

Tool 3: Exploring how the Bible talks about women and men



“When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the attitude of Jesus Christ himself.”

Pope John Paul II, in his “Letter to Women”, 1995

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Introduction: Gender and patriarchy in the church

The Jewish and Christian religions grew out of a world where men dominated in all areas of life: politics, religion, the economy and in the home. Everyone assumed it was true that women and slaves, and even children to some extent, were less than human, and were simply possessions of men.

This is called a patriarchal society, and many societies in the world still operate on the assumption of male superiority.

The Gospel stories, however, show that Jesus defied this patriarchal view of the world:

- He spoke to women in public and risked public disgrace.
- He had women as close friends, discussed theology with them, and even trusted women with the news of his resurrection.



Katharine Jefferts-Schori, Presiding Bishop
Diocese North Dakota, USA.
Source: virtueonline.com

- He affirmed the courage of a woman with a menstrual disorder for breaking a taboo and coming out in public in hope of obtaining healing.
- He challenged women's traditional service role when he told Martha that Mary had the right idea when she preferred to sit and talk with him and learn from him rather than doing housework.
- He scolded his disciples when they would not let children come to him. He put children at the centre of things.
- He openly criticised authoritarian leadership; he directly challenged those who lorded it over others and taught his disciples that service, love and acceptance of everyone was how God calls us to live.

So what went wrong in the Church?

Some say it was when Christianity became formally accepted as a state religion in the Roman Empire when Theodosius I, the successor of Constantine the Great, formally made Christianity the state religion in 380 AD.

Others say it was much earlier, when some disciples of the early church began to argue about which of the apostles to follow and a competitive spirit set in.

And still others refer to selective uses of texts in the Old Testament that describe God as an authoritarian figure who demands absolute obedience to a strict code of rules, rather than using Scriptures that demonstrate the love, grace and mercy of God, who loves all of creation equally.

The Bible: Tool of oppression or liberation?

In the Bible there are examples of both patriarchal and liberating ideas about women. We explore some of these in this tool, and talk about more positive ways to use Scripture.

Many Christians ignore the liberating strands in our Scriptures. They tend to focus on the patriarchal ideas which support their own social or cultural views about women's inferiority. This raises questions about the way that our cultural and social prejudices affect the way that we read the Scriptures. Tools 12 and 13 specifically look into how it has been possible that the Bible has been misused to justify prejudices, and how to avoid these pitfalls. They show how we can read the Bible in ways that allow the Holy Spirit to speak into our lives and our world in fresh ways that are more consistent with the Gospel.

Patriarchal attitudes towards women have continued throughout the life of the Church all over the world. Even though women were very active in the early missionary activity of the church, they were gradually excluded from leadership positions. Reasons given were that women were sexually impure, intellectually limited and passive. Even today, some churches say that women are psychologically unsuited to be ordained. The church has also insisted that women should focus on the home because of their natural roles as caregivers, since they give birth.

Although many senior church leaders no longer accept these arguments, many of these perceptions and attitudes about women continue today. Often this is not a conscious undermining of women, but is the result of an uncritical acceptance of social assumptions about women and men.

There are still ways in which these narrow interpretations of Scripture undermine the equality and dignity of both men and women in churches. This happens:

- when women are excluded from office or leadership just because they are women;
- when churches use language in the church liturgy and official pronouncements that refers to God's people as male ('sons of God', 'all men'),
- when religious language defines God exclusively as male and does not consider the many other ways of describing God that occur in our Scriptures,
- when the church exploits women's work, e.g. when women are paid less for the work they do, and when they are expected to take on service and nurturing roles just because they are women,
- when women are sexually violated or abused by priests or ministers, or when the church does not challenge sexual abuse of women among their members or in society.



Time to talk

- In what ways do these things happen in your church?
- What are other examples of the way patriarchy operates in your church?
- What are the signs of change in your church?

Promoting a more balanced theological understanding

To open up the conversation about the theological foundations of gender justice, this tool explores different biblical texts and offers alternative perspectives. You will find some material that can be used to deepen your own understanding or for discussion in a group.

