpreted as "subordinate assistant," it contradicts the intent of the Old Testament. "Help is not inherently inferior—it is given only when the person being helped is unable to do something with which he needs help. In essence, there is no distinction between men and women, only in the order.[8] The "helper" is basically a description of the one who provides for a man's lack and can help him do what he cannot do alone. Thus the

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6 *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology*, Taipei: Chung Hwa Evangelical Theological Seminary Press, 1995, 746.

7 Lu Yang and Pan Chaowei, *Cultural Interpretation of Bible*, Shanghai: Fudan University Press 2008, 32-33.

8 Kwong Ping-chiu, *Genesis—The God of Creation and Salvation (Vol. I)*, Hong Kong: Mingdaoshe, 2014, 85.

man is created to need the help of his partner and spouse.[9]

The original meaning of "in his presence": Some scholars translate it as "being on par with him," arguing that the spouse should be on par with him in mental, physical, and spiritual aspects. The spouse of the helper can be translated as "partner" or "matched," that is, the verse can be translated as "I will make for him a helper who matches him."

3.1.2 The Rib (Genesis 2:21)

The woman God created was made from a rib taken from Adam's body. Scholars believe that the Bible provides a theory of the origin of humanity which consists in the narrative of the female originating from the male, explaining the origin of the woman as being created from a rib of the man, thus declaring the woman to be subordinate to the man, to be 'taken from the man,' to be of the man.

Part of sex: Seen in this way, women naturally lose their independence and become subordinate and subservient to men.[10] The word *sela* means "side" in the original text, and the two "sides" of the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:12) and the "face" of the tabernacle (Exodus 26:20) share the same root, with its second meaning as "rib." While Adam was sleeping, God took out a "rib" and created the woman, which means: "God took the good part of Adam's body, because he called the woman his 'bone of bones and flesh of flesh.' This depicts the intimacy of men and women when they are in equal positions before God. A woman is not only an

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9 Alan Roth, *Creation and Blessing: Commentary and Information on Genesis*, trans. Sun Yili and Guo Xiujuan, Taipei: Campus Book Press, 2001,155 pages.

10 Cf. Shu Ye, *Cultural Interpretations of the Bible*, 65.

extension of the man, she also has personal rights, and the Bible never says that she is inferior.[11]

We are not sure what kind of organ Adam's 'side' refers to, but the point is that he and Eve were equal, and that the closest thing to his heart was what the Israelites considered to be love. As Henry Matthew said, God did not take a piece of bone from Adam's head to make Eve, lest she have dominion over him; nor did he take a bone from his foot, lest he trample her. God takes out the woman from his 'side' meaning she is equal to him and under his arms, that is, under his protection. The heart that is near to him is loved by him."[12] It refers to the body: "bone" that symbolizes strength and does not disappear easily, and "flesh" that emphasizes intimate relationships. The body that comes out of the body is "bone within bones, flesh within flesh," referring to unbreakable intimacy. It also signifies Adam's lifelong commitment to Eve, whether it is strong (bone) or still weak (flesh), they shall be together, and will not be separated until death. "Woman" is Adam's name for Eve, and the word "woman" is very similar to the word "man" and "woman" in the original word "man." There is the same emphasis that the two have a close relationship and are equal.

3.1.3 Why did the serpent tempt Eve first?

It is generally believed that the serpent that seduced Eve was used by Satan: the serpent itself did not speak to seduce people, it was Satan. Although the serpent was close to Eve, it was Satan himself who actually spoke and seduced people. The Jewish historian Josephus (37CE-100CE) pointed out

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11 *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology*, 870.

12 Kwong Bingzhao, *Genesis (Volume 1)*, Hong Kong: Tiandao Library, 1997. 206.

that when the serpent saw Adam and Eve living happy and God-fearing lives, it became jealous. Surmising that they would not be so happy if they became disobedient to God, it persuaded the woman to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. [13]

But why did the devil approach Eve in the first place and tempted her? Augustine's view on this is that "[the devil] in seducing the woman, was attacking the weak link in the union of men and women in order to overcome the whole. Satan surmised that men would not easily listen to him or be deceived, but that men would willingly submit to women's faults.[14] Of course, the woman had not yet been created at the time of the prohibition—the woman only received the command not to eat the forbidden fruit indirectly from Adam. Among the many explanations of why Eve was seduced, the author agrees with two of those listed by Kwong Ping-chiu: First, the text deliberately omits explaining *why* the serpent tempted Eve in order to make people feel the irrationality of sinning (especially the righteous or spiritual.) People sin without any apparent reason, and fall if they are not careful. Second, in omitting to explain *why* the serpent tempted Eve, the writer shows a preference for having the reader focus on *how* to face temptation so that the devil's inducements can be better confronted.[15]

Many have blamed Eve for bringing sin into the world and passing it on to future generations. "Women are seen as the initiators of human sin and are often cited as the source

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13 Flavius Josephus, *Ancient Jewish History (Episode 1) in Antiquities of the Jews (Vol. I)* trans. Su Meiling, Hong Kong: Christian Tianren Press, 1975, 2-3.

14 Liu Wenming, *God and Women: Western Women from the Perspective of Traditional Christian Culture*, Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 2003, 71

15 Kwong Ping-chiu, *Genesis—The God Who Created and Saved*, vol. 1, 110.

of inequality between men and women in the church.[16] In early Israelite societies, which were strongly patriarchal, no records of women were kept in family histories. Women were not allowed to appear in public, nor were they allowed to participate in rituals, and so on. But here, in the opening of chapter 3 of the Torah, the Jewish text mentions a woman: so, even though she was seduced, Eve was given mention. It is also on record that the man (Adam) ate the forbidden fruit as well. The Chinese Union Version (CUV) of the bible does not say that Adam was present when Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and many interpreters believe that Adam was not present or he would have prevented Eve from sinning.

However, in the Revised Version of the CUV, the phrase "again to her husband" based on the CUV Bible is revised to "And to the husband who was with her." According to the Hebrew Bible, in the original text there is a preposition "with" plus the third-person pronoun "her" in the structure that means "with her." The Vulgate Translation omits this prepositional structure, leading to the inference that her husband did not appear until after she had eaten the fruit. Mainstream English translations of the 19th century deepened this assumption, leading to the dominant view that women sinned first.[17]

The original text and root word in Hebrew עִמָּהּ and עִם means "and, inside, in the middle, accompanied, from, in between." In this word: (a) The basic concepts expressed are: "fellowship, companionship, sharing weal and woe, etc." (b) This character can emphasize the common destiny, regardless of social status or geographical location; (c) Like all other prepositions, the word can have a specific theological meaning. All prepositions cover some kind of

16 Lin Peiquan, "Adam Was Always Present—A Study of the Meaning of Words in Genesis 3:1-7." *Jinling Theological Journal*, No. 4, 2020, 134.

17 Ibid., 133.

relationship, but with a special emphasis on intimacy which should be maintained between God and man and between humans, because it is necessary for the salvation and eternal life of all people, as well as for the worship and service of God.[18] From this point of view, the evidence of Adam's presence is conclusive, so if Eve sinned first, and in doing so lowered the status of women, then Adam who was present would be to blame.

3.3 God's judgment after Eve's sin (Genesis 3:16).

When God found Adam and Eve after they had sinned, and asked them why they had eaten from the tree, they were no longer as close as they had been—in the bone, and in the flesh—but had experienced some estrangement. Adam blamed his wife directly for his sin, and when they saw that they were naked, they were ashamed and covered themselves with the leaves of a fig tree. Sin not only broke their relationship with God, but it also brought Adam and Eve, who had sinned together, out of intimacy. What is more important is that death had come to them, and they had lost the opportunity for eternal life. In God's judgment on Eve alone, two things can be observed:

1. The Pain of Pregnancy and Childbirth:
When God prepared to create humankind, He not only intended for them to guard and manage the world He had created, but also for them to be fruitful and multiply. At that time, He did not mention the pain that childbirth would involve. However, after the woman had sinned, pregnancy and childbirth, which were originally women's natural duty, transformed into a source of suffering for women.

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18 *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology*, 766.

Motherhood is a glory God bestows upon women, but women must endure pain to achieve it.

In addition to the pain of conceiving and giving birth, Eve's relationship with Adam also underwent subtle changes. When God brought the woman He had created to Adam, he said, "This is the bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, that I may call her woman." When Adam first saw his wife, he had called her "woman," because she was his bones and his flesh. But after they had sinned, Adam named his wife "Eve" because she was the mother of all human beings. "Woman" changed from being Adam's woman to "Eve," the mother of all.

