

A Feminist Interpretation and Reconstruction of John 7:53-8:11 in the Light Violence against Women and Its Implications Today

Ubong E. Eyo, Ph.D.

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria

Abstract: - This paper investigates “A Feminist Interpretation and Reconstruction of John 7:53-8:11 in the light violence Against Women and its Implications Today.” This comes on the heels of the fact that violence against women is not only a fact of the contemporary times but was there in the days of Jesus Christ. The paper using two major theories of Feminist hermeneutics, especially the Hermeneutics of Recounting Tales of Terror in Memoriam and the Hermeneutic of Documenting Cases Against Women in the Bible and social feminism theories of Radical Feminism and Liberal Feminism. This work brought to the fore that in most interpretation of John 7:53-8:11, the emphasis has been on forgiveness of sin and the issue of ὁ ἀναμάρτητος (that is one without sin) without any note about the andriarchal system of which the ‘adulterous’ woman was a victim of. This paper which used the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as its preferred translation because of its gender sensitivity arrived at the conclusion that, the whole episode was male orchestrated; the Scribes and Pharisees bringing the woman to be judged by Jesus without the man in the alleged “adultery” case tantamount to judging the female fold different from the male fold; and that, there was no actual committing of adultery by the woman who was brought to Jesus, but she was brought to Jesus because of the inferiority, weak and vulnerable place of women in Jesus’ andriarchal community. Hence, Jesus setting the woman free typified the role of religion as the vanguard in ending violence against women.

Key words: Feminism, Andriarchal, violence against women.

I. INTRODUCTION

Often than not, the interpretation given to biblical text have always been such that follows the tradition of the church. Recent studies have shed more lights on some texts of scriptures bringing to the fore views on the same texts from different perspectives of interpretations. Scriptural texts are now interpreted using the same old tools of hermeneutics and exegesis but with more current applications and social concerns. Hence, scriptural texts, stories, parables and events among others are being re-evaluated not only in the light of modern discoveries but in the light of the social concerns of the world among other things. This has given rise to the re-evaluating Pauline concept of slave-master relationship in the light of the generation where slavery has been abolished among other understanding of some passages. New hermeneutics have been developed to help untie some knotting texts. The changes in the religious landscape, enlightenment and varied understanding of cultural practices

have brought to the fore the need to engage in a biblical hermeneutics that can address the prevailing needs of the day. One of such is the feminist hermeneutics with different perspectives and attendant results. Feminist hermeneutics stems from feminist’s social theory.

II. FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

Feminism is a postmodern and an intellectual theory which is predicated upon the thrust that the female gender should not be discriminated against, but should be given equal opportunities and rights just as the male gender all over the world. Elreta Dodds defines this concept as “any organized activity that defends the right of women and says that women should have the same political, economic, social and religious opportunities that men have in the society” (410). This is more or less a “gender sensitive movement geared towards fighting and eradicating all traces of gender inequality globally” (Eyo 84). Part of this movement is the United Nations declaration of November 25th as the International Day for the elimination of violence against women. It is therefore a “theory of sexual stratification of gender difference dealing with its major concern” (Charles 301). It is the course of movements and propagation against all kinds of victimization and restrictions against women. This theory is grounded on the ground that women should not “be discriminated against but should have equal rights and opportunities as their men counterparts all over the world. It is a generalized, wide ranging system of ideas about social life and human experience developed from a woman-centred perspective.” (Eyo 85). Worthy of note is the fact that, the entire purpose of God’s redeeming covenant is not just the glorification of Himself but the liberation of those who are oppressed, marginalized, et cetera. It is in view of this liberative purpose of God that, the place of women in scriptural understanding comes to the fore. Added to this is the significant current global changes in women’s statuses which has come with its attendant understanding and challenges to both the sacred and secular communities. On this heels comes the feminist biblical hermeneutics which is the hermeneutical used in this paper.