In Practical Tool 2 you will find a summary of an exciting method of reading the Bible called **Contextual Bible study**. If we are to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying through these ancient sacred texts, we need to think deeply about when the verses were written, for whom and why; and how they might apply in our society and in our lives today, given that our lives and perspectives are so different.

Biblical texts that support gender discrimination

The Old Testament

Biblical scholar, Cheryl Exum⁵, lists a number of ways in which women are treated in the Hebrew (Old Testament) Scriptures:

- Women are mostly described in relationships of subjugation to men: few have names, and most women are described according to their husband, son or father
- Women are often described as victims: courageous survivors' stories are omitted
- Women do not tell their own stories: men put words in their mouths
- Being silent about women's pain
- Women's sexuality is usually described in terms of the virgin, the mother or the whore, while men's sexuality is never labelled
- Women are often depicted as passive and men as active
- Women are expected to submit to authority and not to challenge it. Violence is often used to enforce this submission.
- Women are shown to operate in the home while men dominate both in public and at home, regardless of intellect, ability or choice.



Time to talk

Doing your own biblical research

Look up the following passages in your Bible and try to discover how many of the comments, on Cheryl Exum's list, apply to the women in these stories:

- Michal in 1 Samuel 14 & 18 and in 2 Samuel 6
- Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11
- Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:1-22
- Vashti in Esther 1
- The Jewish girl (servant of Naaman's wife) in 2 Kings 5:1-19
- Hagar in Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:9-21.

Can you add any other ways in which women are marginalised in these or other New Testament stories?

⁵ *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Series.215; Gender, Culture, Theory, 3. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.

Lost in translation: The Creation stories in Genesis

The creation stories are basic to many other Scriptures, and have probably influenced gender relations in the church and society more than any others. So it is worth revisiting them. There are two stories of the creation of human beings (male and female) in Genesis.

Story 1: Genesis 1:26-28 (Common English Bible version)

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth." ²⁷ God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and be good stewards of it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground."



Time to talk

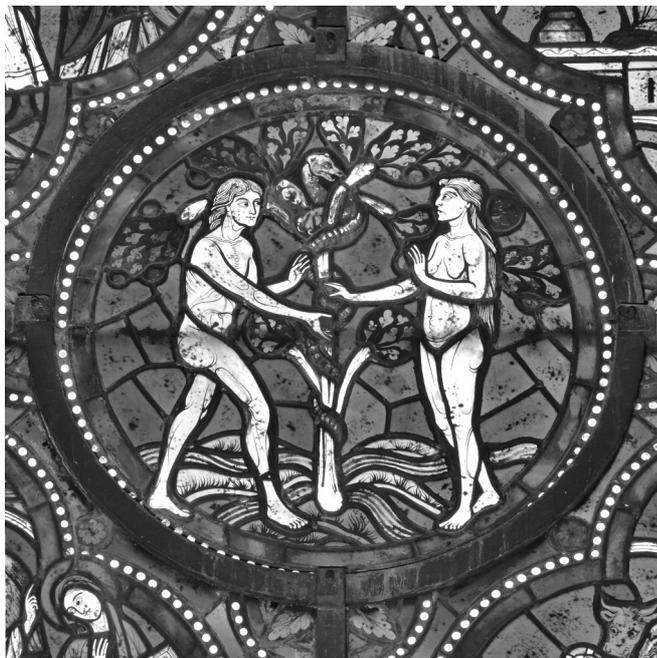
Think and talk about these accounts by reflecting on the following questions:

- What does this account tell us about the way in which men and women were created?
- If both men and women are created in God's image, how should we then see one another?
- Who, according to this account, has more authority – men or women?
- Who is responsible for reproduction and care for children?
- Who is to be the steward of the environment? How are they to treat plants, animals and the earth?

Story 2: Genesis 2:7, 18-24 (New International Version)

⁷ God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. ¹⁸ Then God said, "It's not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." ¹⁹ Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the ground and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them. And whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ Now the man named all the livestock, all the birds in the sky, and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was to be found. ²¹ So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep

sleep, and while he was sleeping, he took one of the ribs and closed up the place with flesh.²² Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken from the man, and he brought her to the man.²³ The man said: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She will be called a Woman for she was taken from a Man."²⁴ This is the reason that a man leaves his father and mother and embraces his wife, and they become one flesh.



