

## “The Bible, Black Women and Ministry”

In the last score of years, there has been a marked increase in the number of monographs, collaborative studies and periodical literature that have focused on biblical perspectives on the roles and status of women.<sup>1</sup> While more than fifty years ago this subject received sustained attention in a few books published in Europe and the United States, by no means do the scope of the treatment, and the stances espoused, or the variety of volumes seen today compare with those found in those earlier studies which appeared shortly after the turn of the last century.<sup>2</sup> Doubtless, the current preoccupation with this subject is a barometer of the legitimate perception, in some quarters, that women have not been ac-

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<sup>1</sup> Krister Stendahl, *Bible and the Role of Women*. Facet Books Biblical Series, 15 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966); Moshe Meiselman, *Jewish Women in Jewish Law*, vol.vi (New York: KTAV, 1968); Joachim Jeremias, "Appendix: The Social Position of Women" in *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969) pp. 359-376; Robin Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman" *JAAR*, vol.40 (1972): pp. 283-303 and sequel article in *JAAR* vol.42 (1974): pp. 532-37; Raymond E. Brown, "Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel," *Theological Studies*, 36 (1975): pp. 688-99 and reprinted in his *Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) pp. 183-98; Elizabeth S. Fiorenza, "Women in the Pre-Pauline Churches" *USQR*, vol.3 (1978): pp. 153-66; Elaine Pagels, "God the Father/God the Mother" in *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979) and the important review by Kathleen McVey, *Theology Today*, 37 (January, 1981): pp. 498-501; Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress), 1978; Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1980); and most recently Williard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*. Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation (Scottsdale, Pa and Kitchener, Ontario: (Herald Press, 1983) and my review in *Report from the Capitol* (October, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Cady Staton et al, *The Woman's Bible*, Parts I, II. (New York: European Publishing Co., 1898); T.B. Allworthy, *Women in the Apostolic Church: A Critical Study of the Evidence in the New Testament for the Prominence of Women in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, Ltd., 1917) and Charles Ryder Smith, *The Bible Doctrine of Womanhood and Its Historical Evolution* (London: The Epworth Press, 1923). See further: W.M. Swartley, *Women*, p. 313.

corded in modern society anything that approaches what the Bible itself at times seems to demand or at least to imply strongly in terms of equality. Yet, it is troubling that most, if not all, of this literature, which purports to study the roles and status of "women" in the Bible, invariably appears to have been written for the specific benefit of Anglo-Saxon or Jewish women of today as opposed to Black and other women of the third world who find themselves in far more wretched circumstances than their more privileged female counterparts. For this reason, it is necessary to study some of the lines along which the biblical witness provides images and themes for the uplift, liberation and divinely-inspired leadership not just of "women" in general, but that of Black women in particular.<sup>3</sup>

Our task would be extraordinarily difficult, if not hopeless, if we restricted our purview to those few women in the Bible who, by modern standards of racial typology, might be considered black, for example, the Cushite (Nubian) wife of Moses mentioned in Numbers 12, the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10; 2 Chron. 9) to whom New Testament writers later refer as "the Queen of the South" (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31) or the *Kandanke*, Queen of the Nubians of Meroe (Acts 8:27). Although we shall have occasion to discuss the importance of these individuals, it can only be by means of strained metaphor that these persons emerge as paradigms for Black women in positions of ministerial leadership today. Moreover, as I have tried to show elsewhere, the Bible does not provide us with concepts of race that are commensurate with modern standards for so-called racial types.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while one might construct a larger hypothetical list of biblical women who could be classified as Black, such a procedure appears inevitably unproductive, given the difficulties in bringing precision to criteria for pure racial types in the Bible. On the other hand, many of the female personalities in the Bible are pre-eminently progenitors of the Black woman of today in terms of her "low estate" circumstances, enormous faith, and responses to opportunities to exercise ministerial leadership. In some instances, men although steeped in patriarchal tradition, accepted such leadership willingly, in other cases, they accepted it begrudgingly; and in still other cases, the male response was marked by disbelief or a refusal to accept female leadership.

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<sup>3</sup> Primers in this area are such works as Jeanne Noble, *Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1978), Robert A. Bennett, Jr., "Africa and the Biblical Period," *Harvard Theological Review*, vol.64 (1971): pp. 483-500; and Frank M. Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> See my article "Racial Ambiguities in the Biblical Narratives," *Concilium*, vol. 51 (New York: Seabury Press, 1982) pp. 17-24.