2. Lust and Domination.

Nangong Meifang interprets "You will lust for your husband, and your husband will rule over you" in the following manner: A devastating blow was inflicted on the woman's initiative, and the woman's sexuality and desire were forcibly set aside under the jurisdiction of men.[19] Women are emotionally conditioned, and women's desires are placed under the control of men and subordinate to men. The domination of man over woman destroys the unity and harmony of husband and wife when God first created it, and becomes a gender hierarchy of obedience and subjugation. This was largely the case with the ancient Hebrews' understanding of the relationship between men and women and their basic orientation towards women, which became the ideological roots of the narrative on women in the later parts of the Bible."[20]

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19 Nangong Meifang, *Women in the Bible: The Text and Unspoken Text of Genesis*, 90. 南宫梅芳:《圣经中的女性:〈创世记〉的文本与潜文本》第90页。

20 Zhao Jianmin, ed., *Essays on Catholic Studies (3rd Edition, 2006)*, Beijing: Religious Culture Publishing House, 2006, 309.

In the original text, "love" or *ahava* תְּשׁוּקָה in Hebrew, neither emphasizes nor distorts the innate difference in position between men and women because this distinction is not mentioned here. This word is the same as the word "love" mentioned in Song of Songs 7:10, which refers to a wife who loves her husband, and in the Song of Songs it refers to a husband who loves his wife.[21]

Therefore, it is not very convincing to define the term "affection" as a sign that Eve's status was lower than Adam's. It is usually translated as "rule" or "administration," and is interpreted here as follows: Eve, on behalf of all wives and children, must understand that her position in the family is that her husband "will rule over you." This leadership means giving the family to a man, and although the way of leadership varies greatly from household to family, it is appropriate in itself.[22] In the New Testament it is said that "the husband is the head of the wife" (Ephesians 5:23), but the husband, as a leader, should not oppress his wife, but rather love his wife as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25).

4. Reflections on the Role of Women in the Church

If the biblical concept of the value of women's existence is understood as deriving from the ribs of men and that women are intended to be men's auxiliaries, then women's mission is only to serve men. Man is then the eternal subject, the primary one, and the protagonist, while the woman is the immutable object, the secondary one, and the other. Under the influence of patriarchal culture, a standard pattern of behavior has been set for women—the other— to complete the tasks that belong to the object. However, it would be

21 *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology*, 1037.

22 Ibid. 603.

totally biased to continue regarding women as objects dependent on men, rather than as independent individuals and subjects.

(1) Beware of the culprit of crime

The ancient Father Tertullian exclaimed: "Woman, so that you do not forget, you are making mankind go to what is perishing. You must always live with tears of repentance in your eyes, with begging eyes, with sorrowful faces, and in rags. Woman! You deserve to go to hell!" [23] He also said: "Woman, you are the devil's gate, and you have persuaded him that even the devil does not dare to attack him directly. Because of you, the son of the Emperor had to die. Thou shalt mourn forever, and thou shalt be ragged forever."[24] Based on the Patriarch's narrative text on sin, Eve was created to help Adam, but the first scene in which she appears is one in which she has a dialogue with the serpent, not only "eating" [the apple] herself, but also "helping Adam to eat it." As such, we should be wary of women who "help" others to sin, but still, Tertullian's words are too intense.

Ancient Israelite authors steeped in the worship of pagan goddesses, were bound to react to paganism when they wrote about their culture of faith. When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was "pleasing to the eye, and brings wisdom to humans," she plucked it, ate it, and gave it to her husband.

In the search for the voice of the goddess of wisdom, the Israelite author protests against the goddess and against man's desire to find wisdom in himself. In fact, throughout

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23 Liu Wenming, *God and Women: Western Women in the Perspective of Traditional Christian Culture*, Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 2003, 1.

24 Liu Yong, "The Christian View of Women from the Compilation of the Bible," *Foreign Chinese (Bimonthly)*, 2011 April, 100.

the ancient Near East, the goddess was wisdom, the woman's quest for wisdom was often found in other myths, and the woman was a strong religious symbol — she represented the wisdom of life and was sought after.[25] But women, who were bent on wisdom, were given the "shame" of being naked. The author's purpose in recording that women sinned first was to show that the goddess worshipped by the "alien race" was the culprit of sin. Instead of giving wisdom and life, the goddess brought sin upon mankind, and in this way the Israelite audience was made to understand that Jehovah alone is the only true God. The author wanted to show his readers that women could not find wisdom on their own, nor could they represent it. And the appearance of God shows that wisdom comes from God and lies in God, not from man's own pursuit. This understanding echoes the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

The account of the crime narrative is not intended to condemn all women or to see them as the curse of men, but to show us how sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, and that Adam and Eve were both guilty in this matter. After the Fall, they reacted by having reservations about one another and covering themselves with the leaves of the fig tree. The man did not take on responsibility but blamed the woman, who then blamed the snake. They show a kind of collaboration on the crime narrative, which of course is negative.

(2) Not confrontation, but mutual assistance

In this article we are not only talking about women in terms of the gender concept, but also at the group and social levels, which are differentiated from each other. The following

25 Wong Wai-Ching, *Gender Consciousness and Biblical Interpretation*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Society, 2000, 18.

quote may give us a glimpse of the Confucian attitude towards women where he excluded women from the ranks of "gentlemen" and put them in the company of "villains." The Confucian text 子曰：唯女子与小人难养也。近之则不逊，远之则怨.[26] can be translated as: The Master said: 'Of all people, women and servants [or petty people/villains] are the most difficult to manage. If you are close to them, they become impudent [or lose their reserve]; if you keep them at a distance, they complain [or become resentful].

The church adds to this the argument that "you will lust" and "he will rule." It can be seen that these two phrases do not express longing that leads to losing oneself or becoming a stumbling block, nor that it deprives women's independence through men's control. However, it is undeniable that this was not a blessing but God's judgment on Eve. In God's punishment, not only did the woman have to endure the pain of pregnancy, but the originally harmonious relationship with the man was also transformed into women's submission to men. We must, however, not assume that men and women in the church today are still in this predicament: that men continue to be self-righteous and oppress women; and that by a woman's silent acceptance of a lowly position, she continues to maintain the "fallen order" and ignores the power of the gospel. Both men and women should actively pursue "compound" relationships and strive to build an equitable and harmonious society.[27] The oppression of women reflects a "fallen order"— the product of the inferiority of men and women in a socio-cultural context which is not an order created by God in the

26 Editor's note: The quote is found in Analects 17:25 in the Yang Huo chapter and is considered one of the most notoriously cited examples of a patriarchal or misogynistic attitude within early Confucianism.

27 Cf. He Xiaoxin, ed., *A Preliminary Study of Chinese Women's Theology,* 93.

first place. In this case, the people who are now in the "new order" that is based on the gospel should get rid of it. The "old" order is the suppressed order. It requires that both the oppressed—the inferior and the repressed—the male and the oppressive, take the initiative to transform their status and work together towards a new order of reconciliation and equality, just as the church submits to Christ who loves the church.

Readers familiar with the Old Testament will find that female figures are often silent and ignored in the Old Testament, as in the case of the humiliation of Dinah (Gen. 34), which records the reactions of Shechem, Shechem's father, Jacob, and Dinah's brother, but did not mention the protagonist's pain and choice. "The absence of women in texts and history is itself a product of the selection and canonization of the Bible in its encounter with 'patriarchal tendencies.'[28] But in the third chapter of the Torah, the first chapter of human history, Eve's speeches, thoughts, and actions are recorded in a relatively large amount of ink. In this way, the author is deliberately giving a female voice to a group where women's voices are missing.

(3) Women's participation in church ministry

Women's participation in the ministry of the church is inevitably related to many factors of the times. "Since the introduction of Protestantism into China in the mid-19th century, the establishment and development of the Chinese church has always been restricted and influenced by cultural, political, economic and other factors under specific historical conditions. In the context of the Chinese Church

28 Elizabeth Shushina Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of the Origins of Christianity*, trans. Song Xuhong, Hong Kong: Daofeng Publishing House, 2016, 129.

the trends in women's ministry have been influenced by various conditions and factors both inside and outside the Church and their mutual relations, and is closely related to contemporary social history and the development of the Church itself, giving it a distinct historical imprint." [29]

At the first plenary meeting of the first committee of the China Christian Council held in Nanjing on October 14, 1980, 17 of the 140 members were women. Bishop K.H. Ting was the president, two of the nine vice-presidents were women (Ms. Shi Ruzhang and Ms. Jiang Peifen), and Ms. Wu Yifang was elected honorary chairman of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee of the Protestant Churches of China. This shows that the Chinese Church had already begun to attach importance to the understanding of women's status.[30]

In October 1999, 378 female pastors had been ordained across the country, with 370 ordinations taking place after the 'Cultural Revolution.' Ordained women pastors thus accounted for 97% of the total number of female pastors. Since 378 women pastors comprised 24% of the total number of pastors, one could say that more than one in five pastors in the country was a woman. Apart from that, the vast majority of female elders (415) and female teachers (498 associate pastors) in the country, have been ordained in the past two decades, with women evangelists (unordained) numbering 1,239. By the year 2000, the proportion of female students in seminaries and schools had increased and had exceeded 50% in some institutions. In eighteen seminaries, besides having two female presidents, more than one-third

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29 Gao Ying, "A Brief Discussion on the Ministry of Women in the Chinese Church," *Jinling Theological Journal*, No. 3, 2000, 50.

