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Women in Ministry (Luke 24: 22-23): Where are they in Nigeria Ecclesia?

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Abstract

The biblical faith tradition prides itself as foremost in gender relations, which a close reading of the biblical text assents. Some scholars, however, argue that women in the Hebrew Bible were totally beholden to the men and as such played little or no part in Israel's faith history. A critical reading of the Scriptural texts highlights an array of women whose active participation in salvation history remained largely unsung. Shrouded in anonymity, the liberative role of biblical women as well as women in church history continued to be inaccessible to the ordinary reader because of entrenched androcentric interpretation of the religious texts, which tends to minimize women's unique role repeatedly. Scripture and church tradition present women who from the beginning of the Jesus Movement and down through the centuries have collaborated with men as well as stood on their own, in church ministry. This expository paper draws insights from scripture, church history and cultural studies, and with hermeneutics of acknowledgement as critical tool, shows women's active engagement in church ministry. The Lucan text (24:22-23), provided the platform from which to tease out the assertion of women participation for the optimal engagement of contemporary Nigeria women in church life and ministry.

Key Words: Ministry, Women, Service, Asceticism, Diaconate

Introduction

For centuries, Christian scholars and theologians, mostly men, continue to grapple with the role of women in church ministry even when the biblical text makes explicit the fact. Ministry as employed in this essay is not limited to ordained ministry but the various levels of service in the ecclesia community (1Cor,12). In all, women participation in church life vary according to the ideology of the proponents. While some acknowledge the egalitarianism put forward in the gospels, others insist on women remaining in the shadows of church life, always objects and never subjects of ongoing history. Although the 2015 Global Gender Gap Report celebrated some major success in the narrowing of the gap between women and men in many fields of human endeavor (World Economic Forum, Switzerland, 2015), some areas such as church life remain impervious; there exists significant gender gaps in the area of church ministry although gender scholars, mostly women continue interrogate the disparity. It would be a herculean task to attempt a review of the pertinent literature on the subject of gender in this essay, but suffice it to state that this essay contributes to the ongoing conversation on women in ministry. It proposes a change of attitude in the reception of women as church agents by the dominant Church culture, which is largely patriarchal.

Clearly, one cannot engage women's role in New Testament without recourse to the activity of women in the Hebrew Bible. The reason being that there exists far more continuity between the two texts, than later division in Judaism and Christianity suggests. Marcus J. Borg puts it thus: "[t]he Hebrew Bible provided the language of the sacred imagination that place within the psyche in which images of God, the God-world relationship, and the God-human relationship reside" for the writers of the New Testament" (Borg, 2001, p. 185). An evaluation of the role of women in New Testaments, therefore, cannot be separated from its Jewish roots, hence, the essay hacks back to the Hebrew Bible to seek out such link that supports the thesis posed. Laid out in four parts, part one discusses women in the Hebrew Bible with a particular example of the woman of Shunem, particularly her encounter with the prophet Elisha. Part two focuses on women in the New Testament foreground in an exegetical survey of Luke 24:22-23. Part three offers a survey of women ministry in early Christianity, emphasizing their participation in the ascetic movement and the diaconate. Part four discusses women church ministers in contemporary Roman Catholic tradition. The essay concludes with appropriation and recommendations.

1. Women in Ancient Israel: The Woman of Shunem and the Prophet Elisha

The pattern of relationship exhibited in the household of the woman of Shunem is of significance to the argument that women in ancient Israel were not totally beholden to the men (Okure, 2013). The Shunammite woman represents the ideals of womanhood rarely highlighted in the discourse of women in ancient Israel. Although some scholars

