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THE PARADIGM OF ELIZABETH: SEXISM, SOLIDARITY AND THE SAVIOUR IN LUKE

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Abstract:

The historical church has consistently understood Luke's gospel to affirm the marginalised, including women. Recent feminist critical methods, such as gender deconstruction, cause us to rethink this. The possibility must be considered that underlying a seemingly innocent text are hidden social codes, which may not be so positive towards the feminine. Has a hidden patriarchal agenda been encoded into this text? While acknowledging some of the claims made by critical feminist authors, this essay looks at the text in a different light. Analysis of the key gynocentric text – the infancy narrative – provides a model based upon the author's treatment of Elizabeth. Particular attention is also paid to the social context of meals, and table-service. This essay will survey the gospel of Luke, and literature surrounding it, to critically evaluate the place that the narrative gives to women. Appropriately to the subject, it focuses on those pericopes that are gendered feminine, particularly the uniquely gynocentric infancy and table narratives. With regards to scholarly literature, I engage feminist biblical scholars, and yet still come from my conspicuously male viewpoint. It is hoped that this perspective will be a valuable one, seeing the text in question is (supposedly) written by a male author. I also hold a confident belief in the value and equality of women. A further peculiarity of my perspective is religious: coming from a Reformed-Evangelical viewpoint with certain doctrinal presuppositions about the inspiration and unity of scripture. The implication of this will become clear later on.

Since the patristic period, it has been noted that Luke's narrative gives special place to women. Origen states that in Luke, "Elizabeth prophesies before John. Before the birth of the Lord and Saviour, Mary prophesies... salvation had its first beginnings from women." [\[1\]](#) This observation has moved to the forefront in recent discussion on Luke-Acts. Barbara E. Reid ties this growing recognition to "the rise of feminist consciousness" [\[2\]](#) She points to the number of female characters in the narrative, especially in Luke's unique material, some of who are images of the divine 13:20-1, 15:8-20. [\[3\]](#) She also draws attention to the technique of pairing male characters with female. [\[4\]](#) Turid Karlsen Seim documents as many as twelve of these gender pairs. [\[5\]](#) Jane Schalberg points to Luke's tendency "to defend, reassure, and praise women." [\[6\]](#) This includes Luke pointing out the economic disadvantage of widows. [\[7\]](#) Luke also presents Jesus praising marginalised (sick or outcast) women with such titles as "daughter of Abraham" – a title used by Luke alone of the four evangelists. [\[8\]](#)

The reason for Luke's positive view of women may well be tied to a concern for the status of women among Luke's readership. [\[9\]](#) Many have attempted to surmise the place of women within Luke's community. For instance, Halvor Moxnes argues that Luke's community (a Greco-roman city [\[10\]](#)) suffered class and gender tensions. [\[11\]](#) Udo Schnelle suggests that much of Luke's rhetoric

addresses the rich and the advantaged, to “distance themselves from wealth in view of the danger of falling away from the faith”. [\[12\]](#)

Similarly, Luke’s affirmations of women could be considered as a way of countering Greco-roman patriarchy.

Yet, as Reid, [\[13\]](#) Seim [\[14\]](#) and Schalberg [\[15\]](#) all point out, recent feminist scholarship has also used critical techniques to describe the gender content of the third gospel. Critical feminist scholarship has uncovered repressive patriarchal models encoded into Luke’s text. Having acknowledged some of Luke’s affirmations of women, Amy-Jill Levine claims, “The Gospel of Luke threatens any attempt made by women... to find a voice in either society or church.” This is because it paints their value only in terms of procreation and service, and denies them discipleship or authority. [\[16\]](#)



However, from a Reformed-Evangelical perspective, it simply will not do to have Luke – a source of God’s revelation in Christ – as a source of oppression towards minority groups. Before I begin to point out the empirical and rational textual arguments against this, I surmise that to make the gospel of Luke a source of sexism would be an abrogation of the unity of scripture. It fails to recognise that it is the same God who rescued Hagar in distress (Gen 21:8-21), who saw the tears of Hannah (1 Sam 1:17), who proclaimed through Isaiah rejoicing for barren women (Isa 54:1-3) who now speaks through Luke. This view of inspiration recognises on the one hand that Luke was ‘moved by the Holy Spirit’, and ‘spoke from God’ (2 Pet 1:21), and on the other that Luke’s work is truly Luke’s, and radically male [\[17\]](#) making Luke a rightly androcentric text. However, this view does not leave room for Luke to express his maleness in the form of an abuse of power.