### I. *General Observations Regarding the Roles of Women in the Bible*

As Phyllis A. Bird recently reminds us, one needs only to scan the genealogies of the Old Testament (e.g., Gen. 5,10; Num. 16,26; 1 Chron. 1, 2) in order to see that "the biblical world is a man's world, for the genealogies are fundamentally lists of males, in which women do not normally appear."<sup>5</sup> As is well-known, ancient Hebraic/Jewish society as well as that of the Greco-Roman World were essentially male dominated. In general, it was certainly the exception rather than the rule for women to possess economic, political or social power and prestige. Largely, the Old Testament especially reflects a decidedly patriarchal hierarchy, despite the fact that one finds mentionings of the exceptional woman such as Miriam, prophetess and sister of Moses (Ex. 15:20), "chosen" women like Hannah (1 Sam. 1:5 ff.), Sarah (Gen. 17:16-19), Rebekah (Gen. 25:21-26), Rachel (Gen. 29:31 or Hagar (Gen. 16, 21, 25). Indeed, even such political figures as Jezebel, Queen of Samaria (1 Kings 21:1-5) or the Hasmonean Queen Salome Alexandra held major political power for brief periods in ancient Jewish history, but they still constitute the minor theme in that history. Whether one assesses the genealogies, the principal images associated with God either in the Old Testament or (divine activity of) the ancient Greek or Roman pantheon, the world of the Bible was, without question, a world mediated through cultures controlled by men.<sup>6</sup> In such societies, the typical role of the woman was domestic and her status was subordinate, indeed frequently seen as inferior, to that of the man.

To put the matter more sharply, the female in the Old Testament is most often cast in the role of the one first deceived, Eve, who in turn caused Adam to fall (Gen. 3:4-6), or the crafty and vindictive (Jezebel), the harlot (Rahab), the adulteress (Bathsheba), or the seductress (Tamar). These are, in conventional wisdom, hardly favorable descriptions. In fact, of the thirty-nine books that constitute the Old Testament only two are named for women; Ruth who is a foreigner and Esther, a book whose canonical status has long been a matter of dispute. Despite these observations, however, it must be pointed out that some of these same women of the Old Testament come to play a vital role as instruments of God in the history of salvation. Irrespective of their erstwhile social position, some of the women in the Old Testament who at first appear to be of a very "low estate" later attain great theological significance as they liberate themselves from their mean circumstances to par-

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<sup>5</sup> Phyllis A. Bird, *The Bible as the Church's Book* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982) p.91.

<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Trible attempts to provide correctives on such traditional evaluations of women and feminine images in the OT; see her "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation", *JAR*, vol.40, no.1 (March, 1973) and *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 16-17.

ticipate dramatically in God's redemptive plan.

Perhaps it is within this context that attention should be called again to the Black women of the Bible about whom we made an earlier notice in passing. In Numbers 12, one finds a conflating of Yahwist and Elohist traditions wherein Moses' Black wife (M.T.: *hā'išā hakušit*; LXX: *gunaika Aithiopiisan*) becomes for Aaron and Miriam evidence that Moses has compromised his distinctive relationship with Yahweh.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, the narrative does not elaborate on the Black woman's reaction at such recriminations against her. Nevertheless, the fact remains that her racial identity caused her, in effect, to be scorned in the expressed racial antipathy of Miriam and Aaron. What is seldom emphasized is that the severest punishment for such attitudes is reserved for the Black woman's new sister-in-law, Miriam, who God strikes with leprosy, making her become "as white as snow" (v. 10). The erstwhile prophetess is severely punished in kind for her acrimony regarding the African.

The parallel Old Testament accounts about the Queen of Sheba have spawned a rich proliferation of tradition in Jewish, Ethiopian, Christian and Muslim histories.<sup>8</sup> Both Origin and Jerome considered her to be of African ancestry.<sup>9</sup> In Ethiopian tradition, she is known as "Makeda" (meaning "not thus"), since she is thought to have turned her people away from worshipping the sun to the worship of God.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, among Muslims she is called "Bilquis" and believed to have been a Yemenite.<sup>11</sup> Albeit not herself a Hebrew, this woman travelled a great distance, according to 1 Kings 10, in order to discover the extent to which Solomon was worthy of the Lord's name. Not only does the story tell us that she came to believe the reports that she had heard, but she praises the God of Israel (10:9) and exchanges many precious gifts with the King. For our immediate concern, this narrative becomes a poignant portrayal of a Black female leader who, regardless of her position outside the covenant community of faith, hears and responds to God in faith and

<sup>7</sup> Robert A. Bennett, Jr., "Africa", pp. 497-498.