Feminist biblical hermeneutics makes women's many varied experiences the major resource for the hermeneutic process, no matter what expression of human life is the focus. From a theological standpoint, A. M. Clifford avers that, this

hermeneutics “enables women to engage in the critical construction of religious meaning in ways that attend to the complex whole of women’s experiences, especially experiences of struggle against dehumanization due to patriarchy” (48). Where texts are concerned, feminist hermeneutics, like most forms of contemporary hermeneutics, holds that the meaning perceived in a text depends on the social setting in which it was produced as well as the social setting in which it is received and handed to. Though there are many typologies of feminist biblical hermeneutics, the paper will apply two of these feminist’s hermeneutics – that of prophetic, liberating tradition which was propounded by Elizabeth Fiorenza and the hermeneutics of recounting tales of terror in memoriam by Phylis Trible. The feminist hermeneutics of prophetic, liberating tradition which is in line with the liberative concern of the entire scriptural message “calls for the liberation of the oppressed as being normative and the key to the interpretation of Biblical texts” (Fiorenza 52). This hermeneutic calls for the reading of the story of the woman who was said to have been caught in adultery from a liberative and prophetic perspective.

On the other hand, the hermeneutics of recounting tales of terror in memoriam is anchored on the examination of feminine metaphors used for God in the scriptures and also focuses on biblical stories of women using rhetorical or literary criticism, seeking to find those things that challenge the subordination of women. The major idea of this theory is to recount the tales of terror in the Bible, especially as it is against womanhood. Stories such as that of the two Tamar (Genesis 38:6-24; 2Sam 13:1-32), Hagar (Genesis 16:1-6); the Levite’s concubine (Judges 19:22-29), Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11:31-40), et cetera. According to Phylis Trible, this hermeneutics retells these “stories of outrage on behalf of their female victims in order to recover a neglected history, to remember a past that the present embodies, and to pray that these terrors shall not come to pass again” (2). These stories allow feminist hermeneutics to connect the past misogynistic stories in the Bible and link them with the present misogynistic treatment of women in the contemporary society. In the case of the text under review, this hermeneutic tends to see the story in John 7:53-8:11 as an horrible event geared towards the feminine gender.

III. THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN JESUS’ TIME

During the era of Jesus’ earthly ministry, two cultural practices were the rule of the day – the Jewish and that of Greco-Roman cultural practices. Even though from the Priestly account of creation (Gen. 1:1-2:4a) Elohim created them male and female which speaks of equality and the Yahwist account of Gen. 2:4b-25 speaks of *’ishāh* (woman) and *’ish* (man) created out of the same being called *’ādām* (a generic name of human being sometimes translated as ‘man’). This Yahwist account is often interpreted by scholars like Matthew Henry and others to mean that a woman was created out of man (male gender). For more on this see Leslie Church (615); Matthew Henry (880); John Calvin (63). Hence, the

conclusion of Church that, “the superiority of the man over the woman...the man is the head of the two sexes, and the woman should be in subjugation” (615). This opinion seems to be not only that of the authors cited above but that of the Jewish culture as shown on a casual reading of Old Testament which represented the religious and cultural practice of Jesus’ era. Even though some scholars like Clarence E. Macartney, Gail Ekanem, Shirley Lees and Mercy Aduyoye among others have tried to paint a picture of feminine characters in Old Testament who played vital roles compared to their male counterparts and also Yahweh as having feminine qualities, these do not nullify the fact that, the Old Testament pictures women as being secondary compared to their male folk (adapted from Eyo, 167-168).

Summarily, the Old Testament begins with a high perspective of woman being equal with man, but ends with woman being subordinate to man. Hence, M. Beeching points out that, “as time went on there was a tendency, under rabbinical teaching to make the man more prominent and to assign to women an inferior role” (1259). This was more an andriarchal than a patriarchal culture because even the youngest male child was valued more than an adult female. This was the gender culture which was prevalent in Jesus’ days.

In respect of the Greco-Roman, worthy of note is the fact that most of the information in respect of women in the period under review are given by men, being that men virtually wrote all the books during the Roman Empire. Gleanings from records of this era show that women, just like slaves were denied political positions and were inferior in status compared to their men, guarded by dogs in a separate chambers, though with some exceptions, in comedies which draw their spectators mainly from men, women were presented as insulting, spiteful, fickle, contentious, nature’s greatest misfit and the normal fate of woman was to be despised and oppressed, especially if she did not enjoy male protection (Oepke, 757).

