

A SOCIO- RELIGIOUS ANALYSIS OF THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN THE BIBLE: A PARADIGM FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

An investigation into the nature of socio-religious and leadership roles played by women in the Bible clearly indicates that leadership roles are assigned by God as a spiritual gift. In these sense, one can easily deduce that God bestow capabilities and positions upon individuals for His own purposes. From the foregoing, it is evident that for any country or nation to experience a sustainable development in all ramifications must be well coordinated and supported by people, especially those at the grass root. In other words, both men and women including boys and girls must be given equal opportunities and work in tandem for overall growth. It is in view of this, that this work examines the socio-religious and leadership roles played by some women in the bible as a paradigm for national development. The work which adopts sociological and descriptive methods identifies some of the roles of women in the secular society and the nation at large. This research has also created awareness for women on the changing context of female leadership roles in the contemporary society. This research concludes that women have risen beyond all forms of stereotypes and prejudices if only they are individually and collectively ready to exhibit and display the potentials God has deposited in them for the betterment of the society and the nation at large. The work highlights some recommendations that can enhance women leadership in the contemporary society.

Keywords: Socio-religious, Roles, Women, Paradigm and National Development.

Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible (OT) women appear for the most part as minor or subordinate figures, yet they played an essential role in the record of Israel's faith and include some of the best remembered actors in the biblical story. The names of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah, and Ruth among others are indispensable to the rehearsals of that story, as well as Jezebel, Esther, and Eve. Behind these, however stand thousands of unnamed and unnoted women who have engaged the attention of recent biblical scholars.

Similarly, an investigation into the nature of socio-religious and leadership roles played by women in the New Testament clearly indicates that leadership roles are assigned by God as a spiritual gift. "God bestows capabilities and position upon individuals for His own purposes, and when He looks for a human vessel, He sees only the willingness of the soul to serve at any position."¹

Witherington's explanation for this is that none of the female leaders featured in scripture engaged in behaviors, especially authoritative instruction, that Paul prohibits.³ Although, both the Old and New Testaments passively accepted the oppression of women, it does not imply that leadership and socio-religious roles are wrong in today's society.⁴ In a nut shell, women took as large share of leadership and socio-religious roles in the Scriptures as was allowed by the conventions of that society, so, women today should be able to serve in whatever leadership positions they are qualified for.

Women in the Old Testament period.

An effective way to right the wrongs of sexist interpretation of the Bible and the resulting oppression of women throughout history in culture and in the contemporary society is to study the socio-religious and leadership roles of women in the Bible. Despite the subordinate positions in which women were placed, it is gratifying to note that the Old Testament portrays women in leadership positions in the religious sphere. There is no indication that women were ineligible for or incapable of leadership or authority in the Jewish world⁵

One ministry in which we most frequently see women's direct involvement described in the scripture is that of prophecy. Today most people think first of Pastors when they hear the word ministers, but in the Old Testament the most common form of ministry with respect to declaring God's word was the prophetic ministry.⁶

These women were presented as prophetesses and some of them served in both the tabernacle and the Temple (Ex. 38:8; 1 Chronicles 25:5-6). Jonathan stokl says that "among the prophetic figures affected in the extra – biblical ancient Near Eastern Sources there exist considerable more women than in the Bible."⁷ According to stokl, Neo Assyrian documents mention thirteen female prophetesses whose names have survived, and other documents that refer to several female prophetesses without mentioning their names.⁸

In the Old Testament true prophetesses included Hulda, Miriam, Deborah, Isaiah's wife and many more others. These women performed excellently during that period as some of their deeds shall be explained here.

The first to be mentioned here is Miriam. She was a prophetess and singer in Israel. Her name means 'beloved'. She was the one who stood afar off to watch Moses on the Nile River when pharaoh ordered the killing of all male infants in Egypt. Moses grew up to be a great leader and prophet in Israel and one with whom God spoke 'face to face'. Miriam had the calling of God upon her life. She held the office of a prophetess one which very few women held in those days. She was a

spoke woman for God who received messages for the people in order to exhort, edify and comfort them. She served along with Moses and Aaron in this ministry.⁹ Miriam's life was centered on the service of God and her marital status or even her sex could not stop her from executing her duties.