30 Cf. China Study Group, "The Situation of Chinese Women in the Church in China," *Lutheran World Federation Press*, 1997, 144. Gao Ying, op.cit, 53.

of the teachers were women.[31] When the new leadership of the National CCC&TSPM was elected on 21 December 2023, two out of the nine vice-chairmen were women, and one out of the nine Vice-Presidents was a woman. On March 26-29, 2024, at the "Training Conference of the Publicity Team for the Construction of Chinese Christian Theological Thought," besides representation from the National Committees of the CCC and the TSPM, Jinling Union Seminary and other seminaries, there were 151 staff members from 30 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions, that included 48 women. However, there were only male participants sent from 13 of the provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions.

Since the end of the last century, the rise in the absolute number of women in the church has been significant, both in church ministry and in church leadership teams. But we still cannot clearly conclude that women pastors enjoy the same level of acceptance as male pastors in the church. In some churches, female clergy are only allowed to administer the sacraments when a male priest is unavailable. There are also churches that accept the ordination of women as priests, but do not allow them to administer the sacraments. Some believers are more inclined to invite male pastors to officiate at weddings or memorial services. Given this perspective, and taking the community of female pastors as an example, the reflection on women's position in the church indicates that there are still practices in the current context that are outdated and should be given serious attention.

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31 Gao Ying, "A Brief Discussion on the Ministry of Women in the Chinese Church" in *Jinling Theological Journal*, No. 3, 2000. 53.

5. Conclusion

Women must play an indispensable role in the construction and development of the church's ministries. The rapid development of the church has also led to an increase in the demand for talents in the church, and the willingness of women to serve. Besides, the further training and equipping of women in the church have increased the opportunities for women to participate in the church. Women can be seen in a variety of service positions, from the senior pastor of a church to a group leader, showing the importance and equal treatment of women in churches today. Given the demands of a growing Church, we need more clergy, and this requires the right candidates, not the right gender.

We need to be careful not to overemphasize the place of women in the church and fall into the "feminism" trap. We should avoid establishing a female identity that is at the expense of men's degradation or by ignoring God's creative purpose. Men and women were created by God to work together in fulfilling God's will. Both men and women are God's co-workers who are equally indispensable. It would be unfair to obliterate the position of men in order to emphasize the role of women, but we should also accord sufficient recognition to the God-given qualities reflected in women to reveal their noble position and role. Thus, when emphasizing the status of women, we should not disregard or belittle men, in the same way that we must not "treat others the way we would not want to be treated."

A woman's place in the church should not be denied simply because a woman was the first to eat the forbidden fruit. Neither should we put too much emphasis on women's unique gift of conception to the detriment of men. When emphasizing the equal status of women and their unique role in the church, we should also avoid extolling

observations such as “the rise of yin and the fall of yang” and “women are strong and men are weak”.

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A new perspective on Gender, Space, Order and Division in 1 Cor 11-14

《哥林多前书》第11至14章中的性别、空间、次序与分歧

ZHAO QIUFEN 赵秋芬

Abstract. In 1 Cor 11-14, a tension is found, where women are allowed to participate in ministry according to 1 Cor 11 but should keep silent according to 1 Cor 14. While 1 Corinthians 11 permits women to pray and prophesy in public worship, emphasizing their spiritual equality and the importance of orderly covering (vv. 5–16), 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 contradicts this by mandating silence, restricting women to passive roles. This stark discrepancy has fueled decades of scholarly debate regarding its resolution. In this article, the author will examine some issues such as Gender, space, order and division in 1 Cor 11-14 from a new perspective.

Key words
1 Cor 11; 1 Cor 14; Conservative-evangelical; Feminist; Head-covering; Interpolation; Pauline authorship; Silence; Subordination;

Introduction

The question of Pauline teachings on women's roles has been disputed by scholars for several centuries, and today it raises more popular concerns in many cultural contexts. It is clear that some tensions regarding women's roles exist in the New Testament letters that bear Paul's name, such as 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians and the Pastoral letters. In this article I particularly focused on two passages which raise issues about women's roles and appear to contain contradictions: 1 Cor 11:1-16 and 1 Cor 14:33-36. Since women are clearly allowed to be involved in ministry in 1 Cor 11, why should they keep silent as in 1 Cor 14? In this article, the perspectives of Jorunn Økland and Margaret M. Mitchell will be used. They both examine the issue of women's roles within what they understand as the holistic structure of 1 Cor 11-14.

1 The issue of gender

As an exercise in feminist interpretation, Økland examines the Greek word *gynē* – how it is used, and how it relates to important aspects of the Greco-Roman context with its strongly hierarchical way of thinking.

1.1 The Greek word *gynē* (woman)

In the linguistic system of the time (that Fiorenza describes as "the androcentric linguistic sex/gender system that uses gender classifications rooted in biological sex" to "reify and naturalize socio-political gender construct"), Fiorenza notes that the term "man" refers to both human and male, whereas the term "woman" only refers to femaleness.[1] Likewise

1 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), xix.

Økland discusses the meaning of the Greek word *gynē* from within this same androcentric linguistic system, when she writes: "even if *γυνή* is often translated 'woman', the two words are not semantically overlapping. Nor is *γυνή* a semantically equivalent term to *άνήρ*, 'man', in ancient Greek usage."[2]

The popular translation of *gynē* is "woman." There is no other particular term for "wife" such as in English or other languages. Økland finds that while

> the Greek usage is not fully consistent, there seem to be a variety of meanings of *γυνή*, namely "wife", "newly married woman", "daughter", "whore", "slave", "servant girl", "widow" and so on. At its most basic, therefore, the Greek word *γυνή* refers to a wife.[3]

This explains why some scholars explore the wives' situation in the first century, exemplified by Winter's interpretation of the passage as we have seen in Chapter 2.

If the word *gynē* first of all means "wife", then it is unequal with the word *anēr* (man) in Greek meaning. While a man can be a man with different roles, the woman is defined exclusively according to her sexual status as a wife. Økland states that "gender-mixed gatherings can be addressed in grammatical masculine form even if women are present (cf. Paul's use of the term 'brother'), because masculine is the paradigmatic and privileged human that feminine is an imperfect or secondary version of."[4] The Greek language of 1 Cor 11 depicts women as being subjugated to men.

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2 Jorunn Økland, *Women in their Place* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 14.

3 Ibid., 14.

4 Økland, Women in their Place, 15.

1.2 Hierarchical gender models in Greco-Roman context

Økland presents four interesting models that together help interpret gender thinking in the ancient Mediterranean, namely: "the Adam and Eve-model, the woman as fertile soil-model, the Pandora-model and the one-sex-model".[5] She suggests that these four models, while exploring different aspects of gender, in fact express different aspects of one common approach, namely the strongly hierarchical way of thinking found in Greco-Roman culture. She explains that they all, in different ways, present "man" as male and the primary human norm.[6]

Økland then picks out two of these models to help interpret 1 Corinthians: "the Adam and Eve-model" and "one-sex-model". First she indicates how Paul uses the model of Adam and Eve in 1 Cor 11:2-16, and demonstrates how this passage illustrates hierarchical thinking. In the account in Genesis 2, man provides a rib from which woman is made as his partner. Hence "the woman is of the same substance as the man, but deduced from and subordinated to him."[7] Økland then shows how the one-sex-model is both seen in some ancient myths, and is also found within some philosophical writings. This model construes gender as two poles on one continuous axis – the male pole was fully and perfectly human whereas the female pole was lacking perfection."[8] Økland identifies this one-sex model as what underlies the way Paul writes about how both men and women become one Man in Christ" (cf. Gal 3:28).[9]

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5 Ibid., 40.
6 Ibid., 77.
7 Ibid., 46.
8 Ibid., 77.
9 Ibid., 77.

1.3 Phallogocentric thinking of gender

While some scholars set a strategy on explaining away the conflicts between 1 Cor 11 and 1 Cor 14, by contrast, Økland believes that "neither must contradictions be explained away (e.g. interpolation theories) or leveled out through a harmonization of various texts. Rather, contradiction is what we must expect as a symptom of phallogocentrism, instability, conflicting discourses, which in turn creates new problems and possibilities."[10] It is understandable why Økland reads a hierarchical Paul in 1 Cor 11-14, while she deals with the contradiction by regarding it as a mark of phallogocentric thinking of gender in local context.

