S. J. Nortjé: The role of women in the fourth gospel.

ABSTRACT
This paper investigates the question whether the Gospel of John treats women any differently from what was customary in ancient Israel and New Testament times. The first section deals with this aspect as comparative material. What follows is a systematic, albeit cursory treatment of the sections of the gospel where women feature in the text. Feminist theology is not a vital part of the discussion but is treated as a phenomenon seeking to secure itself in Scripture passages.

0 INTRODUCTION
0.0 The question of the role of women in today’s society, and more specifically her position in the church and the structure of the church, has been brought forward by the feminist theology as theology of liberation, both of which are rapidly making progress with their sharp criticism on the dominant pattern in society, in culture, in religion, in science and also in theology (Halkes 1978:7). They base their arguments on the prominent role that the New Testament, and specifically John, accord women, in contrast with the position women occupied in that era in religious and public life.

Before we can look at the position which the fourth gospel accords women, and how Jesus saw them, we first have to look at the position of women in ancient Israel.

0.1 Women in ancient Israel
The role of women is frequently measured against the well-known prayer, “Thank you, O Lord, that I am not a dog, a child or a woman.” All her life a woman remained a minor. She was not self-supporting or independent. According to Exodus 20:17 and Deuteronomy 5:21 a man’s wife was named among his possessions, along with his house and land, his servants and maids, his ox and his ass. The wife called her husband “master” or “lord”, in the same way that a slave addressed his master. However, a woman was by no means on the level of a slave, and according to Deuteronomy 21:14 a man could sell his slaves, or even his daughter (Ex. 21:7), but he could never sell his wife.

All the hard domestic work certainly fell to her; she took care of the flocks, worked in the fields, cooked the food, did the spinning and so on. This didn’t lower her status, but merited her consideration (Pr. 31:10-31). According to Exodus 21:17, Leviticus 20:9 and Deuteronomy 21:18-21; 27:16, the law condemned offences of children against their mother as much as those committed against their father. The decalogue commanded that equal honour be given to father and mother alike (Ex. 20:12). An Israelite wife was loved and listened to by her husband, for example Isaac (Gn. 24:67) and Jacob (Gn. 29:18, 30), and was treated by him as an equal, for instance Samuel’s mother (1 Sm. 1:4-8, 22-3) (De Vaux 1974:4). The most illustrative example of the love and honour of a man for his wife is found in the Song of Songs. A man could divorce his wife, but a woman could not ask for a divorce (De Vaux 1974:34).

A woman could at times take part in public affairs, but as a rule she was excluded from public and legal actions, and the witness of a woman was not accepted. Despite this there were several women in Israel who were honoured as heroines for the roles they played:
Deborah and Jael (Jdg. 4-5), and the book of Esther tells how the nation was saved by a woman (De Vaux 1974:39).

In the religious sphere participation by a woman was so curtailed that she was not allowed to partake in the cult and public worship. According to Exodus 38:8 women had been in service at the entrance to the tabernacle. On the grounds of post-Biblical literature, they were presumably praying there (De Goeij 1982: 10). Women could, however, visit the synagogue and temple, but always had to sit apart from the men and were not allowed to participate in any activities. They were exempted from prayers that were bound to a certain time and they did not have to recite the shema-prayers three times a day. They were obliged, however, to do the great Jewish prayer, the eighteenth prayer and the thanksgiving prayer at the table (De Goeij 1982:11).

As far as the study of the Torah was concerned, the men kept themselves busy to ascertain the deeper meaning of the text, but women were not meant to occupy themselves daily with it (although it hadn't been forbidden).

On the grounds of the above-mentioned facts, it appears that a woman's participation in public and religious life was limited, but to a certain extent permissible, and that she was expected to keep herself quiet and busy with the maintenance of her house and family. That does not necessarily mean that she was despised or belittled as a woman. She was still expected to keep the law and subjugate herself to the will of God.

0.2 Women in New Testament times

We can say that women had an inferior social and religious role at the time of the actions of Jesus. It is difficult to determine, from the small amount of knowledge available in the gospels concerning women, to what extent Jesus accorded her a different role than what was usual in ancient Israel. Jesus was no social revolutionary, and the purpose of the gospels was not to describe social changes that his preaching could have affected. It is noticeable, however, from a few examples that Jesus acted in contrast with the prevailing culture as far as women were concerned, namely:

Matthew 15:21-8: The Canaanite woman.
Luke 7:36-50: The sinner that salved the feet of Jesus.
Luke 8:2-3: Women that served him with their possessions.
John 4:27: Jesus in conversation with the Samaritan woman.
John 8:10-11: The forgiveness of Jesus for the adulterous woman.