considered women of that period as dispossessed and totally bound to the men (Glancy 2002), this homely story of the encounter between the woman of Shunem and the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 4:8-37) contradicts the claim. Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible presents examples of several Israelite women whose ministry, both in the religious and civil society of their time, contributed in ongoing history. The Hebrew Bible, for instance, records such names as Miriam (Exod 15:20), Deborah (Judg 4), Ruth (Ruth 2:13), Hannah (1Sam 1:11), Abigail (1 Sam 25:24), the Medium of Endor (1 Sam 28:21). Others include the wise woman of Tekoah (2 Sam 14:6), the prophet Hulda (2Kgs 22:14-20; 2Chron 34:22-33), Bathsheba (1Kgs 1: 17), Esther (LXX Esth 14: 17-18), and Judith (Jdt 11:5, 16), among others (Mbonu, 2009). These women, Mbonu noted, did not descend from a monolithic stock, they represent different backgrounds, cultures, times, and genre with the status of being insiders, outsiders, spiritualists, captives, concubines, queens, widows, childless, mothers, pagans, judges, peacemakers, wealthy, prophetesses, and priestesses. The Shunammite woman fits into the array of ancient Israelite women whose service presence provided positive examples of women's participation in the religious and community life of their era.

The narrative of the Shunammite woman and the prophet Elisha symbolizes a classic example of the intricacies in the community life of an Israelite woman of that era. This modest narrative encompasses cultural norms, customs, and patterns of relationships that form the structures that define women's placement in society a norm that places premium on relationships. Israelite culture of that period took seriously and sensitively relatedness and inter-relatedness that touched on reciprocity, mutuality, and justice that community-living demands. Although the narrative spans 29 verses (vv 8—37), our analysis focuses on the first part of the story (vv 8—13) Reading, 2 Kings 4:8-13.

Curiously, the Hebrew Bible does not feature many narratives between prophets and women. Rather the story of prophets and kings abound as found in the Books of Kings and Chronicles as well as the prophetic oracles. But this story of a woman and a prophet in 2 Kings 4:8-37 is unique in that the subject of the narrative, was not presented from a disadvantaged position. Evidence in the text suggests that the unnamed woman of Shunem was a person of influence and wealth. She and her husband receive the man of God, Elisha and his servant, Gehazi, in their home and showed them hospitality on a regular basis. Not satisfied with the services offered the man of God, the woman intuits that the prophet needs more comfort for a more effective ministry. Thus, in consultation with her husband she decides to provide the prophet a more comfortable accommodation, she proceeds to provide a rooftop room for his overnight stay whenever he passed by: "Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us" (2 Kings 4:10). The couple demonstrated a genuine concern for hospitality by

extending their home, in support of to support the religious life of the people through the prophet Elisha.

For the prophet, Elisha, the singular act of liberality of this nameless woman and her husband must be acknowledged. The prophet proposes to reward the woman. Evidently, he perceives the woman's competence and proposes to her the possibility of a wider exposure beyond the confines of her small town, Shunem. Elisha says: "You have lavished all this care on us; what can we do for you? Can we say a good word for you to the king or to the commander of the army?" (v. 13a). Undoubtedly, the man of God noted that his host, the woman of his retreat at Shunem, possessed astounding energy and a power of organization and of leadership that could support development at a wider context, hence, the suggestion for her to be connected to a more influential position, either the establishment of the King or the military. In effect, Elisha was recommending her for a higher official position, a position that would likely take her out of her small town. The suggestion here is that the woman's quick sense of comprehension and veracity would fit not only into the higher civil society of the King but also in the defense ministry of the country (cf. Jdgs 4-5). Given the heightened state of security in Israel of Elisha, the thought of recommending a woman to the ministry was significant. Furthermore, verses 12-13 amply suggest this unnamed woman can participate in the highest level of leadership inside the sphere of the dominant power brokers such as the king, prophets and the military establishment. But the woman would accept none of Elisha's offers; rather she chooses to remain with her own people. "I live among my own people" (v. 13b), was her response to Elisha. "Living among my own people" could mean that service to the nation is not location bound. For the Shunammite, ministering in a small village is not different from serving in larger establishment, the military or the King's court, as proposed by the prophet. Service in this context emerges from the ethos of hospitality, solidarity, reciprocity, and mutuality the domain of women. Note that it took a prophetic mind to appreciate the versatility of this small-town woman of Shunem.