Source: [Le_Mans_-_Cathedrale_St_Julien_CV_01en_wikipedia.org](https://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Mans_-_Cathedrale_St_Julien_CV_01en)



Time to talk

Both creation stories show that human beings are meant to be in relationship with each other and with God. But the way they do this is very different.

The second presents the man (Adam) as created first, and then the woman.

- How does this influence how people understand right relationships between men and women?
- Have you heard this passage preached on before, and how has it been used?
- What are some of the consequences for women (and men) in your community?

Some notes on translation

Genesis was originally written in the Hebrew language. Because the Bible is so old and has been translated into almost every language on earth, some meanings can be lost in the process of translation. Hebrew scholar Phyllis Trible⁶ has shown that this is what has happened to this story.

Human or man?

The word translated as *the man* in English, was *ha-adam* in the Hebrew. This literally means “*creature of the earth*.” So it would be more accurately translated as “the human”, which is gender neutral. It is not until the end of the passage, after the second human is created, that the human recognises himself as *is* (man) and his helper as *issa* (woman).

Rib or side?

The way the Hebrew is more accurately interpreted to mean that the one human was split into two equal sides (*tsele*).

Helper or servant?

The word translated as *helper* in the English was used in the Hebrew for military support (Isaiah 30:5). The same word (*ezer kenegdo*) was used to describe the way in which God helps God's people (Deuteronomy 33:29). So this word means something like helping each other as equals.



Time to talk

What does this mean for gender relations today?

Reflect on the revised version of the Genesis 2 story, below, that has inserted words more closely reflecting the Hebrew original.

- How does this change your picture of a healthy relationship between men and women?
- If the man recognises the women as his equal, strong helper in times of trouble, as in the original Hebrew meaning, how does this affect your view of gender roles in the home, in church and at work?

⁶Phyllis Trible 1978, 1986. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Augsburg Fortress Publishing.

- If this version of the story were used more in our churches, how would it change the churches' teachings and practices related to marriage and the roles of men and women in home, church and society? How would it affect gender relations in society?
- In what ways can you use it in your own church?

New International Version, with Hebrew meanings inserted

⁷ God formed the human (*ha-adam*) from the dust of the ground and breathed into the human's [*ha-adam*] nostrils the breath of life, and the human (*ha-adam*) became a living being. ¹⁸ Then God said, "It's not good that the human (*ha-adam*) is alone. I will make the human (*ha-adam*) a helper (*ezer kenegdo*) suitable for the human (*ha-adam*)."¹⁹ Now God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the ground and all the birds of the air, and brought them to the human (*ha-adam*) to see what the human (*ha-adam*) would name them. The human (*ha-adam*) gave each living being its name. ²⁰ The human (*ha-adam*) named all the livestock, all the birds in the sky, and all the wild animals. But no suitable helper (*ezer kenegdo*) for the human (*ha-adam*) was to be found. ²¹ So God caused the human (*ha-adam*) to fall into a deep and heavy sleep, and while the human (*ha-adam*) was sleeping, took one of the sides (*tsela*) and closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then God made a woman (*issa*) from the side he had taken and brought her to the human being. ²³ The human (*ha-adam*) said, "This one finally is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. She will be called a Woman (*issa*) because from a Man (*is*) she was taken."²⁴ This is the reason that a man (*is*) leaves his father and mother and embraces his wife, and they become one flesh.



Time to talk

Genesis and teachings about the man as the head of the household

Read Genesis 3: 16-20, in which God goes through all the consequences of Adam and Eve's decision to eat of the fruit.

It is interesting that it is only AFTER the first humans have sinned against God and gone their own way, that:

- God declares that "your husband...will rule over you".
- Adam takes it upon himself to name the woman (Eve), thus assuming authority over her as the original human did when naming the animals.