<sup>8</sup> See: Snowden, *Antiquity*, p. 334 and Edward Ullendorf, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London: Oxford University press, 1968), p. 132: "The Story of the Queen of Sheba", based on the biblical account of the queen's visit to King Solomon, has undergone extensive Arabian, Ethiopian, Jewish and other elaborations and has become the subject of one of the most ubiquitous, and fertile cycles of legends in the Middle East. Also, see: Joseph E. Harris, *Pillars in Ethiopian History* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974) pp. 35-42.

<sup>9</sup> Snowden, *Antiquity*, pp. 202, cites Origen's *Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum* 2.367-370 and Jerome's *De Actibus Apostolorum*, 1.673-707.

<sup>10</sup> Chris Provty Rosenfeld, s.v. "Makeda", *Dictionary of African Biography*, vol.1 (New York: Reference Publications, Inc.), p.97.

<sup>11</sup> "Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: The American International Printing Co., 1946), Surah xxvii.22-23; xxxiv.15-20; especially comment on p.983.

is not the least disappointed, for her faith is shown to have been rewarded.<sup>12</sup>

Then there is the other Black Queen in the New Testament, the *Kandake* referred to in Acts 8:27. Unlike the Queen of Sheba in the Old Testament, the *Kandake* does not traverse great distances to seek verification about secondary reports on events taking place in Jerusalem. Rather, she commissions her finance minister to worship in Jerusalem and presumably to bring back to her some holy words from Zion! Amidst all of the modern tension evident in some black male ministerial circles which resist commissioning female ministers, it is possibly instructive to be reminded of this Nubian precedent in which a Nubian Queen *commissioned* and *sent* the man. The Hellenistic tradition preserved in Acts 8:26-40 has, therefore, greater significance than merely serving as an episode in the gradual transition of the gospel message away from the Jews to the gentiles.<sup>13</sup>

## II. Gospel Themes for Black Women in Ministry

By the prevailing standards of Palestinian society in the time of Jesus Christ, the woman was to take no part in public life; she was to remain as unobtrusive as possible, confining her duties to domestic responsibilities.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the woman of the ancient Near East enjoyed extremely minimal rights in either civil or religious spheres. The Torah itself seems to presuppose that generally the woman is inferior to the man; the wife is largely the property of her husband.<sup>15</sup> Matthew's editorial note in his account of Jesus' feeding the five thousand illustrates the attitude: "And those who ate were about 5,000, *besides women and children*" (Matt. 14:21). In other words, women like children usually did not count as particularly significant members of the community. Within such a milieu, the increased visibility of women, sometimes even in leadership roles, as reported by the writers of the four gospels and particularly in their presentations of Jesus' stance, is all the more remarkable.

Caution, however, is advised in any attempt to suggest that any group of passages in the gospels of the New Testament present the pristine perspective of Jesus of Nazareth. Would that the challenge of New Testament study were so easy or simple as numerous electronic mass media evangelists today seem to suggest. No, the discernment of Jesus' proba-

<sup>12</sup> Cf. "The Queen of the South" in Matt. 12:42 and Luke 11:31 where this Queen of Sheba legend has become reinterpreted by early Christians in such a manner as to transform her into an eschatological figure of judgment for the disbelieving Jews.

<sup>13</sup> See: Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971 [ET]) pp. 309-317.

<sup>14</sup> Joachim Jeremias *Jerusalem*, pp. 357, 363.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 371-372.

ble attitudes or those attributed to the respective editors of gospel traditions requires the tools, discipline and results of careful and critical study. The biblical witness suffers enormously when everyone, disregarding such guidelines, becomes a self-styled "expert". Since frequently one finds the same biblical passage used as the basis of arguing both the *pro* as well as the *con* position regarding the propriety of women in ministry, it becomes imperative that one adhere to clear principles for biblical hermeneutics and establish objective (not merely dogmatic or confessional) bases for a particular interpretation of a given text.<sup>16</sup>