Elisha's interaction with the Shunammite allows the reader to assess the relationship between the religious leaders and ordinary people, particularly women in 9th century BC Israel. Centuries later, a similar same genial relationship between the prophet Elisha and the people appears to colour Jesus' interactions with his followers, men as well as women, in the Gospels. The Jewish women disciples featured in the New Testament, and like their foremother, demonstrate that they have space, agency, and self-determination as well as possessing, within a context undeniably patriarchal, status and dignity in the Jesus Movement. The resurrection narratives in the four gospels (Matt 28: 1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-10; John 20:1-18), attest to the claim, and the text chosen for this study Luke 24:22-23, amplifies the assertion.

2. Women in the New Testament a study of Women in the Luke's Resurrection Narrative

An Exegetical Survey of Luke 24:22-23:

Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive (Luke 24:22-23, NRSV)

A cursory background to the text under review grounds the exegetical survey in this section. The Gospel according to Luke and its second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, together, form an intricately integrated thematic construction. In Luke-Acts, the author shows the universality of his narrative in the intermingling of Jesus's disciples and audiences, women and men alike, from Galilee to Jerusalem and to Rome at the same time, featuring women in diverse ministries along the way. The Gospel of Luke begins and ends with women playing significant roles in redemption history (Luke 1:26-38; Luke 24: 1-10). Luke opens his chapter with the story of a lowly maiden, Mary, from an insignificant town of Nazareth, where nothing good is expected (John 1:46). In a classical art of inclusion, Luke concludes his gospel with women, the first witnesses of the resurrection (24:1-10). Thus, Luke shows women as bearers of the good news of the reign of God, from the beginning of his writing up until the end; in-between, he presents an array of women of various statuses and backgrounds: single, married, pregnant, mothers, wives, widows, philanthropists (8:1-3), property owners (10:38-42), prophets, sinners, feisty, penitents, disciples, among others. The Galilean women disciples, like their men counterparts, followed Jesus from the very beginning of his public ministry in Galilee to the end of his earthly mission in Jerusalem. But the women went many steps further as the next paragraphs show.

Luke 24:22-23: One cannot draw meaning from these verses without reference to the episode at the beginning of the Chapter (Luke 24: 1-12). A group of Jesus' women disciples, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and perhaps other, visited his tomb the day after the Sabbath and made a discovery that usher in a new era in human history—the resurrection; Luke records what the witnesses saw. The women, undeniably the first witnesses of the resurrection, ministered the good news first to the other disciples (men): “they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest” (24:9).

The ministry of the women was the subject of the discussion of the two men on their way back home after the debacle of Good Friday. It was this “telling” that the two disciples on the way to Emmaus share with the stranger in their midst. A group of passionate women astounded the men disciples with the news of the resurrection: ἀλλὰ καὶ γυναῖκές τινες ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξέστησαν ἡμᾶς, (Luke 24:22), for their women, their discipleship did not end with the termination of the earthly ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem, for them, ministering to Jesus is otherworldly, it went beyond this earthly

life, their ministering followed Jesus to his grave. All four Gospels agree on one vital detail about the Easter morning: that it was early hours of the morning and still dark, and the women went to Jesus' tomb. Before the early morning pilgrimage to the tomb, Luke notes the women's solidarity with Jesus, they kept vigil at his crucifixion and burial (Luke 22:50-56).

Luke makes it clear that the ministering women were not silent witnesses of the Christ event. Although, their witnessing was termed *λῆρος*, "idle tale" (something that appears like a wild talk of a sick person in delirium), it, however, moved Peter into action. The *λῆρος* made Peter leave his comfort zone and run to the tomb. While what he saw there left him amazed, the women's experience of the event spurred them to action, they told their story (v 10). It is the women's story that the two disciples narrated to the "stranger" who walked with them on the way to Emmaus (24:13-35). The underlying point is [*ἤλθον λέγουσαι* (v.23)], the women, proclaiming to the resurrection to the men, disciples and others (1Cor 15:12-19).