Admitting the presuppositional nature of my above argument, I will now bring rational and empirical argument into play as well. The critical feminist approach has sometimes failed to see that works from different time periods must be viewed through

the grid of their own cultural milieu, as distinct from our own. Luke's treatment of women must then be discussed in relation to Luke's own community and readership, being that Luke is a product of a different culture to our own, where women's issues are necessarily different to that of a post-industrial capitalist society.

Take the instance of Luke's presentation of Elizabeth in 1:5-25. This opening of the narrative is seen from Elizabeth's perspective (Zechariah being presented as an 'absent father', a foil to Elizabeth [18]), making it the first of the many Lukan texts that are gendered gynocentric, and form a balance to Luke's standard androcentricity. Elizabeth is an elderly and barren woman from a priestly family (v. 5-7), whose greatest concern is "the disgrace" that she has "endured among [her] people" because of her barrenness. Elizabeth's response here is a common biblical one. The parallel of Hannah, cited above, seems introverted, if not pale in comparison to Rachel's suicidal cry, "Give me children, or I shall die!" (Gen 30:1). To say that Luke is propagating the view of women as functionaries whose purpose in life is only to bear children [19] overlooks the need expressed by Elizabeth, and the women of her era. There is little point in telling Elizabeth that she ought to need such modern constructions as 'equal opportunity', if only to overlook the need which she herself expresses. It is a strange feminism that overlooks the concerns of real women on a grass roots level.

That being said, Luke in no way co-operates with the social and moral marginalisation of barren women. If Luke does not overtly attempt to overturn this marginalisation, he regardless assumes that it is not a reality with the reign of God. By presenting Elizabeth as being "righteous before God, living blamelessly" (Luke 1:6) in close context of describing her as being "barren" (v. 7), Luke shows that barrenness is not a sign of God's displeasure.

Luke's view of women is persistent in the narrative. Indeed, the rest of the story continues with 'Elizabeth's paradigm', as Luke continues not so much to assert, but to assume the spiritual and social equality of women. An example follows close: in Luke 1:26-38, the angel Gabriel (cf. Dan 8:16; 9:21-22), comes to tell Mary of God's plan that she shall be the mother of "the son of the most high" – v. 32. Mary inquires how this can be, seeing she is a virgin. Gabriel explains that the conception will be a miraculous one, and Mary accepts the commission. By this action, her soul magnifies the Lord, as her following song interprets (v. 46-56).

According to the pattern that I observed in the preceding (and parallel) pericope of Elizabeth's conception of John the Baptist, Luke does not use aggressive means to overturn patriarchalism, but rather simply assumes that in the reign of God it is not a reality. Schalberg points out that Elizabeth's praise of Mary in v. 45, "blessed is she who believed", blesses her spirituality instead of defining her "by her biological motherhood". [20] I notice that Luke shows that men do not grant this appraisal to them, as though their equality somehow depended on that.



Rather, it is Elizabeth, a woman, who makes the observation, showing that women's value, given by God, is inherent within them. Their status within any given society may be an expression or abrogation of, but is irrelevant to, this spiritual reality of God's reign. I also notice that this idea is confirmed by Mary's own song. Within ancient historiography, songs are used to interpret the narrative events. [21] So by giving the song to Mary's voice, Luke shows a woman defining the meaning of her pregnancy herself, in her own words, on her own terms. This stands as a stark contrast to a culture that told barren women that they were a "disgrace". It is also a prophetic witness in our own culture, causing us to question whether our social structures adequately model the divinely bestowed, and self-languaged value of women seen in Elizabeth and Mary.