The foregoing admonition having been offered, one can confidently say that the gospel tradition provides substantial evidence that women, with the advent of Jesus' public ministry, began to be viewed as entitled to greater rights as human beings and to assume larger responsibilities and more significance in the primitive church than was customary. A striking illustration of this confronts us in the Matthean infancy narrative where four women, viz. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah's wife (i.e., Bathsheba) are listed in the opening genealogy (Matt. 1:3, 5, 6). It is clear that Matthew includes these women in order to make a distinctive theological statement. As Raymond Brown points out, "These women were held up as examples of how God uses the unexpected to triumph over human obstacles and intervenes on behalf of His planned Messiah."<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the social or ethnic stigmas originally attached to the identities of these four women in the Old Testament, Matthew at the outset vividly demonstrates that they also exercised leadership as they performed a service for God important enough to entitle them a place in a genealogy of Jesus. By appealing to the examples of these women, Matthew also underscores the point that far from attaching a social stigma to Jesus' mother, one should recognize in her giving birth to Jesus the fulfillment of Isa. 7:14 and 26:9.<sup>18</sup>

Although Luke's genealogy (Luke 4:23-28) follows the traditional patriarchal pattern, he deliberately attributes the Magnificat, i.e., the prayer of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10) to her so that Mary now expresses "definite sympathies for the poor and oppressed."<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, Mary is not merely the domestic mother; she is also a paradigm for the socially concerned female. The Luke-Acts corpus displays, in a way disproportionate to the other gospels, a prominent interest in the witness made by

<sup>16</sup> Willard Swartley, *Women*, pp. 160-164, 235-249.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980) pp.73-74.

<sup>18</sup> John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) pp. 54, 185.

<sup>19</sup> Richard J. Cassidy, *Jesus, Politics and Society* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978) p.21. R. E. Brown, *Birth*, p.335. John Donahue, "Biblical Perspectives on Justice" in *The Faith That Does Justice*, John C. Haughey, ed (New York: Paulist Press, 1977) p.106.

women. Notice how many other women Luke names or otherwise mentions: Elizabeth (Luke 1:36); Anna, the prophetess (Luke 2:36); the women who provided for Jesus "out of their means", i.e., Mary Magdalen, Joanna, and Susanna (Luke 8:2); the persistent widow who demands justice as one of God's elect (Luke 18:1-8); Dorcas (Tabitha) of Joppa known for her good works and merciful deeds (Acts 10:36); Mary and Rhoda (Acts 12:12-13) and Philip's four daughters who are called prophetesses (Acts 21:8-9).

Another illustration in the gospels that depicts the new public access of women as a result of Jesus' ministry is the narrative concerning the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:26-30 (cf. Canaanite woman in Matt. 15:21-28). Courageously, the *gentile woman* (double jeopardy) approaches Jesus in public, and does so on behalf of her *female child*. According to the story even Jesus refers to the gentile woman and her daughter as "dogs". Still, the woman persists in her petitioning with an utterly disarming measure of faith which Jesus cannot but honor. Like the relentless widow in Luke 18, the Syrophenician woman's bold faith helps her to gain full access, recognition and direct assistance from Jesus, despite traditional biases against her full humanity. Luke's omission of this story undoubtedly results from the manner in which the story's anti-gentile and anti-female nuances ran counter to Luke's theological emphases.

There probably is little need to belabor the observation frequently made by feminists within the last decade that women were the first both to discover the empty tomb of Jesus and to report what an angel at the site had told them regarding Jesus' resurrection. Certainly, the Matthean and Lukan accounts confirm this, despite the fact that the original text of Mark closes with the matter of fact comment the women told no one, for they were afraid (Mark 16:8) and also despite the fact that the events in the Fourth Gospel are altered somewhat by that evangelist's special concern to stress the primacy of the beloved disciple's status (John 20:4-5). It is clear, however, at least in three of the gospels (Matthew, Luke, and John) angels first explained aspects of the significance of Jesus' resurrection to women. Therefore, it seems inescapable that women and not the male disciples were chosen as the initial instruments to spread the news about the resurrection. The women evidently tended to believe, whereas the man tended to be much slower in believing. Luke establishes this tendency rather clearly, it seems: "O foolish man, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25).

Few gospel passages are as amenable to themes for Black women in ministry as John 4:4-42 which describes Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman and the immediate consequences of that encounter. In the opening dialogue between Jesus and this woman at Mt. Gerizim (4:9c), the woman reminds Jesus of the poor relations between Jew and Samari-

tan, especially since events of the second century B.C.<sup>20</sup> The Luke-Acts corpus as well as the Fourth Gospel mention the Samaritans in sympathetic ways, whereas Matthew and Mark, writing at earlier dates in climates of less polemics and tension with Judaism, are silent about the Samaritans or Jewish disputes or difficulties with them. In the Johannine tradition reporting Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman, there are multiple ingredients for today's Black woman in general and that Black woman contemplating or actually engaged in ministry within American society.