Moreover, Økland illustrates that:

> Paul could see "women" as a category of otherness in relation to "men", so if we focus on 1 Corinthians 11-14 that deals with the ritual gatherings, and that touches on many gender issues – these gender issues do not necessarily have to be linked to any "real" women in the ritual gatherings. Similarly, in the discourse Paul was part of, notions of chaos and disorder were related to notions of femininity, as unity was to masculinity, so male and female just belong on separate sides. [11]

On account of this view, in 1 Cor 11-14 women appear as the carriers of sex and gender and as a category of being, instead of meaning "real women", but men represent the cosmic humanity without gender.[12] Hence Økland suggests that "any attempt to construct 'Paul's view of women' must be

10 Ibid., 20.

11 Ibid., 21.

12 Ibid., 21.

heuristic, 'gender' is also a heuristic, etic term when applied to ancient texts."[13]

2 The issue of space

The other contextual issue which concerns Økland is space. By this she means the function of the *ekklēsia*, and the differentiation between *ekklēsia* and *oikos*. This interpretation offers one creative way to interpret aspects of 1 Cor 11-14.

2.1 The meaning of the Greek word ekklēsia (church)

Økland first explains the word *ekklēsia* (Church) as it occurs in the New Testament—it occurs in 1 Corinthians more than in any other of the New Testament writings. She then proceeds to explain its use in Classical Greek—the word *ekklēsia* basically means "assembly." The root of the word *ek-klēsia* means "call out and together a group of people"—"the *ἐκκλησία* was the gathering of the citizens – adult, freeborn, Greek males in a city-state—for the purpose of making political decisions."[14] She then adds detail from the Greek version of the Old Testament—"in the Septuagint, the term could denote a gathering in general, and in this general meaning it sometimes also included women and children."[15] She then summarizes this background and how it sheds light on New Testament usage in 1 Corinthians—*ekklēsia* is a local Christian gathering rather than a common gathering.

13 Ibid., 22.

14 Ibid., 135.

15 Ibid., 136.

2.2 The distinction between two spaces

Økland's argument here is that Paul distinguishes between two spaces by using the two key terms *ekklēsia* and *oikia*. *Ekklēsia* denotes a ritual gathering, "a space properly set apart from daily life."[16] Paul, she asserts, distinguishes the alternative space of the household (*oikia*) from that of the *ekklēsia* (church). So when Paul describes the Holy Communion, he makes this distinction between the two different spaces: "do you not have houses / homes where you can eat and drink? Or do you despise the *ekklēsia* of God?"[17]

Økland notes that in 1 Cor 14:34-35 the differentiation between *oikos* and *ekklēsia* as two distinctive spaces occurs again. This time it is not the meals that are held in oikos, but Paul is writing about the prohibition of women's speaking: "the women should keep silent in the *ekklēsia* … and if they wish to learn something, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in *ekklēsia*"[18] (cf. 1 Cor 14:34-35).

The distinction would have been a conceptual one, independent of whether there were separate physical spaces. Using this distinction, it becomes easier for Paul to assert that the Lord's Supper should not be thought of as an ordinary meal, and that the practices of women in the household are not automatically proper when the Christians gather for worship in church.[19] In other words, the differentiation between these two distinctive spaces is a reasonable explanation of what Paul says that women may or may not do in times of worship.

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16 Ibid., 166.

17 Ibid., 137.

18 Ibid., 151.

19 Ibid., 166.

This distinction between public and private space has become a generally accepted tool for interpreting the role of women in the early church. In his introductory textbook, Harris claims that "the gradual shrinking of women's roles in the church may have been related to a historic change in the kinds of places in which believers assembled."[20] In a private house, the host or hostess probably took a leading role in presiding over gatherings. For example if a congregation assembled at the house of a wealthy widow – one no longer under a husband's control – it is likely that she participated actively in worship services, praying, prophesying, and teaching others. It is possible to understand the story of Lydia in this way, in Philippi (1 Cor 11:5; Acts 16:13-15).[21]

Harris suggests that with congregations growing, numerous men were attracted to join in the gatherings. Needing larger buildings, women as householders and hosts (who also offered hospitality to the Christian gathering) became fewer. They were gradually replaced when purpose-built public "church buildings" came into use. The gathering was shifted from the private house (*oikos*) to the public space (*ekklēsia*).

Correspondingly, the structure of church leadership was inevitably affected by this change. Harris's argument is that changes in time and space together made the situation different with regards to men's and women's leadership.[22]

3 The issue of Corinthian order in 1 Cor 11-14

Some scholars, including Økland, suggest that Paul has "order" as the unifying theme that runs through 1 Cor 11:2

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20 Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (New York: McGraw – Hill, 2007), 478.

21 Harris, *Understanding the Bible*, 478.

22 Ibid..

to 14:40. Within this section, he deals with the order of men and women in worship, the order of the Holy Communion, the order of the spiritual gifts and the order in church administration.[23] Økland's conclusions are presented below.

3.1 Cosmological hierarchy

Having so far presented the relevant historical context about gender and space, Økland depicts how gender is interwoven with space in the way church is ordered in 1 Cor 11-14. She believes that in 1 Cor 11-14 Paul argues that order seems to be threatened. Church gatherings therefore should express the proper order: "everything should take place decently and according to the correct order."[24] So she attempts to interpret the limiting of a woman's role through Paul's argument for unity and hierarchy arising from a need for an ordered gathering. Økland maintains that:

> It was rather Paul's emphasis on correct ritual and dress, on correct order and cosmology; his fence-drawing between Christians and non-Christians, men and women; his drawing of boundaries between different cultic roles; his language of holiness and purity; his idea of the *ekklēsia* structure as representative of some kind of cosmological entity (namely the cosmic order visualized in Paul's version of the creation stories), and his concern about the correct representation of the deity worshipped there. Such

23 Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2: *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 298. See also Fiorenza'"s arguments about "order" above.

24 Økland, op. cit., 208.

> issues that belong to a discourse on ritual or sanctuary space are abundantly present in chapters 11-14.[25]

Økland shows how the *ekklēsia* space is gendered in 1 Cor 11-14. She illustrates how Paul's strategy was to construct a hierarchy within which women are set at the inferior level and are therefore excluded from speaking.[26] She argues that in 1 Cor 11:1-16 Paul assumes a form of universal hierarchy in the ritual gathering in the space called *ekklēsia*.[27] Økland believes that this ordering of *ekklēsia* reflects a cosmological pattern or paradigm.[28]

3.2 Hierarchy and *kephalē* (head)

Økland examines the extent to which hierarchy is found within the way the word *kephalē* (head) is understood.[29] As we have already seen in Chapter 2, the word *kephalē* means "head" but it could also mean "source". The head was viewed as the noblest part of the body, standing as a representation of the whole body.[30] So many scholars now read *kephalē* as "source", with or without hierarchical connotations. For example, as we saw in Chapter 2, Thiselton believes that *kephalē* does not involve subordination, or authority over something or someone else. By contrast Økland asserts that it is impossible to strip Paul's use of the word *kephalē* from hierarchical connotations. In ancient contexts such an understanding is assumed – both value-judgments and

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25 Ibid., 168.

26 Ibid., 169.

27 Ibid., 170.

28 Ibid., 171.

29 Ibid., 174.

30 Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones (eds.), *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th edn; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), p. 2945. Cf. Økland, *Women in their Place*, 175.

power implications are present in the expression "man is the head / source of woman". So she concludes that "source" is not a neutral concept in Greco-Roman discourse.[31]

Økland supports a hierarchical reading of 11:1-3, but she suggests that v 3 does not refer to the husband's authority upon or rule over his wife. Instead she considers that this is "a piece of ritual discourse firmly situated within the section dealing with ritual gatherings."[32] Both female and male together represent the cosmological model. These verses demonstrate gender difference, and draw a hierarchical boundary between men and women. She states that "a ritual setting is the proper place to make the places for men and for women and the boundary between them clear and distinct, as opposed to the fluent and confusing practices of everyday life."[33]

3.3 Veil and ritual as two boundaries

Økland complements the way Keener and Winter discuss the veil (see Chapter 2) by adding further details about the veiling of women in antiquity. She indicates that the veil functioned as a symbol, or a boundary of gender distinction. Wearing veils was a common cultural phenomenon in Tarsus (Paul's hometown) in the first century, so naturally Paul was used to such gender discourse about head covering.[34]

Økland quotes Neyrey about gender distinction—it is possible to conceptualize veiling as a distinctive cultural phenomenon. Paul, in attempting to find a way within the ritual gathering of distinguishing between the genders, selects the veil as the proper ritual clothing for women.

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31 Økland, *Women in their Place*, 175-176.

32 Økland, *Women in their Place*, 177.