It is on this note that, Christine Schenk avers that “in 340 BC, Demosthenes wrote, ‘keep mistresses for the sake of pleasure, concubines for daily care of person, wives to bear legitimate children and be faithful guardians of households’” (Schenk, Web). From the foregoing, it can be said that the cultural environment that Jesus lived was not feminine-gender friendly. The life of slaves in some cases was even better than that of a woman. These two cultures may have played out in the narrative under review.

IV. A RECONSTRUCTION OF JOHN 7:53-8:11

The story of this text which is often interpreted from the perspective of Jesus’ forgiveness of sinner without any reference to gender issue is found only in the Fourth Gospel. The text has some problems in respect of its inclusion in the canon of the scripture and interpretation among other issues. All scholars commenting on the originality of this text agree

that the text does not form part of the original Johannine Gospel. Hence Raymond Brown opines that:

This passage is not found in any of the important early Greek textual witnesses in the Eastern provenance (e.g., in neither Bodmer papyrus); nor is it found in the Coptic. There is no commentary by the Greek writers on John of the 1st Christian millennium, and it is only from ca. 900 that it begins to appear in the standard Greek text (335).

The footnote on New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) confirms this non-inclusion of the text in the original manuscripts thus, “the most ancient authorities lack 7:53—8:11; other authorities add the passage here or after 7:36 or after 21:25 or after Luke 21:38, with variations of text; some mark the passage as doubtful”, and Blomberg points out that, “we cannot appeal to this passage in a study of John’s historicity if it most likely did not form part of his autograph”(140).

While having reservation over the historicity of the text, Carson rightly points out that:

Similar stories are found in other sources. One of the best known, reported by Papias (and recorded by the historian Eusebius, H. E. III. Xxxix. 16), is the account of a woman, accused in the Lord’s presence of many sins (unlike the woman here who is accused of but one)(334).

Irrespective of the fact that it is absent in early manuscripts, Donald Guthrie points out that, “it has ancient attestation and there is no reason to suppose that it does not represent genuine tradition”(Guthrie 946). It is good to note that this narrative has a number of parallels with some stories in the other Gospels, and so, we agree with Carson that, “the reason for its insertion here may have been to illustrate 7:24 and 8:15 or, conceivably, the Jews’ sinfulness over against Jesus’ sinlessness” (334). Notwithstanding the lack of agreement in respect of the historicity of this text, this work considers it as it is presently included in the canon. While some scholars interpret this story within the frame of adultery and the act of forgiveness of Jesus (cf Ryle J. C. 69-83; Milne, Bruce 123-127; Whitacre, Rodney A. 203-210 among other scholars), this work joins those who in this story look at the place of women in the case of sexual sin, especially within an andriarchal culture.

The story assumes that Jesus was in the temple again having finished teaching the previous day and everybody having gone home. The time of this scene is “early in the morning and the people came to him.” In the midst of teaching the people by words, an occasion arose for him to teach them by action. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who was just caught in adultery to Jesus. It is good to note that the ‘scribes’ are never mentioned in John and that “the combination (of) ‘scribe and Pharisees’ is typical of Matthew (seven times, of which four occur in the clearly

secondary ‘woes’), and also occurs in Mark (7:5; cf. 7:1 and ‘the scribes of the Pharisees’ in 2:16) and Luke (five times: cf. Acts 23:9). Worthy of note here is that:

The scribes were the recognized students and expositors of the law of Moses, but so central was the law in the life and thought of [the] first-century Palestinian Jews that the scribes came to assume something of the roles of lawyer, ethicist, theologians, catechist, and jurist(Carson, 334).

These were the custodians of the custom and tradition of the people and it must be noted that these were all men.