Discuss the following questions, or any others you may have:

- Do you think it was God's original intention in creating humankind that the 'husband should rule over his wife' (vs 16)? How does knowing this affect your understanding of what might be a 'redeemed relationship' between men and women?
- How might this re-reading of Genesis 3 be helpful to the churches' work of bringing about gender justice and ending gender based violence in church and society?⁷

New Testament Passages

A number of passages in the New Testament make reference to the creation story to justify or try to impose unequal power relationships and restrictive roles on men and women. We have seen above that this contradicts the original intention of the texts.⁸

The role of women in the Church

There are 3 passages that are often used to argue against women in leadership roles in church.

The writer of 1 Timothy 2:11-14, who used his own patriarchal interpretation of the creation story to argue that women can only have a subordinate role in the church:

"A woman must be a learner, listening quietly and with due submission. I do not permit a woman to be a teacher, nor must woman domineer over man; she should be quiet. For Adam was created first, and Eve afterwards; and it was not Adam who was deceived; it was the woman who, yielding to deception, fell into sin. Yet she will be saved through motherhood – if only women continue in faith, love and holiness, with a sober mind."

The same argument can be found in other New Testament Epistles, such as 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35, which was written by Paul.



Patriarchal interpretation of sections of both the Old and New Testament argue that women can only have a subordinate role in the church. Source: PACSA

⁷ Prof Christina Landman offers a reinterpretation of the story of Eve, when she points out that after being cast out of paradise, Eve actually restored humanity's relationship with God as the God of Grace (not of punishment) when she gave her children names reminding us of God's grace

⁸There are a number of reasons for this, and theologians and church historians have grappled with this question for many years. This is beyond the scope of this publication.

The following passages make the same basic point:

- Ephesians 5: 21-28 (read the whole passage in light of vs 21)
- Colossians 3:18ff
- Titus 2:4-5
- 1 Peter 3:1-7



Time to talk

How might the earlier version of the creation story change your response to these teachings?

Academics who study the history and origins of the Bible have gone back to the ancient manuscripts from when these Scriptures were first written down. Some found that in many cases, the verses about the inferior position of women were added later, often in the margin of the original text. In other cases, one can see these were not part of the original text because later manuscripts insert the verses in different places, showing that they may have also been taken from notes in the margin of the originals.

It is important to know the history of the Bible, if one is to make sense of some of the contradictions we see in these passages, especially because they seem to directly contradict what Paul was actually living out in his ministry.

Some biblical historians point out that Paul was most likely influenced by his Jewish culture, which was very patriarchal. He wrote Galatians 3.28-29 much later, which seems to take him back to Genesis 1, which makes no reference to a distinction between male and female, but all humans were created in God's image.

There are places in Paul's letters and in Acts, which show that he worked closely with a number of women leaders in the early church. For example, in Romans 16, Paul mentions as many as nine women among the leaders he greets, who are understood to be prominent leaders in their own right: Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Tryphana, Tryphosa, Julia, Nereus' sister and Rufus' mother ('a mother to me also' in verse 13).

It is clear from the way he talks that he has worked closely with them, and respects their leadership in the church. For example, Paul says that Priscilla 'is prominent among the apostles' (vs 7), which implies she may have actually been one of the early apostles. Biblical historians have found evidence that Priscilla was literate in both Greek and Latin, and may have even written down some of Paul's letters (as he did not write his own letters but dictated them).



Time to talk

- How would this information strengthen a lobby for women's ordination in the church?

This question about church leadership is explored in more depth in Tool 9.

- Most of the cultures where Paul ministered were very patriarchal. How might these teachings relate to the culture in which these writers lived? How do they relate to the different cultures that influence us in Africa today?
- What might this mean for how we generally interpret Scripture today?

Something more to think about

- How do we now deal with the problematic passages in the Bible – are they authoritative for women or, indeed, for the whole Church? (What does authoritative mean⁹?)
- How have women dealt with this dilemma in the past?
- What, if anything, has changed and why is it important to begin to deal with passages of Scripture that seem to relegate women to the kitchen and to child care?
- Have you heard of Contextual Bible Study and do you think it might be helpful? (See more about this approach to Bible study in Practical Tool 2.)