33 Ibid., 178.

34 Ibid., 189.

In other words, head covering was used to make gender distinction within Corinthian sanctuary space.[35]

Moreover, besides the veil being a boundary, Økland also introduces the concept of the veil as a ritual boundary. She refers to the idea of "fencing out and fencing in", different layers for men and women, suggesting that male and female have places that are hierarchically ordered in relation to each other.[36] So while in chapter 11 both men and women may pray and prophesy, their activity possibly takes place in different phases of the ritual.[37] Such an understanding has the effect of making women operate in an environment dominated by men:

> Even if Paul is careful to balance his utterance on men and women through sentences with parallel syntax (11:4-5 and 13-14), except in 11:10, it is the woman who has to bear the gender difference. Gender difference is thus transcribed into "woman as difference", whereas the male becomes "normal". The result of the cosmological hierarchy constructed in 11:1-16 then, is the production of the female as secondary to the male, and hence the gendering of the *ekklēsia* space as a predominantly male space.[38]

3.4 Genders in speech (1 Cor 14:33-37)

Here Økland goes into further detail about what was permitted and culturally appropriate in the two spheres/

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35 Økland, *Women in their Place*, 192. Cf. Jerome H. Neyrey, "What's Wrong with this Picture? John 4, Cultural Stereotypes of Women, and Public and Private Space", *Biblical Theology Bulletin 24* (1994): 77-91.

36 Økland, 193.

37 Ibid., 194.

38 Ibid., 194.

spaces of *ekklesia* (church) and *oikos* (house). There is a specific order for "the rituals of meals and speaking and of dress and behavior" in the different and distinctive spaces.[39] So in the case of household gatherings, a woman could pray and prophesy, but in the *ekklēsia* she is restricted from speaking. In the Greco-Roman culture, it was a shameful behavior for a woman to speak in the *ekklēsia*, however this was not the case with regard to praying and prophesying in the household.[40] Økland goes on to suggest that the ritual Paul has in mind has different elements to it. Women may participate in some roles but not in others. For instance, teaching and *logos*-spreading are differentiated from prophecy—women can prophesy with the head covered, but they cannot teach at all.

With regard to "logos", in 14:34-37 "woman" is regarded as a listener. "Logos" is normally restricted to the "male" in ancient times.[41] In his teaching, Paul appears to follow the Greco-Roman pattern – he is also following the Jewish pattern whereby teaching roles are related to gender. Økland concludes: "the place for women remains at the bottom of the hierarchy, as silent listeners to the interaction between male teacher and male disciples".[42] In 14:36 this hierarchical thinking is also found – a woman can only be a logos-receiver and not a logos-spreader, because women are placed "at the bottom of hierarchy and man is located higher up, closer to the source of *logos*."[43] On this basis, we can imagine how the ritualistic setting (where men ruled, and women's roles were limited) was dramatically different from

39 Ibid., 204.

40 Ibid., 202.

41 Ibid., 206-207.

42 Ibid., 207.

43 Ibid., 207.

the home (where the woman had more ability to be active in participating and leading the worship).

3.5 Division and unity in 1 Cor 11-14

In contrast to Økland's argument, Mitchell summarizes the purpose of chapters 11:2 to 14:40 with reference to 14:40. Paul urges the Corinthians to be united together for the good rather than divided for the worse in their common worship.[44]

Mitchell indicates that in 11:2-14:40 Paul attempts to discuss the issue of Corinthian factionalism. In other words, Christians with different backgrounds meet together as one when gathering for worship. Divisions and conflicts emerge both among church members and in their relationship with the non-Christian world. It is also possible that different house churches had their own affiliations and customs.[45] So Mitchell suggests that different Corinthian sects may have debated with each other about what was proper headwear in worship, or how best to conduct Holy Communion, or what guidelines to use when exercising spiritual gifts.[46]

Mitchell first focuses (in 11:2-16) on the issue of hairstyle for men and head covering for women when in worship. Hairstyle or head covering may have reflected "party-affiliation" at Corinth. Paul relates this phenomenon with the factionalism in the Corinthian church in 11:16: "If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God."[47] Referring to this division in the church, Mitchell suggests that Paul probably prefers a compromise decision by instructing women to

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44 Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1991), 259.

45 Ibid., 258-259.

46 Ibid., 150.

47 Ibid., 150.

have their heads covered while praying and prophesying. He lightens his argument by suggesting that, of course, both men and women were originally derived from God, and in Christ both are mutually interdependent (11:11-12).[48]

The second division mentioned is the Lord's Supper. Mitchell finds that after Paul has dealt with the division in 11:2-16, he turns to the more serious divisions about the Holy Communion in the Corinthian church. Mitchell states that "because he returns to this ecclesiological concern in 11:33-34, we conclude that the disunity of the church is the main topic of this argument, to which the tradition (11:23-26) is a response."[49]

The third issue is the divisive use of spiritual gifts. Mitchell asserts that "the importance and proper employment of spiritual gifts" is the most divisive issue in the Corinthian church. According to Mitchell's analysis, 1 Cor 1:18 to 4:21 deals with problems in the Corinthian church about wisdom and knowledge, whereas 12:1 to 14:40 deals in particular with the disputed gift of speaking in tongues. Once again, the whole of Paul's argument (by using the analogy of the body) is to urge the Corinthian church to pursue unity.[50] So whether Paul is dealing with hairstyles for men and women, or the prohibition of speech by women, it is all within this wider context of responding to division.

In more detail, Mitchell proceeds to show how (throughout 11:2 to 14:40) Paul responds to division within the Corinthian church by offering two treatments of Christian unity.

The first treatment is to demonstrate life in the body of Christ. Mitchell indicates that Paul urges the Corinthians to pursue "the common good", namely unity in the one Spirit.

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48 Ibid., 262.

49 Ibid., 263.

50 Mitchell, 266.

The statement in 12:4-6 echoes 8:6 with its stress on unity for the church "in the same spirit and the same Lord and the same God."[51] "The body of Christ" requires all members in one body to construct the peaceful interrelationship, so as to pursue unity rather than factionalism.[52]

The second treatment is love. Mitchell suggests that in 1 Cor 13 Paul defines "the gift of love as the antidote to factionalism". Love is not self-seeking (13:5), but is rather "the exact definition of a non-factionalist."[53]

Based on these arguments, Mitchell states that Paul's specific emphasis (in 14:26-36) is that everyone must compromise. The gift each one uses comes from God, so they must all live and work together in the unity they have in Christ. As in chapter 12, Paul admits that each member has different spiritual gift(s). But all gifts are for building up the body (14:26). Thus, Paul's advice for each is to express their spiritual gifts in an orderly way, giving way to others as necessary. This is personal compromise for the sake of harmony, and sometimes this means remaining silent while others speak. For women it means expressing their freedom as new people in Christ, but being sensitive as to how outsiders will see them—and therefore compromising in what they do when in the assembly.[54]

Mitchell concludes that Paul counsels that:

> Worshippers should exhibit not wild, inharmonious behavior, but behavior which suits the very nature of the God worshipped and honors the full distribution of

51 Ibid., 268.
52 Ibid., 269.
53 Ibid., 278.
54 Ibid., 280-281.

the spirit to all members of the community. God is not of partisan strife but of peace.[55]

The climax of this whole section (11:2-14:40) ends with verse 40, where Paul's advice is to urge each member to behave in an orderly and concordant manner in worship.

Conclusion

We have examined how Økland develops the feminist analysis by giving attention to gender models from the Greco-Roman context. She interprets 1 Corinthians with reference to her hierarchical and cosmological understanding of the contemporary culture and context. The main themes can be summarized as follows:

Firstly, giving attention to the historical context, scholars like Fiorenza and Økland, use a feminist hermeneutic so as to provide new perspectives for viewing history.

They provide an exegesis of the historical background and cultural context that complements and corrects the exegesis of the biblical text. Hence the pioneer Fiorenza reconstructs early Christian history by transforming what she describes as the androcentric view of the authors into a feminist perspective. Fiorenza interprets 1 Corinthians with reference both to the historical context about women's loose hair and the Greco-Roman setting of a wife's subordination. Secondly, attention is given to cultural and contextual analysis.

Økland develops the feminist analysis by the use of gender models from the Greco-Roman context, and interprets 1 Corinthians with reference to her hierarchical

55 Mitchell, 283.

and cosmological understandings of contemporary culture and context.

Thirdly, some scholars use literary analysis of the Greek language as a way of understanding the meaning of certain detailed verses.

Økland investigates the meaning or content of the Greek words *gynē* (woman), *ekklēsia* (church) and *kephalē* (head) in the local context, and finds that the term "woman" is not equivalent to the term "man" in ancient Greek. From this, the idea of the subjugated role of women can more easily be understood. Likewise Økland interprets the tension between 11:2-16 and 14:33-36 by verifying the distinction between the space of *ekklēsia* and *oikos*. Women can pray and prophesy in oikos but it is shameful for them to speak in *ekklēsia*.

Fourthly, different authors identify different structural themes in the Corinthian correspondence.