From these examples it appears that Jesus accepted women for what they were. It is, however, difficult to judge, because the gospels do not discuss women as such. In the letters of Paul a lot more is said about women in the congregation, but for every text in favour of the participation of women there is also a countertext, for example Ephesians 5:24 (a woman must be submissive towards a man) and Ephesians 5:21 (man and woman must be mutually submissive).

My conclusion is that the role of women have to be studied in every separate congregation, and that no general conclusions should be made. The fourth gospel is a good example of this, as the evangelist offers some ecclesiastical attitudes of his time (Brown 1979:186).

0.3 Is John a feminist gospel?

0.3.0 In the ranks of the feminist theology, the Gospel according to John is designated as
the feministic gospel or, alternatively, the gospel that was meant and written for women. They find the reason for this point of view in the prominent role that the evangelist accorded women, during the ministry of Jesus. The answer as to whether John is a feministic gospel or not, can only be found after a careful study and analysis of the sections where women are specifically mentioned or the subject of women is raised by implication, in the context of the purpose of the whole gospel.

0.3.1 The positive contribution of the feministic theology is that the needs and potential of women are highlighted from their own experience of faith (Halkes 1978:8) and that the theology and church order are therefore made less one-sided.

The negative aspect of the feministic theology, however, surpasses the positive in that the feminists analyse and interpret the Bible from their point of view. Quite often they force the text to speak as they would like it to and a feministic interpretation is forced upon it to serve their purpose. An example of this is Halkes's description (1978:12) of the first appearance of Jesus after his resurrection: "De vrouwen gingen terug en die kwam Christus zelf tegen. Terwijl die discipelen en de engelen het lege graf zagen" (the italics are mine). On account of this explanation it seems as if the women went to the grave out of faith in the hope of meeting Jesus there. In reality they were returning to the grave to weep and to balm the body of Jesus. When Jesus appeared to them, they took him to be the gardener until he revealed himself to them. This is an illustration of typically feminist Scripture use.

1 JESUS AND WOMEN IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

1.0 The mother of Jesus (Jn. 2:1-12)

The meaning of the miracle of the wine is not to be found in the miracle as such, but in the relation of this first sign to the rest of the gospel, and especially to the prologue. Already in John 1:18 it is said, "that Jesus is God's only Son, he who is nearest to the Father's heart".

The question is to what extent we are dealing with history and symbolism respectively in the fourth gospel. In this narration of the wedding at Cana it is extremely difficult to differentiate between the historical and the symbolical. There is a general consensus, so it seems, that this narration is not pure history. The symbolism of the incident is indicated by John 1:51, "In truth, in very truth I tell you all, you shall see heaven wide open, and God's angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man." This symbolism of ascending and descending angels suggests that the wedding at Cana is an explication of this symbolism in the form of a historical narrative. This may even be indicative of the so-called higher christology in the fourth gospel.

In this context one should examine the attitude of Jesus towards his family, and in particular towards his mother. Brown (1971:109) refers to Genesis 3 and Revelation 12 and concludes that as "the mother of the Messiah, her role is in the struggle against the Satanic serpent, and that struggle comes to its climax in Jesus' hour. Then she will appear at the foot of the cross to be entrusted with offspring whom she must protect in the continuing struggle between Satan and the followers of the Messiah. Mary is the new Eve, the symbol of the church; the church has no role during the ministry of Jesus but only after the hour of his resurrection and ascension".

Brown (1966:107) accuses many well-meaning commentators of "pious eisegesis", but at this point he is doing exactly the same!
There is no symbolism of the church in this narration. The miracle of the changing of water into wine is not a subtle reference to the eucharist, but in the text it clearly serves to highlight the overriding significance of his doxa (2:11). Therefore Brown is clearly pushing the narration into an ecclesiastical symbolism of which there is little evidence in the context.

What then, one asks, is Mary's role on this occasion? She does not fulfil a symbolic saving (soteriological) function but is instrumental in bringing about a messianic sign (miracle). Even though Jesus creates distance between himself and his mother – which is clearly the meaning of John 2:4 – he does not reject or denigrate her because she is supposedly standing in the way of his messianic function (e.g. Smelik 1977:58), but accepts her suggestion that something ought to be done about the lack of wine. Symbolically she is thus instrumental in bringing about the first miracle in John, which allocates to her a significant role in this gospel, one which she shares with the other women we shall discuss. Of course one should not press this instrumental symbolism too far. She is, after all, only a background figure in this account. Nevertheless, she does function in a way which is in striking contrast to the role of women of ancient Israel.

We do not meet her again until her presence at the crucifixion. In this instance she is not there in an instrumental capacity, but as a mother in the full and true sense of the word who loves him as her first-born son as any other mother would. If anything, this moving scene is an example of human experience in its most profound form. If feminism is meaningful, then the warm and loving relationship between mother and son is a significant element in true womanhood. Let us consider the scene.