As one reads through John 4:4-42, serious notice needs to be made regarding the manner in which this story forms a couplet by way of contrast to the story about Nicodemus in the preceding chapter (3:1-23). The Samaritan woman seems to lack everything that the respectable Pharisaic member of the Sanhedrin possesses. In fact, the Samaritan woman stand in "triple jeopardy", for she is a Samaritan, a woman, and one who not only has been married five times (Jewish law permits only three marriages), but is also living with a man who is not her husband (4:18). Each aspect of her condition has its parallel among many Black women in America today. Like the Samaritan, many black women find themselves in a state of quiet domestic chaos with all of the societal stigmas attached to such circumstances. Given standards of conventional values within society, the Samaritan woman, like her Black counterpart today, brings what many take to be great liabilities to her encounter with Jesus. Yet, Jesus, as the black gospel song goes, saw through her *faults* and found her *needs!*

The truly instructive segments of this extended pericope, in light of the topic under present study, are at least three-fold. First, Jesus' disciples were "shocked" (*ethaumazon*) to discover that Jesus was deep in conversation with such a woman (4:27).<sup>21</sup> The gospels seem consistent in their respective portrayal of the limited perspectives or theological narrowness of the men who were Jesus' first disciples. Today, in some quarters, Black women, transformed and strengthened by faith, have to contend with similar narrowness on the part of a male dominated clergy. Second, the Samaritan woman did not let the disapproving "shock" of the disciples stop her. Instead, she rushed back to her city to beckon her people to come and see the one who might be the fulfillment of their messianic

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<sup>20</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, I-XII (Garden City New York: Doubleday, 1966) p.170, lists some of the religious and political reasons for the antipathy between these two groups, e.g. the Samaritan refusal to worship at or recognize Jerusalem as the preeminent Holy City and lingering Jewish resentment against the Samaritans for having accomplices with Syrian monarchs in 128 B.C. See further: R.J. Coggins, *Samaritans and Jews* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975) pp.138-148.

<sup>21</sup> *Thaumazō* (lit. "amazed") is translated in this way by R.E. Brown, *John*, p. 173.



expectations (4:28). Third, this Samaritan woman became the cause for many other Samaritans coming to believe in Jesus (4:39), despite the fact that some Samaritans later seized upon the opportunity to indicate that the woman could only have partial credit for their new found belief (v.42). In any case, in this story we have what in minimal terms could be a report about the first woman missionary to the Samaritans.<sup>22</sup> Although there is neither a laying on of hands nor other formal sign of commissioning, this woman volunteers and functions as a minister to her people, despite some hesitance on the part of her own people to accept her as such.

### III. *Sorting Out Paul's Attitude on Women in Ministry*

Because some of the seemingly most conservative New Testament texts regarding women are found in writings frequently attributed to the apostle Paul, the tools of critical scholarship are indispensable in making determinations about which Paul, in fact, did write as opposed to what his later "disciples" wrote in his name. Of first order of importance is to recognize that only seven epistles in the New Testament are written by the historical Paul; these seven "undisputed epistles" are 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians and Romans. Furthermore, even within these "authentic" epistles of Paul, we find strong evidence of textual glosses and interpolations; indeed, in writings like 2 Corinthians and Philippians, we do not so much as have a single unified epistle as much as a composite of several epistles synthetically brought together. As much as we might wish that Paul's writings were a bit more tidy, the reality is that in them we have a complex literary mosaic.

The task of sorting out Paul's attitudes or stances about women particularly in relation to the questions of ministry and ordination is much less onerous today, due to the contributions made in several lucid studies within the last few years.<sup>23</sup> Invariably, these studies help us either to appreciate the limitations imposed on Paul by his ancient historico-cultural context or to weigh the substantial evidence that passages like 1 Cor. 11:7 or 14:34-35 are interpolations which reflect church circum-

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<sup>22</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) p.188.