The custodians of the Jewish tradition called Jesus, διδάσκαλε - *didaskale* a term which doubtless is the equivalent of ραββί - *rabbi*(cf. 1:38) and denotes one who is a teacher. By this, they may have indirectly said that Jesus has the right to teach and interpret the Law of Moses and they will be satisfied with his position on the matter. His position was therefore to be an authority in the matter they were presenting to him. Though we cannot deny their craftiness in setting trap for Jesus, but by calling him διδάσκαλε, they “in effect submit the case to him for decision”(Schnackenburg 164).

The accusation against the woman was that, “this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery and the Law of Moses commanded us to stone such women” (vv. 4-5). There seems to be a kind of ambiguity that trails this text in that, the woman was not accused of fornication (πορνεία - *porneia*) but adultery (μοιχεύω - *moicheuo*). The punishment for both was not the same. The Law of Moses specifies death by stoning only in the case of a betrothed *girl* who is guilty of adultery, but commands that the married woman who commits such a sin should be put to death, though without stating the manner in which this punishment is to be carried out – whether by stoning, strangulation, or in some other way (Deut. 22:23f). Which of the sins did the woman commit? The answer to this therefore determines what punishment she was to receive. The text talks of the later but prescribes the punishment for the former; was this deliberate or a miscarriage of judgment?

The second major problem of the text which is sometimes omitted in the interpretation and implication of this text is the point that, she “was caught in the very act” (v. 4). The requirement of the law is that there must be sufficient evidence to prove this case; circumstantial conditions were not allowed since the witnesses were supposed to have seen the act by themselves. If she was caught in the very act, where was the adulterer (the man)? It takes a man and a woman to commit adultery. Why was only the adulteress presented to face judgment? Was this not a sign of two genders being judged differently? Those who brought the case to Jesus were men and the one to be exonerated was man, putting to the fore the second class treatment to women in Jesus’ andriarchal culture.

A crucial point in this case is the fact that, when Jesus asked them to cast stone on the woman as a sign of judgment. Since they have quoted the Law of Moses, then they should execute the judgment accordingly. It was required by Law that whoever was the prime witness(es) in a case, should be the first to execute the judgment (see Deut 13:9f; 17:7). In this case, no one did. This invariably shows the craftiness and hypocrisy of the men fold. They knew that they were at fault! The question raised by Jesus, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (v.7), was meant to address the hypocrisy of men in this matter. It was not intended to show their original sin but the sin of false accusation and dealing with the woman without fairness. So Jesus question can also read, "he who is without the sin of laying false accusation against this woman, let him cast the first stone according to the law."

Worthy of note in the text under consideration is the fact that, the Scribes and Pharisees brought the woman not for what actually happened, but to tempt Jesus, so that they may have a basis of accusing him (v.6). In this story, the craftiness of the male gender is also brought to the fore. They may have been fully aware of the truth of the matter, but wanted a weaker gender they can use to score a cheap political and religious goal. Women are always regarded as the second class citizens, inferior beings, helpless weaker and vulnerable vessels who could be used at the whims and caprices of men. Why did Jesus' tempters not use their male folk as the bait?

Another critical point in this story is Jesus' statement to the woman, "go and sin no more" (v.11) which has made many scholars to believe that, this was a forgiveness offered in respect of the woman's sin of adultery. In this case, they aver that, Jesus convicted the woman of the sin wherein she was accused and then offered her forgiveness. Such a position is not lucid when compared to other places where Jesus used the same expression. In the story of the man who was healed at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus used the same expression, (see John 5:14), but there is nowhere in the text which avers that the man was sick because of sin. This was the normal way of addressing the Adamic sin every human being where forgiveness was absolutely necessary. In the case of this woman, it was not the sin of adultery or fornication but the forgiveness of sin was geared towards the original sin, which every human has. They brought an alleged accusation of adultery on the woman but Jesus forgave her the original which is in every person born into the world. This is where grace comes in.

On the other hand, if Jesus act of forgiveness on the woman is seen in respect to the alleged act of adultery, then, this invariably speaks of placing equality and equity of all genders before the law. If two people "committed sin" and the male was set free, what was the moral justification to judge the female offender? The action of Jesus here deals with equality of both genders before the law.