Mary is, in contrast with all the other women, at the cross on account of her motherhood: He is her son, her first-born whom she bore in grief. There is no stronger bond than that between mother and child. It is to this, the last bond of the flesh, that her motherhood clings. But motherhood has to withdraw completely. Already at the wedding in Cana, Jesus forced her back with soft determination, and here he says to her that she should not regard him as her son any longer, but that she should look to the beloved disciple. He takes the place of the eldest son and he takes care of her.

The question is whether a more symbolic meaning should be accorded to the mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple. Schnackenburg (1982:279) is of the opinion that Mary stands for “those who seek true salvation” and the beloved disciple “is the mediator and interpreter of Jesus’ message”. Brown (1979:197) says about this scene, “If the Beloved Disciple was the ideal of discipleship, intimately involved with that Disciple on an equal plane as part of Jesus’ true family was a woman. A woman and a man stood at the foot of the cross as models for Jesus’ ‘own’, his true family of disciples.” Bultmann says that the mother of Jesus represents the Jewish Christians and the beloved disciple the gentile Christians (quoted by Schneider 1978:312) who lived together.

We cannot make these deductions from this text, and it was not originally meant to be interpreted in this way. We can say that the only meaning of the mother of Jesus lies in her continual acceptance of his work of redemption. We receive the testimony for this in Acts 1:14 when she and his brothers are named among those who were always together and who waited for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

We see that Jesus shows the same concern towards his mother as shown towards the other women, when he saw their needs and provided therein.

Remarkably nothing is said in the Gospel of John about the mourning women who
followed Jesus on his way to the cross. It is part of the glory motif of the fourth gospel that the cross is the hour of glorification for Jesus, and not of his humiliation. That is why he turns in divine dignity to his mother to make provision for her.

1.1 The Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:4-42)
At some stage in his ministry Jesus made a point of going through Samaria. The use of the words “he had to pass through Samaria” indicates that there was purpose behind this journey, namely to enter into conversation with a Samaritan woman. John deliberately describes these events in great detail. It is obvious that the meeting with the Samaritan woman is part of John’s mission concern. At the end of Jesus’ stay in this region the Samaritans declare, “... and we know that this is in truth the Saviour of the world” (Jn. 4:42).

From this we gather that Jesus’ visit is not merely an isolated one to show a woman how sinful she is, as is argued by so many commentators. Rather he has a universal ministry in mind beginning with the Samaritans. In this specific ministry the meeting and conversation with the unknown woman is of special importance. The fact that Jesus enquires into her private life is merely the initial stage of a wider purpose. Towards this purpose she is to play an important role and this is the point of the whole narrative. By asking her to go and call her husband, he introduces the theme of calling people to himself. Jesus’ disclosure that she already had five “husbands” is not meant in a derogatory manner. In fact in these words he expresses his sympathy with the woman’s plight of having been abused by men in the past. This fact leads her to suspect that he is a prophet of particular importance. She returns to the village with the message, “Could this be the Messiah?” (4:29). As a result of her message the village folk went out to meet him. The narrative ends with the woman disappearing from the scene but Jesus staying and ministering to the Samaritans for two days.

Considering the narrative as a whole it is clear that the woman is allocated the role of emissary of Jesus to her people. Her witness resulted in the town accepting him as the Messiah. From this it may be concluded that Jesus fully accepted this unknown woman as an instrument in the ministry of the gospel.

1.2 The woman caught in adultery (Jn. 8:1-11)
Although the text of this pericope is suspect there is every reason to accept it as being in agreement with what we read in the Gospel of John. Metzger (1975:220) says in this regard that it could have been part of an oral tradition which was current in a part of the Western church and was incorporated in the text at various places. The United Bible Societies committee judges the matter as follows, “Although the committee was unanimous that the pericope was originally no part of the fourth gospel, in deference to the evident antiquity of the passage a majority decided to print it, enclosed in double square brackets, at its traditional place following Jn 7:52” (Metzger 1975:220).

The textual history matters very little really. As we have the text before us, it must have made sense to someone somewhere. In content it is not un-Johannine and fits the context well. It therefore warrants discussion.

The narrative is well known. What is the role of this, yet another unknown, woman? Seemingly she plays no role whatsoever. She is the passive victim of a conspiracy to get at Jesus. The details are of minor importance to us. What is important, is that Jesus does not
judge or reprimand her. The outstanding feature of this meeting with the Master is his
great compassion for a woman against whom a male population is discriminating by ap­
plying the law rigidly from the male point of view. It is against this discrimination that
Jesus protests. Without condoning her adulterous act, he scourges her accusers and
forgives her sins.