"I am a male and it suited me to have a God made in my image and to have a Redeemer who is like me."

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Tool 12 tries to address some of these thorny questions.

⁹ *Authoritative* basically means that "it is the Holy Spirit that helps us to confess the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. But what does this mean? Some people understand this literally and for them the Bible is 'God's Word' because God personally dictated every letter and word. Others believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the Bible to write about God's great deeds in their **own** language, culture, idiom and experiences. Therefore we can only understand the Bible, not literally, but within context. ...A very important aspect of respecting the authority of the Word of God is not to force your own preferences or prejudices into your reading of God's Word, but to take the Bible's intended nature and purpose very seriously." Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM): *"What does the Bible say about homosexuality?"* In Gennrich, D. Ed. 2013 *Men and Masculinities in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: PACSA and Sonke Gender Justice.

The Good News

Jesus' positive view of women is consistently evident throughout all four of the Gospels. Jesus treated women as equals and definitely not as sex objects or legal possessions. Jesus considered women worthy of being a part of his circle. This section explores some inspiring examples.

Women were disciples of Jesus



Time to talk

- Can you think of examples of women disciples in the Gospels?

Complete the table below:

- Some Scripture verses are provided – read them and talk about the women and how Jesus related to them.
- Think of other Scripture verses that refer to similar women, and add the verses and names of the women into the table below.

Roles women played in Jesus' ministry	The women's names	Bible verses that tell their stories
Women followed Jesus' ministry and supported it.		
Some women simply provided hospitality.		Luke 8:1-3
Roles women played in Jesus' ministry	The women's names	Bible verses that tell their stories
Others showed a deep understanding of his ministry.		John 11:27
Some women openly demonstrated their love and respect for Jesus and His ministry.		Luke 7:36-50 Mark 14:3-9

Jesus respected women

During the time of Jesus, the women in Jewish culture were not educated, were only seen to be saved through the faith of their husbands: in fact they were not thought to have souls at all! Men who spoke to women in public had to undergo cleansing rituals for having been defiled publicly. Women were regarded as ritually unclean during their menstrual period, and were forbidden from preparing food or going out in public.



Time to talk

Jesus the first male gender activist?

Look up the following passages, which contain examples of Jesus relating publicly to women and even discussing theological ideas with women.

- Talk about any of the stories that interest you:
 - How do you think Jesus must have been received for breaking all these taboos?
 - How do you think these women must have felt?
 - How do you think the other characters in the story must have felt?
 - What do you think Jesus was trying to do?

- The women who anointed Jesus (Matt 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8; Luke 7:36-50);
- The woman who had menstrual bleeding for 12 years (Luke 8: 43-48);
- Syro-Phoenician woman (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-39);
- Samaritan woman (John 4:7-12);
- Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:20-33)

What are some of the prejudices against women in your community today, and how do you think Jesus would have handled them if he were walking your streets today? How do you think Jesus wants us to respond to these today, as his witnesses?

Women as sex objects or 'war trophies'

Jesus challenged the attitudes held by many people towards women as sex objects. There was a Jewish practice (Deuteronomy 21:10-14) that allowed a man to take any woman captured in war as his wife. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:28 against adultery prohibits men to lust after any women in his heart. This means he may not even think about her as a sex object, let alone take her as a sexual possession or trophy of victory in war.

Jesus took women's lives and struggles seriously

Jesus had many interactions with women during the course of his ministry, showing that he cared deeply for the plight of women in his day. For example:

- the healing of the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-17)
- the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter who was possessed by demons (Matt 15:21-28; Luke 13:10-17)
- the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Matt 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-39);
- Jesus' encounter with the adulterous woman (John 8:1-11).



Time to talk

In his parables and teachings, Jesus uses symbols and imagery from women's lives, for example weddings, bread-making and childbirth showing that he was reaching out to women by using things they could relate to.

- What are some of the things that matter in women's lives today? It might be interesting, if you are in a mixed group, for the men and women to answer this question separately, and then come together to share their thoughts.
- Are these often mentioned in sermons and teachings in your church?
- How do you think it would make ordinary church women feel if sermons related to their life struggles more? How would it affect relationships between men and women, if at all?