<sup>23</sup> Robin Scroggs, "Women in the New Testament", *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplement (Abingdon, 1976) and others not previously cited above such as Leonard and Arlene Swidler, eds. *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977) esp. Bernadette Brooten's entry "Junia. . . Outstanding Among the Apostles" (Rom. 16:7) pp.141-143. Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul* (Abingdon, 1979) esp. "Women in the Church", pp. 84-114.

stances well after Paul had been martyred.<sup>24</sup> Again, it is to be remembered that most of the New Testament passages that call for the subordination or subservience of women are found in the "deutero-Pauline" material, namely Colossians, Ephesians, or the Pastorals and thus does not reflect Paul's own stance.

Where then do we look in order to ascertain Paul's stance about the status of women and their suitability for ministerial leadership. I think that there are two crucial places that provide some answers, Gal. 3:28 and Romans 16:1-16. The Galatians text is often cited, as well it should be, for the observation has been made that Gal. 3:28 is "the first occurrence of a doctrine openly propagating the abolition of sex distinctions" either within Judaism or the Greco-Roman world.<sup>25</sup> Of course, one could cite the segment of this pre-Pauline baptismal formula which says "in Christ . . . there is neither male nor female" to argue that on a metaphysical plane Paul wishes to obliterate *all* distinctions between men and woman. I believe that one would be stronger to focus upon the radical *social* implications of Gal. 3:28 in what is, in effect, a call for the social emancipation of women within the life of the church.

The opening verses of the appendix to Romans shows just how seriously Paul regarded the social implications of Gal. 3:28. In Rom. 16:1, the woman Phoebe is identified as a deacon (*diakonon*) of the church in the port city of Cencreae. Even though one usually finds English translations of her function as "deaconess", the Greek work for her function is actually masculine, i.e., "deacon". We are not told what her specific duties were other than that she had been a helper of Paul and many others (v.2). While it may be quite incidental that Paul, within this context, first mentions the word *ekklesia* ("church") in the epistle, that he does so while at the same time calling attention to a female by identifying her formal function cannot be purely coincidental. The text does not say that she is the deacon of the church, for significantly the definite article is absent. Nevertheless, it is clear that she is described as *a* leader within a given congregation and it appears that we have, in this designation, some indication of "an early stage of what later became the ecclesiastical office," (i.e., minister).<sup>26</sup> It would seem that Paul himself was not nearly so reluctant to acknowledge female "ministerial" leadership within his churches as were his male devotees of another generation and a subsequent ecclesiastical tradition that adopted (and indeed adapted) him as

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<sup>24</sup> For a helpful listing of the recent debate on these passages, see: Willard Swartley, *Women*, p.318 n.87.

<sup>25</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians*. Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) p.197.

<sup>26</sup> Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1980) p.411. In 1 Tim. 3:11, criteria are stipulated for women to serve as "deacons".

its champion.

Beyond the references to Phoebe, Paul acknowledges in Rom. 16:1-16 other female leaders in a variety of ways. He expresses extreme gratitude, for example, to Prisca (i.e., Priscilla of Acts 18:2, 18; cf. 2 Tim. 4:19) who evidently has an effective wife and husband "team ministry" in their house church (Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19).<sup>27</sup> Paul mentions a "Junias" in Rom. 16:7, but the preferred reading should be probably "Junia" in which case Paul includes this woman among the "apostles."<sup>28</sup> Consider further how impressive is the list of women missionaries and leaders cited in Rom. 16, e.g., Mary (v.6), Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis (v.12), the mother of Rufus (v.13), Julia, and the sister of Nereus (v.15). Thus, in this closing segment of Romans, one gathers considerable evidence that Paul took seriously the social implications of his dictum regarding the full recognition in Christ of male and female leadership within the life of the church. To say this should occasion no surprise, if one but recognize that Paul's own views which acknowledge and enhance the ministerial leadership of women proceeds as a natural consequence from a theology so fundamentally governed by an apocalyptic perspective which fully envisions a transformation of the created order.<sup>29</sup>

Does this mean that we simply ignore today those many New Testament passages that are patently conservative or, by modern standards, repressive on the status of women? Does the Christian in our time seek only to ascertain the probable stances of Jesus and Paul, discarding the rest of the New Testament? To both questions, I think our response must be in the negative, for otherwise we would be contributing to the tendency of creating "a canon within a canon". We would also be hopelessly lost in understanding how the entire New Testament witness confronts us with the great range of problems associated with the early Christian movement's development from its status as an apocalyptic reform movement within Judaism to a separate religious institution within the Greco-Roman world. The most substantive challenge offered by the New Testament is to take full cognizance of its rich diversity and simultaneously to develop the kind of hermeneutic that recognizes the mundane or human character of the struggles on the part of ancient communities of faith in transition as preserved in the New Testament.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For amplified comments on the early Christian practice of two "yoke-fellows" (1 Cor. 9:5), see *Ibid.*, p.413.