Fiorenza regards chapters 11 to 14 as a whole concerned with Paul's argument about order. Similarly Koester shows how Paul illustrates the theme of order in 11:2-14:40 – the order for worship, communion, spiritual gifts and church administration. Økland interprets the controversial passages through Paul's argument for unity, whereas Mitchell interprets 1 Cor 11-14 more broadly within the whole Corinthian correspondence, providing the theme of unity as a theological response to the divisions appearing within Christian community.

Økland uses the distinction between *ekklēsia* and *oikos* to make sense of the tension between 1 Cor 11 and 14. This is a principled distinction between two different representations of space, still assuming that early Christians gathered in private houses. However at least one recent scholarly work by Adams provides conflicting evidence, suggesting that the dominant view of early Christians only

meeting in houses must be revised. If this is right, then Økland's argument might have to be re-considered.

The strength and value of the feminist approaches are that they provide an alternative interpretation of the historical context against which to interpret these contradictive passages. The understanding of space as conceived of in different terms (public versus private), and as gendered, opens possibilities for a differentiated interpretation of 1 Cor 11 and 14 respectively. The disadvantage is perhaps that the idea of a conscious differentiation between alternative representations of space may become somewhat anachronistic, and that interpretations strongly depend on a distinction between private and public space being applied to early Christian gathering places.[56] If house churches were not the exclusive practice, and if the Corinthian congregation referred to in 1 Cor 11-14 in fact did not meet in a private home, but in a public building,[57] the room and relative freedom for women reflected in 1 Cor 11 might not be so easily explained and reconciled with the strict prohibition of 1 Cor 14.

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56 Edward Adams, *The Earliest Christian Meeting Places:Almost exclusively houses?* London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2016. 29-30.

57 Ibid., 24-30.

Nationalist Ideas and their dissolution in the New Testament: the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew's Gospel

管窥新约圣经诠释中的民族主义思想及其消解——以《马太福音》中迦南妇女的故事为例

YU YIN 余音

Abstract: Taking the story of the Canaanite women recorded in Matthew 15:21-28 as an example, this paper starts from the content of the story and its related background, and lists some modern scholars' interpretations of the story using traditional theological interpretation, socio-scientific interpretation, and postcolonial interpretation. This is to show the nationalist tension and its dissolution in the Canaanite women's story itself and its interpretation, in order to make an exploratory reflection on how Christianity confronts ultra-nationalist ideas.

Keywords: Canaanite women Biblical interpretation nationalism

Introduction

The exorcism of unclean spirits from the daughters of non-Jewish women is recorded in two Gospels, Matthew and Mark, but there are differences in their accounts of this story. The Gospel of Mark refers to the non-Jewish woman as a Greek, that is, the Greeks of the Syrophoenician ethnic group, while the Gospel of Matthew calls her a Canaanite. In contrast to the concise narrative of Mark, the Gospel of Matthew records in greater detail the direct interaction between the Canaanite women and Jesus, introducing the understanding of discipleship. Since the canonization of the Bible, the story of this non-Jewish woman in the Gospel of Matthew has been interpreted by church fathers, theologians, Biblical scholars, and believers in countless forms, including but not limited to retelling, commentary, sermons, poetry, interpretation, etc., which in itself constitutes an intricate history of its effects. The figure of the "Canaanite woman" in this story has been the focus of Western exegesis in different periods usually revolving around her conversation with Jesus. And this conversation often becomes a "hermeneutic puzzle to be solved."[1] However, from ancient times to the present, the story of the Canaanite woman has not been interpreted by her own people (perhaps the Syrians or other religions), but by Christians for their own specific purposes.[2] This paper attempts to analyze the tension of nationalist ideas in the story itself and the modern interpretation process, taking the textual interpretation of the Canaanite women's story in the Gospel of Matthew as an example, in

1 Liang Hui: "Postcolonial Feminist Biblical Hermeneutic Practices - Musa Dube's and Kwok Pui Lan's Interpretation of the Story of 'Gentile Women' in the Gospels," *Studies in Biblical Literature*, No. 1, 2018, 227.

2 Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical world*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995, 71.

order to make a rudimentary reflection on how Christianity confronts ultra-nationalist ideas.

I. The content and background of the Canaanite woman's story

1. An overview of the story (Matthew 15:21-28)

The story of this non-Jewish woman is the only biblical account of Jesus' presence in Tyre and Sidon, and one of the few in the Gospels that describes in detail how Jesus dealt with people of other ethnic groups.[3] According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus debated with the Pharisees in Gennesaret about the tradition of washing their hands before eating, and discussed with his disciples and the crowd what was really defiling: the unclean things that came into the mouth or the unkind words that came out of the mouth, and then went on to Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman cried out to Jesus, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is tormented by a demon."[4] Jesus did not answer the woman's cry. When the disciples came in and pleaded on her behalf, Jesus replied, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." After that, the woman was not reconciled, and went to Jesus to worship him, pleading: "Lord, help me!" Still, Jesus refused, saying, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." It was not until the woman affirmed Jesus' words and begged again for mercy, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fell from their masters' table," that Jesus praised her faith and fulfilled her prayer. Immediately, the daughter of the

3 There is also the story of Jesus healing the centurion's servant in Matthew 8.

4 All Bible verses in this article are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version.

Canaanite woman was no longer haunted by demons and was at peace.

Christians and non-Christians alike will have an inexplicable sense of oppression when they first read this story, because the story itself contains some indescribable religious, ethnic, and class tensions, and the key to the tension between nations in the story lies in Jesus' two piercing words, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24) and "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26). These tensions may become even more evident when we understand the context of the story.

2. Background to the story of the "Canaanite Woman"

(1) Tyre and Sidon

Both cities are located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, separated by less than 20 miles, and were important ports in ancient times. They are now located in Lebanon. The Old Testament history books refer to Sidon as the "great city"[5] and Tyre as "strong"[6] but also a source of skilled craftsmen, both of which belonged to the territory of Canaan, the land that God would give to the nation of Israel for inheritance.[7] The wisdom of the Old Testament describes the Tyreans as resisting God,[8] and the prophets prophesied that the cities of Tyre and Sidon would be in ruins and uninhabited, and that they would be owned by God's chosen

5 Joshua 19.

6 Joshua 19.

7 See Genesis 10 and Joshua 13.

8 Cf. Psalm 83

people.[9] The ancient Greek poet Homer, in The Iliad and The Odyssey, repeatedly mentioned the prosperity of Sidon and the excellence of its light industry and navigation.[10]

After the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites, scholars called the Lebanese coast Phoenicia, and in the first century C.E., Tyre and Sidon were still part of Phoenicia, with the two cities often referred to together. The natives were thought to be part of the Greeks. Although it is not possible to confirm whether the specific areas of Tyre and Sidon mentioned in the Old Testament period and the Second Temple period coincide exactly, according to the documents, the boundaries are not too far apart. Thus, although Tyre and Sidon were the land of the Gentiles from an administrative point of view, from a religious point of view, they were the land that the nation of Israel deserved but had not yet received. Moreover, in the first century C.E., there was a large Jewish settlement that remained there. It was no accident that in Matthew's writing, Jesus traveled there and crossed paths with Canaanite women.[11]

(2) Canaan

In the story, one of the protagonists, the "Canaanite Woman," is from the Canaanite clan. The land of Canaan is the land that Jehovah would give to the nation of Israel as clearly stated in the Hebrew Bible, and it is also the place where their patriarch, Abraham, lived for many years. From that time on, the Canaanites, as a native people of Canaan, were

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9 Cf. Isaiah 23; Jeremiah 25; Ezekiel, chapter 26.

10 Homer: *The Iliad* (translated by Luo Niansheng and Wang Huansheng), Beijing, People's Literature Publishing House, 2003. 152, 555; Homer: *The Odyssey* trans. Wang Huansheng, Beijing, People's Literature Publishing House, 2003. 260, 301.

11 This article does not discuss in detail the specific authors or editors of the Gospel of Matthew and refers to them collectively as "Matthew."

not only hostile to the Israelites from both a historical and religious point of view, but also had a religious and ethnic hostility to Israel.[12] Even though the region to which Jesus went—Tyre and Sidon—was a foreign domain for the Jews and conversely, a native land for the Canaanite women, the description in the text suggests that Jesus takes on the role of the host while the Canaanite woman becomes the guest.

Thus, instead of calling the heroine of the story a "Syrophoenician" as in the Gospel of Mark, "Matthew" rephrases it as a Canaanite, on the one hand, emphasizing that the conflict in the story is centered on the nation of Israel[13] while on the other hand, it is also intended to reveal the status of non-Israelite subjects in the process of Israel's restoration.[14]

(3) Dogs

In the ancient world, the term "dog" was used to describe people, often in a derogatory sense. Reading between the lines of the Bible, the usage is similar.[15] In the Old Testament, the Israelites called themselves "dogs" as a sign of humility, while the Jews called other peoples "pigs" or "dogs," partly because traditional Jewish thought considered foreigners to be worthless, and partly because foreigners were hostile

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12 Titus Presler, "Mission Is Ministry in the Dimension of Difference: A Definition for the Twenty-First Century," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2010, 201.