Women were among Jesus' close friends

Women were his friends and he remained close to his mother. Think of the three Marys – who were they, and what were their relationships to Jesus? Among other things, they were the ones who were present during Jesus' last hours, at the cross, burial and resurrection (Matt 27:55-61; 28:1-10; Mark 15:40-16:11; Luke 23:55-56; 24:1-12, 22-24; John 19:25-27; 20:1-18).

Women were the first to proclaim the Good News

The Gospels of Mark, Luke and John record that women were the first to receive the Good News of the Risen Christ.

Both Mark and John record Mary Magdalene as the first person Jesus appeared to.

Jesus recognised that women can be witnesses and messengers of important news, which was not permitted for women then.

In Luke, we see that the disciples first refused to believe Mary (Luke 24:11), but they were proved wrong.

Mary Magdalene is now often called the first evangelist, because Jesus sent her to go and share the Good News with the disciples. (John 20:17-18).

"I used to think that God was male: God the Father and God the Son. Then someone told me that in both the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, the Holy Spirit is in the feminine gender. I feel a bit different about the Holy Spirit knowing that. Somehow it makes me feel closer to the Holy Spirit."
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Time to talk

- What are some of the arguments you have heard against women becoming pastors or priests?
- How could your understanding of how Jesus related to women help you to argue more effectively for the ordination of women and more women lay leaders in your church?

The personal image of God

The 2008 gender audit research discovered that most churches use exclusively masculine language for God, in their liturgies, Bible versions, hymns and sermons. If God is Spirit, then God cannot be limited to any human form. For human beings to relate to God, we tend to personalise God and use images that make sense to us. There is nothing wrong with doing that, as long as we do not assume that our images of God define all of who God is.

It may be helpful to use a number of different images for God to avoid becoming fixed in only one understanding of God, as this can help us to get to know God better.

It is exciting to discover that there are a number of other ways for describing God, which are found in the Scriptures. Here are some examples:

- You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth (Deuteronomy 32:18¹⁰).
- For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labour, I will gasp and pant (Isaiah 42:14).
- As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you (Isaiah 66:13).
- Like a mother, God teaches her children to walk, holds them in her arms and feeds them (Hosea 11:3-4).
- God is described as the woman who searches for the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) to balance the shepherd who looks for the lost sheep.
- God as a baker-woman: Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21; John 6:31-35.
- God as different animals: mother bear – Hosea 13:8, 2 Kings 2:24; mother eagle – Exodus 19:4, Deuteronomy 32:11-12, Job 39:27-30; mother hen – Matthew 23:27, Luke 13:34, 2 Esdras 1:27-30; Psalm 17:8-9, Psalm 91:4.

"I asked my little boys about their image of God. They were emphatic about God's maleness, telling me with great certainty: 'Well of course he's male – God is a boy's name!'"

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¹⁰Professor Gerald West from the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa explains that this is an example of "how feminine images for God are used (here and elsewhere in the Bible). Though the noun, 'rock', is a masculine noun (grammatically), the images associated are female. ...The rock (probably of the wilderness wandering [in Exodus]) is the rock who provides sustenance (water) and even life itself, like a mother". (Email communication, February 2014)



Time to talk

God described in different ways

- Look at the above Scripture passages. Talk about the image(s) of God you have found. Which ones do you find helpful? How do they enrich your understanding of God?
- How do you imagine God?
- How does the way that you see God make you feel about your relationship with God?

Attachment: Alternative contextual readings of Scripture: three examples

1. The Christian Women's Ministries (CWM) acknowledge their foremothers in the faith¹¹

The women in the Bible are our foremothers in the faith. At the General Congress of the Christian Women's Ministries that was held from 4 to 7 July 2013 in Port Elizabeth, we spoke about our mothers, and we were once more amazed at what we learn from them.