Another prophetess in the Old Testament whose story is fascinating is Huldah, Huldah was the first prophetess to declare written words to be the word of God-scripture. She was the first whose words of judgment are centered on a written document as no others have been before her. She was the first to authenticate scriptures. Manuscripts had been accumulating for years, if not centuries, but for the first time a prophet proclaims the writing to be God's word, and this prophetess happened to be a woman – the last female prophetess before Judah fell to the Babylonians she started the process that would eventually give the church the canonized scriptures.¹⁰

Huldah is extremely important to the history known as Joshua – Samuel – Kings and also chronicles. The Huldah narrative is central not only to the Josiah episode but to the entire structure of chronicles. John Otwell said, "it is clear that Huldah was a major cult official, and her reputation in her own time probably was greater than Jeremiah"¹¹. This woman placed a stamp of authenticity on scripture, interpreting it and exercising authority over men all at the same time. Huldah "authorizes" the Book. She places her stamp of approval on the content as truly from the Lord¹¹. Ralph Mahoney in his own work concludes that, "no prophetic ministry of record ever produced such a sweeping change in the nation of Israel in so short a time"¹²

Looking at the role played by Huldah as a prophetess in her own time and during the Josiah's reformation, one can say that this can serve as lessons for both men and women in political and religious leadership and position today. By the time Huldah was able to found the book, she had the authority to declare the "Book" to be a fraud, and it is possible that Josiah would have believed her. But her authority was what gave the book credibility and power.

Another reverend prophetess, judge and woman leader to be discussed here is Deborah. Following the death of Ehud, the judge whom God used to deliver Israel from Eglon King of Moab, the Lord raised another Judge. This time it was "Deborah", a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth (Judges 4:4) to deliver Israel from Jabin King of Canaan unlike the previous judge, 'Deborah was both a judge and a prophetess. Under Deborah's leadership, the children of Israel were delivered from a twenty-year-long occupation by an alien army. She served in a prominent position for people came from parts of Israel to consult her. Deborah held a place commanding the respect of the nation and filled it in a worthy manner.¹³ Isaiah's wife was another good example to be mentioned here, we have no biblical comment on her ministry, but one wonders if she did not contribute significant prophetic insights to the extensive writing of Isaiah.

No Old Testament prophet is said to have been married to a prophetess. It is not hard to believe that Isaiah's marriage to a prophetess gave him a distinct advantage over other prophets not similarly blessed.¹⁴ According to Ralph Mahoney, Proverbs 31 describes her as diligent, skilled crafts person, landowner and business woman, benefactor of the poor and needy and wisdom and opinion respected.¹⁵ With the little record one is able to get about Isaiah's wife, it is indeed important for contemporary women to learn from her way of life so that the will of God for their lives can be perfected. Ruth is another good woman in the Old Testament that needed to be envied they called her 'the woman of good report'

Let your light shine before men, that they may see
your good works and glorify your father in heaven.
(Matthew 5:16).

Ruth was a Moabitess who lived at the time of the judges of Israel. This was the period between the death of Joshua and the rise of Samuel. She was the wife of Mahlon, the son of Elimelech who had left Bethlehem to Moab with his family as a result of famine in Israel. After the death of Elimelech and his two sons, Naomi his wife decided to go back home. Ruth insisted on following her and ended up marrying Boaz who became the great grandfather of David, the king of Israel. Ruth's name means 'friend' and she really lived up to it by her love and commitment to God and to Naomi.¹⁶ The shunamite woman is another woman to be commended for her hospitable character. She was called "The hospitable woman" hospitable to one another without grumbling (1pet.4:9)

The shunamite woman is called after the name of the city she came from that is shunem. This city was situated a little north of Jezreel near Nain, the city where Jesus raised a widows son from the dead. Elisha often passed through shunem to Jezreel, the capital city, and that was how he met the woman from shunem. This woman has been referred to as rich and eminent and rightly so because she was very rich and influential in the city. She was married to a man much older than herself and the marriage did not have the blessing of children. Elisha had been passing from carnal to Jezreel through shunem. Whenever he passed by, the shunamite woman would insist that he eats in her house. This was an act of hospitality which she did out of her free will. She was a rich woman who did not need anything from anybody. She, however, took time to extend invitation to people to come and eat. Her house was warm and open and this character must have earned her respect and honor among her people.