13 Mookgo S. Kgatle, "Crossing boundaries: Social-Scientific Reading of the Faith of a Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15:21–28)," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2018, 602.

14 Joel Willitts, "The Friendship of Matthew and Paul: A Response to the Recent Trend in the Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel", *HTS*, Vol.65, No.1, 2009, Art. #151, 5.

15 Cf. 1 Samuel 17, 24; 2 Samuel chapters 9, 16; Psalm 22; Proverbs 26; Isaiah 56; Matthew 7, 15; Mark 7; Philippians 3; 2 Peter 2; Revelation 22.

to Israel in all respects.[16] In addition to the story on which the Gospel of Matthew is most frequently mentioned in the New Testament, in chapter 7 Jesus says, "Do not give holy things to dogs, and do not cast your pearls before swines, lest they trample them down and turn around and bite you." As can be seen from the description by "Matthew," "dog" as a derogatory term is the exact opposite of "holy."[17] While there is no conclusive evidence that "dog" is the standard Jewish name for foreigners, in this story of the Canaanite woman, the relationship between the "dog" and the non-Jewish people is evident in Jesus' conversation with the Canaanite woman. The Gospel of Matthew presents a socio-historical world in which the Israelites believed that they were specially chosen by God, sanctified, and clean, and so they were particularly concerned with national purity.[18] Of all the nations, it is the nation of Israel alone that belongs to God, and no other nation does. The well-being of all other nations depends on the sharing of the nation of Israel. However, because of their different perceptions of religious beliefs, Jews, in turn, became enemies of other peoples.[19]

II. Contemporary Traditional Theological Interpretations of Canaanite Women's Stories

Looking back at traditional New Testament interpretations, most commentators have focused on this Canaanite woman, who has shown great faith, humility, and patience in defiance

16 Kgatle, op. cit., 605.

17 Ibid.

18 Lidija Novakovic, 'Yet Even the Dogs Eat the Crumbs That Fall from Their Masters' Table': Matthew's Gospel and Economic Globalization," *HTS*, Vol.65, No.1, 576.

19 Elma Cornelius, "A Remarkable Woman: The Canaanite Woman in Matthew," *Ekklesiastikos Pharos*, Vol.93, No.1, 36.

of all limitations, qualities that should exemplify Christian virtues.

William Barclay thinks that the reader can be very sure that the smile on Jesus' face and the pity in his eyes completely dissolved the insult and bitterness in his language.[20] The perseverance of the Canaanite women stemmed from an unconquerable expectation.[21] Mounce argues that "dog" is not necessarily a pejorative term, and that the original Greek word refers solely to a domestic dog or other pets. So, Jesus' language is not as insulting as it reads, and the Canaanite women who call themselves "dogs" simply illustrate this as a metaphor of pets picking up scraps of food in their homes.[22] "This woman's unwavering faith in the power of Jesus and her perseverance made this miracle of healing happen," he noted.[23] Other scholars believe that Jesus' words of narrow nationalism were later added to the story by conservative Jewish Christians who opposed foreign missions, and that the story ended with a rewriting by those who supported the missionary cause of non-Jewish peoples. Turner agrees with scholars such as Davis that Jesus' rejection and seemingly narrow nationalist rhetoric were intended to remind the reader of Israel's priority in the history of salvation, and that the new covenant was not intended to modify God's original covenant with the Israelites, but merely to continue and expand it.[24] The non-Jewish woman, who called Jesus "the Son of David" when she saw him from afar, should have had some understanding of the Jewish messianic concept, and Hare believes that the

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20 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), Vol.2, 121.

21 Ibid., 124.

22 Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 152–153.

23 Ibid., 153.

24 David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 306.

woman herself acknowledged the historical and theological priority of God's election of Israel. [25]

For apologetic or other theological purposes, traditional hermeneutics often employ various ways to downplay or even ignore the tension of religious nationalism in the story, and even lift the Christian faith directly over the top of time and space. Gerd Theissen argues that the traditional exegetical modes such as biographical, archetypal and historical views of salvation are not convincing because they are based solely on the assumption that faith transcends time and space, but do not fit into the historical context of the story—the then existing social and political conditions in the border areas of Tyre and Galilee. [26]

III. The Socio-Ideological Interpretation of the Story of the "Canaanite Woman"

1. Socio-scientific interpretation

Socio-scientific hermeneutics focus more on the socio-cultural context of the Mediterranean region in the first century AD to help understand the content and context of the story.

Overman argues that the Matthew group is too unique and even exclusive in its description of disciples and the authority they possess, not allowing for any other authority, such as teachers, judges, or arbitrators of any kind, that

25 Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 182.

26 Gerd Theissen, trans. Linda M. Maloney, *The Gospel in context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 62–65.

is inherited from Jesus and His teachings.[27] For example, in Matthew 16, Jesus speaks to Peter, and in Matthew 18 he repeats to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth, will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:18 NRSV), and the teaching that directly links the disciples' earthly conduct to the heavenly condition is unique in the Gospels. In addition, before reiterating this statement, Jesus taught about how to deal with brothers who offend in the community—if the offender did not even heed the exhortation of the church, he would be regarded as a "Gentile" (ἐθνικός) and a tax collector, a seemingly derogatory teaching that implies the Matthew text's view of international relations.

John Pilch argues that Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite women was a product of their historical background. The culture of the Middle East in Jesus' time was very different, and in that Mediterranean culture, the core value that drives all actions is honor, and this view of honor and disgrace is at the heart of the competitive culture of the time. Jesus also lived in such a cultural pattern, and what he said to the Canaanite woman was precisely to defend his honor in an unsympathetic way. In contrast, the Canaanite woman was unwilling to submit to the cultural rules of the situation, and she was determined to break them in a cultural situation where the woman was not allowed to speak in public. In this case, Jesus' response was reasonable.

Shin argues that the Jewish belief that they had historically always taken precedence over the Canaanites had now been reversed through the faith of Canaanite women, who through their faith in Jesus' ministry, now

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27 Andrew J. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 133–134.

enjoyed greater priority over the Jewish leaders.[28] What Jesus did was to shatter the inherent notions of religious nationalism among the Jews and dissipate the tension brought about by such religious nationalism.

Ktgale believes that this dissolution of tension stems from the woman's cry, and every cry she makes liberates Jesus from the "Judean cultural ghetto" and sparks in him a desire to help other peoples.[29] Because of the Jewish religious purity system, Israelite leaders seldom visited the border regions where the Gentiles lived. Jesus' action, however, was an attempt to break with this religious nationalism. Jesus defied the Jewish religious purity system and brought this "ethnically unclean" and "gender-disadvantaged" Canaanite woman's family into the kingdom of God, implying his opposition to Jewish nationalism.[30] Kgatle conveyed the relevance of this story to South African women, inspiring them not to belittle their own ethnic background, because they can succeed regardless of their ethnicity.[31]

2. Postcolonial interpretation

Musa Dube interprets the story from a postcolonial-feminist perspective. Rather than focusing on the historical veracity of the story itself, she treats the account as a rhetorical text, exploring its rhetorical function and impact.[32] Dube bases postcolonial interpretation on the historical

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28 In-Cheol Shin, "Women's Stories Implying Aspects of Anti-Judaism with Christological Depiction in Matthew," *HTS*, Vol.70, No.1, 2014, Art. #2704, 6.

29 Kgatle, op. cit., 607.

30 Ibid, 604.

31 Ibid, 612.

32 Liang Hui: "Postcolonial Feminist Biblical Hermeneutic Practices – Musa Dube's and Kwok Pui-Lan's Interpretations of the Gospel Story of the 'Gentile Women,' 210.

method of editing and researching texts, and uses literary methods such as narrative evidence, rhetorical evidence, and reader response evidence to study texts. While the Gospel of Matthew was intended from the outset to be interested in the nations of the world, the words that express conquest seem to divide the Gospel writers, editors, and audiences into a circle of Israelites with Jesus and the disciples in the story, while outsiders are portrayed as wicked and dangerous, unworthy of food, like women and even "unclean dogs," and as people who long to seek salvation from Jesus, the reluctant nationalist.

The author weaves the narrative in such a way that it is easy for the average reader to blame the victim and ignore the narrative strategy.[33] How could Jesus, as a traveler, be called "Lord" by the Canaanite women? Dube believes that this divine authority came from his privileged race and class.[34] The story portrays Jesus as coming for Israel alone and in opposition to the non-Jewish peoples.[35] Jesus' comparison of non-Jewish nations to "dogs" alludes to the fact that in the New Testament period, non-Jewish peoples were considered by Israelites to be insignificant people—obliged to follow their masters, and unworthy of having food for their children. For it is clear from the Hebrew Bible that Israel's strategy of subjugating foreign nations/tribes was, first and foremost, to oppose equating their own culture with that of the natives of the land they had entered. "Inter-national" relations can be established only when the perceived superiority of the Israeli nation is expressed, recognized and guaranteed.[36] Thus, the woman's "foreign"

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33 Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 153.