One cannot say that she plays a role of any kind or that she is instrumental in any mis­
sion. She is merely a vulnerable woman and victim of a deceitful plot. Her significance as
a woman lies in the love of Jesus which forgives her sins and opens avenues for a new life.
On the other hand the accusers are accused and unmasked and unforgiven. If anything,
this story shows Jesus’ rejection of male prejudice in favour of a suffering woman. This is
her “role” and message.

1.3 Martha and Mary (Jn. 11:1-44).
A unique situation is depicted here. The set-up is not the usual family structure. We have
two sisters living with a brother. This in itself indicates that the family was not the only
community structure. The raising of Lazarus from the dead is the background for under­
standing the roles of these women. They are intimate friends of Jesus. A special relation­
ship existed between Lazarus and Jesus. This is the setting for the scene to follow. Jesus
deliberately waits until the death of Lazarus before he enters the scene. When he does,
both women more or less accuse him of waiting until it was too late to save their brother.
All the details do not concern us here. What does concern us is that they are called upon to
witness the first resurrection from the dead in the fourth gospel. This miracle is the
ultimate sign of the Messiah. In Jewish law a woman was not allowed to be a witness in a
court of law. In this instance however they are required to be a testimony to the raising of
the dead by the Messiah. This leads to Martha confessing in so many words, “I now
believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who was to come into the world”
(11:27). And here the narrative ends. They are not in any way instrumental in Jesus’
ministry of the raising of the dead. They do play a role as friends who extend warm
hospitality towards Jesus. After the great event they are not called upon to go out to
witness to this fact.

This is typically Johannine. His stories do not seem to have conclusive ends. The
significance of this event lies in the fact that two women are honoured to be the first
witnesses of the ultimate miracle of the Messiah.

1.4 The anointing of Jesus by Mary (Jn. 12:1-7)
This Mary is probably the sister of Martha and Lazarus. At some later stage, during an
evening meal, Mary anoints the feet of Jesus, much to the chagrin of the disciples, in par­
ticular Judas. He sees in her act a mere waste of money. Jesus, however, explains her ac­
tion as a symbolic deed referring to his death. Jesus accepts the sign as a witness to his
forthcoming death. That he accepts such a deed from a woman makes it all the more
significant. Once again we see how Jesus allows a woman to be instrumental in the pro­
claiming of his message. In this instance his death is proclaimed. This is a sign done to him
and not by him, and the fact that it is performed by Mary shows that she understood the
true identity of Jesus when he raised their brother from the dead. In this way she forms
part of the passion narrative and receives a place of honour among the witnesses to Jesus
as the Messiah.
1.5 Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:1-2, 11-18)
There is a certain climactic progression in John's treatment of women in this gospel. If Mary and Martha were the first witnesses to the raising from the dead, and Mary the first to proclaim his death by anointing him, then Mary Magdalene is the first witness to Christ's resurrection. John evidently assigns to women a first position in vital stages of Jesus' ministry. In whichever way we view Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene, it is clear that his doing so is not without meaning. From the narrative it seems obvious that she is chosen to be "the apostle to the apostles" (Brown 1979:170). In Jewish circles it would have been intolerable that a woman should be allowed such an important religious function as witnessing to the Messiah. That she is indeed chosen for this role, indicates divine preference. Once again we have someone elected to be instrumental in this messianic testimony. The fact that it is a woman makes it all the more significant.

2 CONCLUSION
2.0 The role of women in the fourth gospel
The woman in the fourth gospel is above all a woman and her femininity is honoured and accepted. When she is instrumental in the ministry of Jesus, it is as a woman and never as a woman with a chip on her shoulder. She is never exploited or ignored. The fourth gospel does not concern itself with questions like parity, equality, discrimination on the grounds of her sex, and so on. The evangelist subtly weaves her into the pattern of a man's world where she is as at home as he is. What more can and should one say? Why allocate roles to men and women when the evangelist is not concerned with such distinctions? Why force her into a semi-masculine role when the evangelist portrays her in all the tenderness – and vulnerability – of womanhood?

If John the evangelist was the son of Sebedee, then Mary would have been as much a mother to him as she was to Jesus. She never stopped being a mother. The Samaritan woman and the adulteress were vulnerable. Their meeting with Jesus neither defeminized nor "liberated" them into an impregnable individualism. The sisters Mary and Martha had a family unity with their brother. They were capable and above all caring. The evangelist does not dwell on their inner family relationships or personal lives. They were, as far as John is concerned, the honoured recipients of a message surpassing the everyday existence. They were witnesses to the resurrection from the dead! As such they were also instrumental in the ministry of Jesus.

Finally, if Jesus is cast by John in a "christology," then women are positioned in a "higher femininity" and not in an individualistic feminism. If the evangelist wanted to cast women in a particular role, it is a distinctly feminine one in which their true potentialities are realized and integrated in the ministry of Jesus.

WORKS CONSULTED


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