A hospitable person is one who loves welcoming and entertaining guests at his or her expense. The Bible commands Christians to show hospitality to one another. In so doing some have entertained angels without knowing.¹⁷ The shunamite woman did not stop there. She asked her husband if they could make a guest room for Elisha in their house. She had perceived that he was a man of God and wanted to provide a place of rest and quietness for him. She made for him a bed, table, chair

and lamp to study the word of God. She was concerned not only with her own needs but also those of others. Kindness to God's messengers is commended and a great reward is promised those who practice it.¹⁸

Esther is another good to know woman in the Old Testament. Esther is one of the virtuous women in the Old Testament and she was the daughter of Ahibal. Both her father and mother died and she was brought up by Mondecia, her father's nephew. He loved her and brought her up as his own daughter. The Jews at that time were living in Shushan the capital city, as well as in other towns of the Persian Empire. Also at that time, King Ahasuerus, a brutal and wicked man, ruled over the empire. His authority extended over a vast area one –hundred and twenty seven provinces in all. Esther, through divine arrangement became queen and through her God saved the Jewish people from extermination.¹⁹ She possessed qualities expected of a leader which included obedience and humility. She was a great woman whose works and life shall ever remain and not forgotten. The 13th and 14th of Nisan is called the feast of Purim to celebrate the deliverance of the Israelites under Esther.²⁰

Following the above names of women mentioned in the Old Testament and many more, one can easily conclude that women were not completely disallowed from participating in the work of God even in a patriarchal society.

Women in the Inter-Testamental Period.

In this period God was preparing the world for the perfect situation for Jesus to come to earth. He was 'silent' but working none the less.²¹ However, irrespective of low participation of women in the Inter- Testamental period, there were women who played very important roles that are commendable. Among them was a woman who was offered freedom with her seven sons by the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanies if they would only eat swine's flesh set before them or face death. They accepted martyrdom rather than violate the laws of their ancestors and their conscience. Following the history, the woman combined womanly emotion with manly courage and spoke words of encouragement to each of her sons in their native language (2 Maccabaeus 7:21). It was in affirmation of this that Charles wrote:

Full of noble Spirit and nerving her woman's heart
with the courage of man, she exhorted each of them
(her Sons)²²

There was also a woman who featured prominently in Israel's national history. She delivered Israelites when the Assyrians were about to crush them. A time when "they had lost courage for with the enemies all around them, there was Judith, a very religious widow and wife of Manasseh, who fasted all the days of her widowhood, except the day before Sabbath and Sabbath itself, feast days and new moon having heard how the people were complaining bitterly against Uzzai the king, Judith volunteered her service and promised to deliver her nation from the Assyrians. The Assyrians had come out with their commander, Holoferness, backed by a vast army of infantry, and cavalry. And as he appeared about to defeat Jerusalem, then,

the leaders at Jerusalem put the fate of the whole nation in her hands not even requiring that she divulge her plan. Sequel to the above, Arulefela said:

She fasted and prayed and went out to the camp of the Assyrians well dressed with her maids and killed Holoferness, the head of the Assyrian Army. She came back to Israel with the head and called to watch-men at the gates! God, our God is still with us, to show his power in Israel and his strength against our enemies, even as he has done this day²³.

Women in the New Testament Period.

Women played significant roles in the New Testament. Records show that they served as hostesses to the church, in their houses, as deaconesses in their churches and as people who prophesized and spoke in tongues. Their caring attitude and nature is evident from the various ways they cared for Jesus and the body of Christ.²⁴ In a day when the religious leaders thought it so much disreputable to speak to a woman in public, even if she was a wife or daughter or sister, Jesus openly converses with women wherever He encountered them²⁵ A different picture unfolds in the ministry of Jesus. Luke 8:1-3 indicates that Jesus welcomed some women as traveling companions. He encouraged Martha and Mary to sit at His feet as disciples (Luke 10:38-42). Jesus respect for women was something strikingly new, and in stark contrast to that of the Pharisees and saducees.²⁶ To this effect, there were some women who were missionaries with Jesus (Lk8:1-3).