Throughout the body of Luke's text, this 'paradigm of Elizabeth' continues as women are presented at meals. [22] This is the locus of much of Luke's gender content. Mary Douglas has pointed out that,

If food is treated as a code, messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. [23]

Kathleen E. Corley has analysed each of the Synoptic Gospels in terms of the cultural encoding of Greco-Roman meals. Corley

shows that in early Greco-roman culture, respectable women did not attend meals. [24] However, in Judeo-Christian contexts, women had always been present at meals. [25] It is in Luke's gospel, Corley argues, that women do not recline with Jesus at tables, but are seen serving, in the manner of conservative Greco-Roman women. [26]

Central to Corley's argument is her reading of the words διακονεω - to serve and διακοπια - service. According to Corley, women are often portrayed 'serving', which refers to serving tables but "as an activity of a woman, διακοπια (the noun) occurs only once in Luke-Acts, in Luke 10:40 where Martha is criticised for being distracted with 'much service'". [27]

In my opinion, the distinction Corley makes between the noun and verb forms of the same word is not a strong enough exegetical ground for the claim she makes from it. Upon analysing Luke's uses of these words, I note that Corley's assertion that διακοπια only occurs once as an activity of a woman in Luke-Acts omits the fact that this word is only used once in Luke at all. When Luke uses the word in Acts, it has taken on a theologised meaning due to its later position in salvation history. For instance, in Acts 1:17 and 25, it refers to the unique ministry of the Twelve, and in 6:1, 4, to the diaconate. Furthermore, in 10:40 the only instance of a noun form in Luke, the verb form is also given the same referent: Martha's work.

In fact, my own reading of Luke's usage of the verb διακονεω in his gospel shows that his approach is sensitive to the position of women. The verb is used seven times in the gospel. In 4:39, Peter's mother serves food to Jesus and Peter as soon as she has been healed. In 8:1-3, several wealthy patronesses (another role for polite Greco-Roman women [28]) "διακονουσιν αυτοις" (provided for them). The third use of the verb is that of Martha in 10:40. She is distracted by many "διακοπιαν" (the noun form: service), and complains to the Lord (Κυριε) that her sister has left only her to do all the work ('μονην με κατελιπεν διακονειν').



These first three examples of διακονεω show women in a servant role at the table. In doing this, Luke has made his gospel appear polite to conservative Greco-Roman table manners. As Corley puts it, they are "silent, submissive, and ready to learn at Jesus' feet." [29] Take the instance of Peter's mother-in-law. Interestingly, the pericope is



Markan material. I notice that Luke records with Mark that they entered τὴν οἰκίαν Σίμωνος, but omits the following words: καὶ Ἀνδρέου μετὰ Ἰακώβου καὶ Ἰωάννου. This

makes the scene more private. As Corley notes, “when men ‘serve’... to the community it symbolises a leadership role... had Peter’s mother-in-law ‘served’ several men... it might have had scandalous overtones.” [30]

We must concede that Corley has well documented Luke’s insistence that women in his narrative adhere to Greco-roman table manners, and excludes them from meals. Even in the case of the woman who was a sinner in 7:36-50, Greco-roman manners are observed; she does not approach Jesus except “from behind”. [31] However, this may also be viewed through the ‘paradigm of Elizabeth’: Luke has indeed shown women within conservative Greco-Roman meals, but this is merely a bland observation, neither affirming nor attempting to overturn the peculiarities of Greco-Roman culture. However, Luke is active in affirming the value of women within their cultural milieu, as will be seen in the next four examples of διακονεω that Luke gives.

Viewing the narrative structure of Luke, I note that these three examples have established διακονεω as a theme (or motif) in Luke’s narrative, but in the next four uses of the word, the theme is developed. As the journey to Jerusalem progresses, Luke begins to picture Jesus, instead of polite women, as the one who ‘serves’ - διακονεω. First, this is described eschatologically (12:35-40). At the Parousia, Jesus will serve those among his followers who waited and watched for his coming. The remaining three uses are found in a cluster in 22:26-27. Jesus says, “...the greater among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like ‘ο διακονων’. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or ‘ο διακονων’? But I am among you as ‘ο διακονων’”. I note that in saying this, Luke continues in the ‘paradigm of Elizabeth’. Luke does not attempt to overturn Greco-roman patriarchal table customs. However, once διακονεω has been established as the behaviour of polite women, Luke encourages the men to behave as servants as well for the very reason that Christ has behaved thusly. Indeed this is the very opposite of ‘affirmative action’. Rather than attempting to ‘fight’ for women’s right to a voice at the table, Luke simply joins them in the position of their service, and shows Christ doing the same.