<sup>28</sup> Bernadette Brooden, "Junia", pp. 141-143 and comments by Willard Swartley, *Women*, pp. 176-177.

<sup>29</sup> J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul, the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) pp.110-111, and my "Paul's Reinterpretation of Jewish Apocalyptic", *The Journal of Religious Thought*, vol.40 no.1 (Spring-Summer, 1983) 18-22.

<sup>30</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry Into the*

A couple of illustrations may substantiate the case. First, in our having said earlier that texts such as 1 Cor. 11:7 ("man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man") or 1 Cor. 14:34-35 (Women should keep silent in the churches) are interpolations, we mean that the tone and content of such passages are inconsistent with dominant ideas in Paul. Yet, these same texts are much more consistent with ideas found in early second century New Testament texts such as 1 Tim. 2:11-12 ("Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over man") or 1 Peter 3:7 (the woman as the weaker sex). As the primitive unstructured house churches expanded, attracting more women who like men claimed the *charismata*, greater attention had to be given to order and stability. The institutionalizing process was partly achieved by the church's pattern of accommodating itself to a world in which the church as an institution could exist given both the "delayed Parousia" and gnostic as well as other external threats, remembering, of course, that certain gnostic groups sought especially to win over women (2 Tim. 3:6-7).

Second, while many New Testament scholars still insist that Paul himself authored Colossians and Ephesians, the arguments for such a view are far from convincing. Usually, proponents of that stance must postulate an elaborate developmental scheme distinguishing phases through which Paul's theological teachings shifted in focus, emphasis and content. Against this line of reasoning, however, are several factors including the fact that in Colossians and Ephesians, we begin to find theological and ecclesiological observations stated in terms not easily reconcilable with those of the historical Paul. Furthermore, it is precisely in Colossians and Ephesians that we first encounter the formulaic "Domestic Tables" (*die Haustafeln*) or Codes of Subordination, viz. "Wives, be subject to your husbands" (Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:22). Again, what this phenomenon indicates is that the church itself is in a different (later) phase of institutionalization, adapting itself to some of the institutional mores of other forms of institutional life in the Greco-Roman world. We do not here have the historical Paul's teaching, for these Codes are absent in his writings, so much as an index of an accommodation pattern by a religious minority group trying not to give unnecessary offense to the larger, often hostile, environment.

#### IV. *The New Testament Caution and Challenge*

American society seems to be remarkably susceptible to "causes" and ephemeral "fads" rather than long-term commitment to major social is-

sues. Often when critical issues are raised in our society, the tendency on the part of the political and corporate establishment is to give the issue an initial hearing, make a series of immediate but frequently minor and superficial adjustments and finally to wait until both the rhetoric and passionate concern taper off or more cynically to shift the media's attention away from "the old cause" to some new one. Certainly, Black people have enough first hand evidence about this syndrome in America and Black women in particular cannot forget how little they featured in the so-called *woman's* suffrage movement at the turn of the nineteenth century. Considerable care must, therefore, be exercised in assuring that the questions of Black liberation generally and Black female ministerial leadership in particular do not pass off the scene as "causes" that have had their hearing.

A safeguard against that possibility is provided by a biblical caution implicit in Rev. 2:18-29, the fourth of seven "letters" to the churches. In this passage, we find a sobering message to the church in Thyatira where a woman, called Jezebel, was evidently causing havoc, on the one hand, claiming to be a prophetess and on the other hand leading many within the church astray (Rev. 2:20). The graphic image is that of an influential charismatic woman whose activities in the area of religion aggrandize her and not the church of God. This text constitutes a disturbing reminder that just as there have been and are charlatans of the false prophet variety, there have also been false prophetesses who are capable of arrogance, guile and utter deception. Within this frame work, the caution for us all comes, "And all the churches shall know that I am the One who searches mind and heart and I will give to each of you as your work deserves" (Rev. 2:23b,c). Indeed, this caution and promise is followed finally by the sublime challenge in vv.26-28:

The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron. . . even as I myself have received power from my Father and I will give him (or her) the morning star.