Luke's portrayal of the women as outgoing runs through the second volume of his work, the Acts of the Apostles. Beginning from the first chapter (1:14), Acts shows women as equal participants in the Christ-event by placing them squarely within the Pentecost ambient at the Upper Room (Acts 2). Not unlike the men, the women received the outpouring of the Spirit predicted by the prophet Joel (2:28-32), and proclaimed by Peter:

In the last days, it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy (Acts 2:17-18, NRSV).

The author of Acts leaves his readers without doubt as to the role of women in the reign of Holy Spirit from the birth of the Church. Indeed, Paul's letters which predate the other documents of the New Testament include list of women ministers in the nascent church. In the last Chapter of the Letter to the Romans, for example, Paul provides a list of his women co-workers in ministry. Others, such as Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2), Apphia (Philemon v 2) are but some examples of women ministers during that era. But women ministry did not end in the first few centuries of Christianity, they continued down through the centuries, but women's ministerial role diminished as Christianity began to imbibe the Greco-Roman culture (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1996) that privileges patriarchy over charisma.

3. A Historical Survey of Women in Ministry in Early Christianity

Although the influence of Greco-Roman culture appears to suffuse Christianity in the early period, history presents an array of women participating in one form of Church

ministry or another. It would be a herculean task to attempt a comprehensive review of that body of literature in this section. Two examples, however, would elucidate women's involvement in the core ministry in church life. One such example is found in the ascetic movement that flourished in the fourth century Greco-Roman world, under the leadership of Emperor Constantine after the Edict of Milan, 313; this period witnessed a welcome development for Christianity operationally or politically. While many agree that the Edit provided a springboard for Church advancement, Teresa Okure and other scholars disagree. Okure insists, the Edit was non liberative for women for the new found 'freedom' to worship instituted the Roman colonization of the church, unfortunately marking the departure from Christ to the state with its patriarchy and hierarchy of Lordship and not of *diakonia* (Okure, 2013, p. 359). The new freedom offered by the Edit, however, presented fresh forms of Christian faith expressions such as the Ascetic Movement.

The Ascetic Movement

The ascetic movement flourished in the North African desert during the fourth and fifth centuries. Women ascetics flourished alongside the men during this period. Asceticism employed in this essay represents a manner of life, a principle that a person can attain a high spiritual and moral state by practicing rigorous self-denial, self-mortification, and the other such extreme abstinence for religious reasons. Women moved from the home-centred subordinate lifestyle of mainstream society, transitioned into a new arena of freedom found in the ascetic lifestyle (Desert Mothers, Internet source). Termed Desert Mothers, as opposed to the well attested Desert Fathers, Laura Swan contends that women ascetics "did not allow cultural norms and expectations for women to thwart their call nor limit their pursuit of God" (2001, p. 18). As a result, these women sought out the solitude of the desert which in turn offered them a greater sense of physical and spiritual autonomy. Even at that epoch, by playing a significant role in the ministry and leadership of ascetic Christianity, the Desert Mothers proved to make male leaders uncomfortable with their public roles. Melanie the Elder, for example, widowed at age 22, became an ascetic and eventually established monasteries for women's as well as men. This young widow turned ascetic, invested her family riches into increasing the ascetic way of life (Steete, 1999), raising asceticism to a form of ministry highly cultivated at the time. Asceticism was not an end in itself though; women ascetics ministered as sages, they provided spiritual directions and had disciples who followed their lifestyle. Also, Christian writings in early centuries of the Christian era show women serving as deacons in churches.