In conclusion, an investigation of the text and narrative does not support the claims of critical feminism, that Luke promotes

patrarchalism. It cannot be denied that patriarchal models are present in the text, or that Luke does not overtly challenge such models. But rather, I have discovered that Luke prefers to show Christ joining women in their marginalisation, and encouraging others to do so. Truly, Luke's method of affirming women reminds us more of the peaceful Satyagraha method of Mohandas Gandhi than it does the militant campaigning of the suffragettes. Although western feminisms have matured since then, their roots do lie in the direction of the latter. Could it be that with this cultural memory, and a desire to take equality by 'force', recent analysis has missed the fact that Luke's Jesus is standing not apart from, but quietly with the marginalised women of his day, and whatever is said or thought about them is therefore borne by him.

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[1] Origen, "Homilies on the Gospel of Luke 8.1" *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1947 94:33

[2] Barbara E. Reid, O.P., "Beyond Petty Pursuits and Wearisome Widows: Three Lukan Parables" *Interpretation* 56 (July 2002): 284

[3] *ibid.*: 294

[4] *ibid.*: 284-5

[5] Turid Karlsen Seim, "The Gospel of Luke", in Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures Volume Two: A Feminist Commentary*. New York: Crossroad, 1994: 729-30

[6] Jane Schalberg, "Luke." In *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, 275-292. London: SPCK, 1992.

[7] Luke 2:37; 4:25-6; 7:12; 18:3, 5; 20:47; 21:2-3

[8] Schalberg, "Luke": 278-9

[9] It should be pointed out that Richard Bauckham has recently questioned the assumption that each gospel was written for a particular 'community'. He argues that the gospels were intended "to circulate widely among the churches." (Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?" In *The Gospel for all Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998:11) If this is true, then Luke's picture of women does not merely reflect his concept of women in his community, but of christian women universally. Bauckham's posterior methodology is consistent with his assumptions about the readership. As the text gives us different gynocentric pericopes, the "readers/hearers are invited to adopt successively the many different perspectives of those who hear, observe, encounter and follow Jesus." (Richard Bauckham, "The book of Ruth as a Key to Gynocentric Reading of Scripture" *Gospel Women: Studies in the Named Women in the Gospels* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. : 14) I suspect that from a critical feminist perspective, Bauckham's view of the readership of Luke could

be the grounds for suspecting a patriarchal agenda in the text. For instance, Luke's depicting of women in serving roles (e.g. Luke 4:38-39 and 8:1-3) could be read not as a reflection of Greco-roman women's table manners, (Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1993: 144-6) but as a model for all christian women, that they should adopt servile roles within their churches.

[10] Halvor Moxnes, "The Social Context of Luke's Community" *Interpretation* 48 (1994): 380

[11] *ibid.*: 385-6

[12] Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings*, London: SCM, 1998: 246

[13] Reid, "Petty Pursuits": 285

[14] Seim, "Luke": 739-62

[15] Schalberg, "Luke": 289

[16] Amy-Jill Levine "Introduction" in *A Feminist Companion to Luke* ed. Amy-Jill Levine, London: Sheffield Academic, 2002: 1

[17] That is, if we suppose the maleness of Luke.

[18] Turid Karlsen Seim, "The Virgin Mother: Mary and Ascetic Discipleship in Luke" In *A Feminist Companion to Luke*. ed. Amy-Jill Levine, London: Sheffield Academic, 2002: 93-95

[19] Seim, *Virgin Mother*: 89-105

[20] Seim, "Luke": 279

[21] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991: 43.

[22] 4:38f; 7:36-50; 8:1-3; 10:38-42.

[23] Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal" In *Myth, Symbol and Culture*: 61-81, ed C. Geertz, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1971.

[24] Corley, *Private Women.*: 53-66

[\[25\]](#) *ibid.*: 66-78

[\[26\]](#) *ibid.*: 109

[\[27\]](#) *ibid.*: 113

[\[28\]](#) *ibid.*: 11-13

[\[29\]](#) *ibid.*: 146

[\[30\]](#) Corley, *Private Women*: 121

[\[31\]](#) *ibid.*: 130

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