We sometimes think of Eve as a bad woman who brought humanity to a fall. However, although she sinned and was removed from paradise with Adam, we can find in Eve a remarkable woman of faith. When her children were born, she gave them names like Cain and Abel and Seth, names that originally remind us of God's grace, and not of His punishment. Thus Eve became our foremother in restoring her relationship with God ... and by proclaiming God as the God of Grace. And it is good for us women today to know God as the God who speaks with the grammar of grace.

Let us look at Rebecca next. And for that, let's go to Genesis 27:46. Rebecca was angry with the women her son Esau preferred, and she expressed her dissatisfaction with the words "I am now sick and tired..." Women today should take their cue from that. We too should sometimes say, "We are now sick and tired..." We are sick and tired of abuse against women and children. We are sick and tired of poverty and exclusion and a whole bunch of other things. So, let's say that with our mother Rebecca. We are now sick and tired.

¹¹Article written by Rev Professor Christina Landman. URCSA News, September 2013.

Before Rebecca there was Hagar. She was an Egyptian slave given by Pharaoh to Sarah when Pharaoh wanted Sarah as his wife but found out that she was Abraham's wife. When Sarah out of jealousy let Abraham chase Hagar and her son Ismael into the desert, Hagar sat down with her son and waited to die. And then God spoke to her, and showed her the way forward, out of the desert. Then Hagar gave God a name, the true God she previously had not known. "You are God who sees me", she called God (Genesis 16:13). We women take hope and inspiration from that: Our God sees us.

Most important are the songs sung by women in the Bible. The women were the ones that transferred the faith from generation to generation by singing songs of faith to their children. Psalm 46 was a song sung by the women standing around the bed where a child is born. In this song God is praised as Immanuel, "God who is with us". In the four great songs assigned to women in the Bible the theme of God as Immanuel is repeated. The first is the song of Miriam in Exodus 15, when God is praised for leading the Israelites out of slavery. The second is Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2, where she praises God for giving her the long-awaited child Samuel. The third is Deborah's song of victory in Judges 5. God was with them in conquering the enemy. God is Immanuel. The fourth is of course Mary's song, the Magnificat, the great song in Luke 1:47ff which she sang after she has heard that she was going to bear the Messiah. And when the angel Gabriel told her that she must call the son Immanuel, it came as no surprise to her. Immanuel is a name given to God over the centuries by women.

God is with us. He protects and sustains us. This is the message the women of the CWM wants to give to the world. God will never leave us, not in birth and not even in the grave. He is Immanuel.



Time to talk

- What is the most important insight you gain from reading the above statement of the CWM women?
- How can you use this insight in working for gender transformation in your church?

2. The five young virgins who carried extra oil

Read the extract below, from a talk by Reverend Professor Christina Landman¹², and then discuss the questions to engage more deeply with her alternative reading of the parable of the five young virgins: Matthew 25:1-14.

"I often preach about the 10 young [bridesmaids, or] virgins, and especially the five wise virgins. I use the word 'virgins' because they would have been young girls if they were bridesmaids – younger than 12 and a half, because at 12 and a half years you were married. If you were 13 you were already seen as a spinster. These virgins were in a sense the most powerless people in the society of Jesus' time. They made no decisions about themselves; the father married them off and then every nine months they would give birth. That was their lives, and then they died at the average age of 26.

Imagine Jesus sitting with his disciples talking about virgins. When men get together, do they usually talk about virgins? No. Do they talk about wise virgins? No. And why were these virgins wise? Because they made their own decisions by deciding to take their own oil. The five other virgins that were not wise said their fathers would provide the oil. These others were buying into the patriarchal discourse [by depending on a man to help them]. The five wise virgins inherited the kingdom."



Time to talk

- Why do you think Jesus chose to use young girls as his subject? Do you think it would have been easy for them to make their own decisions? What point do you think he was trying to make?
- What does this say about Jesus' view of the patriarchal norms of his day, and his approach to them?

¹² Rev Professor Christina Landman. 2009. *Religious Discourses Supporting Patriarchy. In The Evil of Patriarchy in Church, Society and Politics*. Stellenbosch: A consultation hosted by IAM (Inclusive and Affirming Ministries)

3. Women who advocated for their rights to inheritance and land¹³.

Read Numbers 27:1-11.