Jesus may invariably asked the male bigots, "why did you bring only the woman, where is the man?" This shows the chauvinistic elements of Jesus' andriarchal culture and it speaks of gender injustice against the female folk. It shows a culture in which women were judged by a different canon other than that of the men.

V. GLEANINGS FROM THE STUDY

From the critical study of this text from using feminist hermeneutics, it can be gathered that:

1. The whole episode was male orchestrated by men – the Scribes and the Pharisees who represented both the secular and religious institutions. This was an andriarchal culture where female gender were judged as being inferior to their male counterpart.
2. None of those who accused the woman of adultery was able to sustain the accusation against her – none of them stoned her as was the law concerning prime witness(es).
3. Jesus pronouncement on her to go and sin no more had no bearing on the sin of adultery she was accused of, but was in respect of adamic sin which is inherent in every human being. The action of Jesus here deals with equality of both genders before the law. In this action also, Jesus' show of forgiveness and grace extended to the woman with the command to her not to sin again.
4. The Scribes and Pharisees bringing the woman to be judged by Jesus without the man in the alleged "adultery" case tantamount to judging the female fold different from the male fold.
5. That there was no actual committing of adultery by the woman who was brought to Jesus, but she was brought to Jesus because of the inferiority, weak and vulnerable place of women in Jesus' andriarchal community.
6. Jesus in setting the woman free gave a pointer to the fact religion should be at the forefront of the combating violence against women.

VI. CONCLUSION

Violence against women did not start today neither the fight against it. In the story under review, the scribes represented political/secular institutions while the Pharisee represented the religious institution. Jesus (the word made flesh) was an embodiment of both the religious and the secular institutions in this act of setting the woman free showed that both the religious and secular institutions must together fight against gender violence, especially violence against the feminine gender.

WORKS CITED

- [1]. Beeching, M. "Woman." *New Bible Dictionary*. Ed. D. J. Douglas et. al. Leicester: IVP, 1991. 1258-1259.
- [2]. Blomberg, Craig L. *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*. Leicester: IVP, 2001.

- [3]. Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According to John (i-xii) - Introduction, Translation and Notes*. New York: Doubleday, 1966.
- [4]. Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Trans. Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1994.
- [5]. Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010.
- [6]. Charles, Joseph Okokon. *Sociological Theory: A Historic-Analytical Approach on Man and Society*. Lagos: Serenity, 2010.
- [7]. Church, Leslie F., ed. *Matthew Henry's Commentary*. Jos: Challenge Publications, 1979.
- [8]. Clifford, A. "Feminist Hermeneutics." n.d. *Encyclopedia.com*. 23 October 2015. <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.
- [9]. Dodds, Elreta. *Is God a Chauvinist? The Bible and Women: A Complete Look*. Michigan: Towards the Mark Publications, 2006.
- [10]. Eyo, Ubong E. *Jesus and Women in Johannine Gospel: A Paradigm Shift in an Androcentric Culture and the Implications for the Efik People*. Calabar: Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Calabar, 2016.
- [11]. Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. *In Memory of Her - A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994.
- [12]. Guthrie, Donald. "John." *New Bible Commentary*. Leicester: IVP, 1990. 926-967.
- [13]. Henry, Matthew. *Commentary on the Whole Bible*. Chicago: Operation Mobilization Literature, 1995.
- [14]. Milne, Bruce. *The Message of John*. Leicester: IVP, 1993.
- [15]. Oepke, A. "Woman, Wife." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Abridge)*. Ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans publishing Company, 1985. 751-777. PC Study Bible V5.
- [16]. Ryle, J. C. *Expository Thoughts on John*. Vol. 3. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009.
- [17]. Schenk, Christine. *Jesus and Women*. n.d. Internet. 05 June 2013. <<http://www.cta-usa.org/wicl/4jesusandwomen.html>>.
- [18]. Schnackenburg, Rudolf. *The Gospel According to John*. London: Burns & Oates, 1980.
- [19]. Tribble, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. London: SCM Press, 2002.
- [20]. Whitacre, Rodney A. *John*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1999.