34 Ibid, 147.

35 Ibid, 152.

36 Ibid.,153.

image suggests Israel's national superiority, and her preaching to other peoples is based on an unequal notion of "inclusion."[37] In addition, the "dog" is a description of the lowest social class at that time, but in the story, the woman does not question what Jesus said, and instead, recognizes and accepts herself as belonging to the lowest class, indicating Jesus' innate class superiority at that time, as well as the ethnic and gender disadvantage of the Canaanite woman and her daughter.[38]

Kwok Pui-lan believes that Biblical interpretation involves questions of the social power and rights held by the interpreters, and then directs our attention to the interpreters of the Bible. Differences in race, gender, ethnicity, social status and political orientation directly or indirectly affect the direction of scriptural interpretation and thus will have an effect on the audiences of these biblical interpretations; even the creation and establishment of biblical canons are obviously related to power. In religious communities, ordinary people do not have the power to determine what is true. As an overseas Chinese, she is also troubled by the deprecation and rejection of her own culture caused by the authority of the Bible. She asked, "How do we inherit the dual history of the Bible and the nation?"[39] She argues that the story of the Canaanite woman reflects the great tension between Jews and Gentiles in the early Christian community,[40] and that the woman's humility was used to reinforce a passive and submissive attitude towards

37 Ibid, 150.

38 Ibid, 147.

39 Kwok Pui-Lan, "Hermeneutics from the Perspective of Chinese Women," in Li Chichang (ed.), *The Asian Situation and Biblical Interpretation*, (Hong Kong, Christian Literature and Art Publishing House, 1990), 257.

40 Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical world*, 75.

the conqueror.[41] Today, Chinese women interpreters should inherit the critical hermeneutics of their ancestors, in examining patriarchy in the Bible and in their own national traditions, and pursue inter-ethnic and gender equality[42] in interpreting the Bible, so as to "reshape the relevance of the scriptures to the current situation, and respond to the social care and spiritual needs of different interpretive communities."[43]

IV. The Canaanite Women's Story and Nationalist Ideas

1. Concepts related to ethnicity and nationalism

When we talk about race/ethnicity, we are trying to talk about real, material and concrete forms of interaction between different communities throughout history, but we should not make the mistake of thinking that we are talking about such a thing as race itself. The conservative view of a primordialist holds that race/ethnicity is something that individuals possess based on kinship or primitivity, and can be distinguished according to custom—which may include language or religion. The structuralist view, represented by sociologist Fredrik Barth, is more flexible, arguing that race/ethnicity is a form of group self-definition, perhaps closely linked to kinship or primitivity, but whose scope and meaning are highly malleable, and individuals are involved

41 Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 61.

42 Kwok Pui-lan, "Hermeneutics from the Perspective of Chinese Women," op. cit., 259.

43 Liang Hui: Postcolonial Feminist Biblical Hermeneutic Practices – Musa Dube's and Kwok Pui-lan's Interpretation of the Story of the 'Gentile Women' in the Gospels, 227.

in constructing, maintaining, or changing their identities at any time, over time.[44]

So far, there have been more than 200 definitions of nationalism, and to this day the question of "what is nationalism" is still a focus of debate in academic circles. The nature and classification of nationalism are controversial, and the boundaries and relationships between nationalism and racism are not clear. However, many scholars regard nationalism as a social ideology, which usually refers to thoughts and behaviors that are based on safeguarding the interests and dignity of one's own nation. The formation and development of nationalism is inextricably linked to the formation of a modern state. Regarding the types of nationalism, there are various ways to classify them. According to the political, economic, cultural, and religious manifestations of nationalism, the term can be divided into four types: political nationalism, economic nationalism, cultural nationalism, and religious nationalism.[45] According to the biblical narrative tradition, the most prominent feature of the Jewish people is religious nationalism, which reflects the uniqueness and superiority of the Hebrew religion.

2. The nationalist tension embodied in the story and its interpretation

Listed above have been accounts of the story of the "Canaanite women" by some contemporary scholars using different interpretive approaches. Some of them have made

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44 Denise Kimber Buell, "Challenges and Strategies for Speaking about Ethnicity in the New Testament and New Testament Studies," *Svensk exegetisk årsbok*, Vol.79, 2014, 35.

45 He Xingliang, "Nationalist Interpretation," *People's Daily*, June 26, 2017, 19.

a purely "faith interpretation" of the dialogue between Jesus and the Canaanite woman that transcends time and space, so as to achieve the goal of defending the "Jesus" written about in Matthew. There are also some scholars who face up to the religio-nationalist ideas embedded in the story itself, rationalizing it, or exploring its impact on modern society. Different social, historical, cultural, political, economic and other backgrounds still determine the asymmetry of their individual interpretive power, and the different interpretative results.

The hermeneutical approach used by many biblical scholars tends to place the interpretation of biblical texts in the past, as if they belonged only to antiquity and would not continue to influence later—and even present-day international relations through the power relations advocated by the texts. Readers of postcolonial interpretations, however, insist that these texts not only provide us with a New Testament view of the foreign relations of the Israeli nation, but also continue to shape the Bible reader's ideas of national and international relations, and continue to influence the establishment and development of contemporary international relations.[46] Since the shapers of modern national thought often cite scriptures,[47] the biblical text is also one of the classic texts cited by many scholars. Many manifestations of ultra-nationalism such as Judaism, anti-Semitism and Christian nationalism are closely related to biblical interpretation.

The words and actions of the Canaanite mother in the story seem to introduce a very disturbing element to Matthew's Jesus (and more importantly to the faith community in which Matthew is located): the awareness

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46 Ali A. Mazrui, Cultural Forces in World Politics (London: James Curry, 1990), 39–42.

47 Buell, op. cit., 36

that faith communities must undergo a social change that will ultimately force them to become a more inclusive community.[48] The universality of early Christianity asserted that Christianity was open to all, regardless of background. Although Christians were also multi-ethnic in a narrow sense, this did not prevent the early Christians from describing themselves as another group that was broadly similar to "nation."[49] After all, the fact that much of the writings of the New Testament were originally written and circulated as Jewish texts also leaves the relationship between the idea of nationalism in these writings and the later collective self-understanding of Christianity unresolved or unclarified. Ultimately, it is not as simple as Matthew's description: "Woman, your faith is great." (Matthew 15:28) that dissolves the tension of nationalism, but the consciousness of the need to break down any form of nationalist barrier. People today live in a very different time and place than Jesus, so it is not possible to apply the story directly to Christians[50] —whether it is Jesus' nationalistic voice or the Canaanite women's disdain for cultural rules.

Epilogue

The content of the Christian Bible will remain largely unchanged, and the widespread circulation and use of the

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48 Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew's Advice to A Divided Readership," in David E. Aune, ed. *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 26.

49 Buell, op. cit., 33–51.

50 Nancy Klancher, et al., *The Taming of the Canaanite Woman: Constructions of Christian Identity in the Afterlife of Matthew* 15:21-28 (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 142–143. Quote from John Pilch, "Scripture from Scratch: Jesus in his Middle-Eastern Context," n.p., http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/SFS/ an0900.as [cited 27 Sept. 2010].

Bible, especially the repeated recitation and preaching of many intriguing stories in the New Testament as well as the interpretations from different angles, can still have a great impact on the world. The story of the "Canaanite woman" is one of the more difficult passages in the New Testament to interpret and apply, and from the context of its occurrence, whether it is Tyre-Sidon, the country where the story takes place, or the nation of the story's heroine, Canaan, the Jewish understanding of "dogs," or Jesus' two nationalistic answers, it does show the tension of religious nationalism in the story. From the modern interpretation of the story, it can be seen that instead of ignoring the tension in the story or rationalizing it from a modern perspective for the purpose of apologetics, it is better to confront the positions that do exist in the story and find ways in which the Christian history of reception can be better interpreted and practiced, and to examine the Christian faith itself. The Christian faith, on the one hand, emphasizes that Christ's redemption is universal, and on the other hand, it makes Christians think that they are "chosen" by God, so that the balance between individuality and commonality is crucial. From a religious point of view, ethnic and racial conflicts caused by religious nationalism can seriously hinder the establishment of God's kingdom. In a way, the birth and development of Christianity was a major achievement of the shift from nationalism to globalization, and the story of this article reflects the hard-won success of this achievement. The doctrines, traditions, and customs of faith may not be surpassed, and the ethics of "love" in faith should transcend the respective interests of nations and countries.

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