Then read the sermon below, on a little-known Old Testament story.



Time to talk

While you are reading the story and the sermon, keep the following questions in mind and discuss them afterwards:

- What human rights do women in your community and country not have but need to obtain, in order to live full and prosperous lives?
- Talk about what lessons you can draw from this story and this sermon for the ongoing struggle for gender equality.



Virginia Muwanigwa, Loveness Jambaya Nyakujarah and Cheryl Hendricks at a meeting of the Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance in Malawi, 2012.

Source: Katherine Robinson

¹³Sermon for Women's Day, March 11 2013. Elaine Neuenfeldt; *Lutheran World Foundation – Women in Church and Society, World Communion of Reformed Churches*. http://old.wcrc.ch/sites/default/files/Liturgy_0.pdf

"Five women are named in this story. In this family, there were no men, no husbands, no brothers left, only five daughters Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and the entire congregation to request their rights to inherit their father's land.

And the request echoed among all. We can imagine that maybe the whole congregation was involved, whispering: are women allowed to speak publicly? And even to request something? What do they think? Do they want to change our traditions? It was always like this, said an old woman shaking her head!!

That is an audacity, screamed a man walking away.

But, there was a need for a discussion, after they dare to come publicly to ask for a revision of the law given by God. The five women standing before the congregation and the leaders, asked for a change in the law, because the law was discriminating, unjust. But, we can also imagine that the daughters were not alone there and what they were asking was not isolated in the life of the people walking in the wilderness.

The memories were still fresh with Miriam questioning the style of Moses' leadership. These women remembered how brave Miriam was asking and arguing for a shared leadership. But they also remembered how hard this was for her; they were with her, caring for her, singing and praying, while she was outside the camp, waiting for her health and skin to recover. Here again, this group of women discussed beforehand, strategised and planned. And the five took the courage to ask.

And the issue was brought to the table. It was not possible to ignore. The people had in the memory experiences of discussing issues: Moses sitting and listening to all those who came with conflicts, and problems....

A conversation took place: Moses and God discussed. And God spoke to Moses, who announced to the people: "What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right" (Num 27:7).

And more... "The law must change." It is not an isolated case only for these five women. These women had the courage to struggle for the law to be changed. It was not an individual request for a personal benefit. The personal need was turned into a political and communitarian request. It was not only an act of good will with these women, but an intentional change of the structure acknowledging that this is justice for all.

This reflection today...challenges us to reflect. There are times when we have to struggle for laws that are discriminatory and unjust. The only thing to do is to struggle for change. There must be redoubled efforts so that processes, mechanisms and policies be set in place so that justice can be done. Good intentions alone are not enough. From this story, we learn of the need to work to

network and organise women as subjects of change that their voice will be heard, and advocate for channels to be established where justice and rights may flow.

And the story could finish here, with the right thing done, justice achieved, and all were happy. But not. It is not always like a Hollywood happy end. There is always the repercussions; the moment after the movement, when preserving what was accomplished is the most difficult challenge.

Further in the 36th chapter of Numbers, suddenly the male relatives of the tribe to which Zelophe had belonged wake up to what from their point of view is an omission in the new rule proposed by the women: the women must marry inside their own tribe, in order to preserve the property within the tribe! It seems that rights for women is ok, but, keep them limited. The most remarkable thing at this moment is that there is NO sign of conversation among the leaders, or between Moses and God to institute this limitation. This is directly decided without consultation. The women's reaction does not appear at all.

It is sad, yes, but mostly it is challenging again and again: maintaining rights and achievements is not an isolated event. It is always a process. It is always a continuing journey. Being vigilant about the accomplishments and working constantly to maintain the rights and justice is the learning from this story. And the establishment of clear and intentional structures and mechanisms in institutions and organisations is one step to sustain justice.

And even with clear paths, we still need to remember International Women's Day; we still need to remember the statistics and realities... and constantly pray and act for Justice for all – women and men, gender justice.

May the God of life, leading us for Justice and Peace, help us in wisdom! Amen"