The Office of the Diaconate

Women were not left out in the diaconate during the early period of Christianity. Scripture attests women serving as deacons; in the letter to the Romans, Paul commends a woman deacon, Phoebe, to the Christians in Rome: *Συνίστημι δὲ ὑμῖν*

Φοίβην τὴν ἀδελφὴν ἡμῶν, οὗσαν [καὶ] διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχρεαῖς, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, ... for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well” (Rom 16:1-2). Note the word *diakonos* is in its neutral form as opposed to *diakoneo*, which simply means service or support. Phoebe, was more than an ordinary Christian woman at the pew; Paul found in her a sister, *adelph*, suggesting a familial closeness rooted in the baptismal bond; a *diakonos*, an official teacher and missionary in the church of Cenchreae as well as a benefactor (*prostatēs*), a designation suggestive of financial sponsorship, which also could mean that Phoebe was wealthy and of good social standing (Castelli, 1999; Fitzmyer, 2008).

Furthermore, the word deacon, (Greek—*diakonos*) as employed in the New Testament represents servant or helper. *Diakonos* occurs 29 times in the New Testament. Paul mentions specifically a *diakonos*, Phoebe in 16:1-2. Worth of note is *diakoneo*, meaning to serve or support, occurs thirty-six times in the New Testament. Several centuries removed from Paul, however, the diaconate was not opened to every woman, the office was limited to monastic women and spouses of bishops. Two types of monastic women were typically ordained to the diaconate in the early and middle Byzantine period: abbesses and nuns with liturgical functions, as well as the wives of men who were being raised to the episcopacy (Vagaggini, 2013). There was a strong association of women deacons, particularly abbesses starting in the late fourth century or early fifth century in the East, and in the medieval period in the Latin as well as the Byzantine Church (Herrin, 2006). Principally, women deacons lived in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, where the office of deaconess was most often found (Women deacons, internet source). Not unlike the men deacons, women *diakonos*, provided pastoral care to church members and especially the women. In the Byzantine church women deacons had both liturgical and pastoral functions. They instructed catechumens, assisted those undergoing baptism, which involved candidates stripping and being anointed with oil (Irvin & Sunquist, 2005). Irvin and Sunquist go on to note that among the Franks, some women deacons “not only heard confessions from women and men alike but gave absolution to persons of both genders” (2005, p. 347). Evidence that women participated in the office of the diaconate modifies the generalization that the ordained ministry has been a male preserve from the beginning of Christianity.

Christianity from the beginning was a charismatic movement. Authentic Pauline letters makes clear that the gift of the Holy Spirit is not gender bound. Persons were gifted for the edification of the ecclesia community. As the church took more of the characteristics of the dominant Roman culture, which for the most part confined women in the private sphere, women’s visibility in church ministry began to diminish. During the fifth and sixth centuries in the western part of the Roman Empire the role of deaconesses became less favourable. The Councils of Orange in 441 and Orléans in 533 directly targeted the role of the deaconesses, forbidding their ordination (Irvin &

Sunquist, 2005). Prohibition on women ordination to the diaconate did little to dissuade them from ministering in other areas of church life as subsequent centuries witnessed the rise of women religious Orders and Congregations. In the Roman Catholic tradition, for example, the presence and activities of the vowed women religious (Religious Sisters) amply suggests that the office of *diakonos*—servant and helper, remains alive and active among the Christian women regardless.

4. Women in the Contemporary Church: Women in the Roman Catholic Tradition

Scripture attests to women in various forms of ministry from ancient Israel, the New Testament and through the centuries as shown in the preceding paragraphs. Women in the Roman Catholic tradition have featured no less in the church ministry even though some tend to consider their participation incidental and peripheral because they do not form part of the church's hierarchy. But ministry, as service, is not hierarchy bound. Catholic women continue in the tradition of biblical women in their service of God and God's people in the different fields of human endeavor. They appropriate, particularly the role of women in the New Testament in the sense of *diakonos*, like Phoebe; contemporary Catholic women are Sisters, teachers, benefactors and helpers. Of significance is the role these women provide does not in any way suggest inferiority; neither does it suggests not playing the second fiddle, they roles are distinctive, a crucial half that make up the whole. In Igbo thought, the binary principle *ihe di abuo abuo* or things exist in pairs, depicts the sense in which supportive role is employed in this essay. Similarly, Chinua Achebe helps us understand supportive role in the sense that nothing can truly stand by itself in the Igbo aphorism *ihe kwuru ihe esobe ya*, loosely translated—nothing can stand alone, there must always be another thing standing beside it (Achebe 1998, p. 70). The adage underscores the Igbo abhorrence of absolutism. Rather reality is multiple and all interrelated and interconnected, so also in the spiritual realm, women ministry rather than diminish the ministry of the “men” or of the church, completes it. Furthermore, in his, *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe portrays a woman religious minister among the people of Umuofia, Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, in a delicate position service of leadership (Mbonu, 2010). Women's ministry both in the indigenous African tradition and in Christianity can no longer go unacknowledged.

Women ministry is not some complement of what men do. Women perform unique ministry in the ecclesia community. Indeed, the contemporary example of the ministry of Saint Teresa of Calcutta and the religious Order she founded validates the supportive role of women in today's church life. Here in Nigeria, Catholic Religious Sisters remain an integral part of the church life in their educational, medical, social, and pastoral ministries. Religious Sisters provide health-care services, particularly in rural areas and educate Nigerians of all ages, helping students to define themselves authentically and spontaneously in relation to the world. Religious Sisters provide services in rural areas,

places far removed from government influence, they rehabilitate street children as well as educate the visually impaired, physically and mentally challenged ministries that only a few would undertake. Living in a world that is the flux, as pastoral agents, the Sisters offer counselling services to assist many in decision-making. Women ministry in the Catholic tradition involves all women. The various associations of Catholic Women participate in one form of ministry of another.

In addition, the numerous projects of the various groups of the Catholic Women Organizations (CWO) highlight women's involvement in church ministry. Women's services notwithstanding, their continued absence in the ordained ministry continues to be a vexing subject among a significant member of the ecclesia, particularly since the issuance of Pope John Paul (now St. John Paul) Apostolic Letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (in English: Priestly Ordination the) on 22 May 1994. In summary, the Letter reemphasized the reservation of priestly ordination to men alone; it also stated that "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women." Catholic women continue in tow of their Christian foremothers whom weathered the disappointing outcome of the Councils of Orange (441) and Orléans (533) on the diaconate, they continue the work of *diakonos* in Church without the official title of deacon or priest. In a Church that denies them the ministerial priesthood, Catholic women continue to find more creative ways to live the gospel of charity vividly painted by the author of the first Gospel (Matt 25: 31-45), as the quintessential goal of all Christian striving.

Conclusion

The Christian foundational text, the Bible, continues to provide Christian women the inspiration in the service of God and God's people regardless of the dictates of the dominant (male) culture. Contrary to some views, the practical role of women in ministry is well tested in Scripture and the example of the unnamed woman of Shunem, debunks the relegation of women to the shadows of life in ancient Israel. In the New Testament, Luke-Acts continues to portray vibrant Jewish women in his narratives. These strong matriarchal figures serve as role models for contemporary Christian women in their engagement with the ecclesia community. The singular authenticity in ministry shown by the Lucan women earned them God's faithfulness—they became the first witnesses of the Resurrection. Ironically, Christianity as known today is based on evidence of women, the Resurrection, yet the dominant Christian culture excludes women from certain key position within the fold. For a more effective ministry, therefore, it behooves women to seek out, uncover, recover and make contemporaneous constructive images of women buried deep within the biblical text or shrouded in anonymity in Church history by developing hermeneutical tools which can potentially unburden, lift up, or promote their humanity individually and collectively in the face of rejection, marginalization and repression in the community called Church.

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