According to Witherington, from the beginning of Jesus ministry, he intended women to be witnesses and participants in his mission.²⁷ On this Abogunrin observes that though women are not specifically mentioned as disciples, it does not rule out the fact that women are probably included among the seventy on missionary journey.²⁸ It is true that while Jesus chose his disciples, He chooses only men as members of the twelve disciples women were not among them. But the accounts showed that, women have had a remarkable roles played in the accounts of Jesus ministry. He was ready to teach them like men, (Luke 10:39). He accepted them as person as well as spoke to them in the public and also individually²⁹ He shocked his disciples when they saw him talking with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar (John 4:7-26).

Jesus dealings and relationship with women shows that He was not at the mercy belt of the culture and tradition of His days on women. The personhood and dignity of women are clearly demonstrated by Jesus Christ.

Jesus attitude runs counter to those of any culture, He valued women, affirming them as being equally made in the image of God and fully man. There is no hint of oppression, domination, depreciation or ridicule in His interactions with women. He never silenced or interrupted them, nor did he ever appear to be threatened by them”³⁰

Women in the Early Church.

The fact that women were allowed to follow Jesus and was possible for them to learn a lot from Him, by this it could be said that Jesus empowered them.

As it is true of Luke's gospel, women played prominent roles in the ministry of the apostles in the early church. Thurston on this was able to give the names of twelve women who actively participated in the spread of the gospel and also performed one socio- religious role or the other during the time of the Apostles. They are: Mary the mother of Jesus, Sapphira, Candace the Queen of Ethiopia, Tabitha, Mary the mother of John, Rhoda, a servant girl, Lydia, Damaris, Priscilla, Diana, Drusilla, Bernice.

Others are Euodia, Synteche, Jumia, Anna, Phoebe, widows in the church in Jerusalem, Jewish women of high standing in Antioch in Pisidia, Timothy's Jewish mother, a slave girl with a spirit of divination and four daughters of Philip who were prophetesses.³¹ These women were categorized into different categories as Married, Single, Professional, Homemaker, Jew, Greek, Roman goddess, Single mother, Prophet, Teacher, Missionary, Queen and Slave.³²

The Roles of Women in the Secular Society and in the Nation at Large

Some of the roles played by women in the secular society and in the nation at large shall be analyzed under the following headings.

1. **Domestic Roles:** - The roles of women in the secular society are essentially associated with the home in which biological and economic roles are blended. They play, irrespective of all odds, unique and important roles such as helps, mothers, comforters and nurse. Firstly, they join hands with their husbands as helpers in bringing joy and happiness, peace and live to the family, which normally starts as nuclear family, extended family and finally develops into larger community. In the same Venn, women bring up their children in the family with all the necessary training they need in order to become responsible fellows in the society. In the basic Nigeria, society in the Bible, the honor is usually attributed to the men when their children are properly brought up and it is attributed to the weakness of women when they are not brought up properly, thereby in one way putting much pressure on the women and in another way indirectly expressing that women are the hob upon which the success of the family revolves.

2. **Agro-Economic Role:** - Since development is primarily concerned with economics activities. This work shall be looking at the economic roles of women from the subsistence farming economic stand point. in fact, in Africa, where horticulture is still the main cultivation method, the U.N economic commission for Africa has ascertained that 70 percent of agricultural production is in the hands of women.³³ Ester Boserup has linked the variation of sex roles in farming to different types of agriculture. According to her, in subsistence farming where land is plentiful, a slash-and-burn technique is the typical agricultural style; generally men clear the land and women do the bulk of the farming.³⁴ In addition to the important roles of women in

farming, women in subsistence economies traditionally have engaged in a variety of other economic activities v13-a-v13, spinning fibers, weaving clothes, drawing water, tending market gardens and processing and preserving foods gathered from the communal properly. More so in West Africa universal sense, women brew beer, women in southern Asia boil palm sugar, and women in parts of Mexico and elsewhere make pottery. Women in most countries weave and make clothes; women in most countries sell their surplus food in the local market. Profit from these activities generally belongs to the women themselves³⁵. Thus women in many part of the world have become known for their astuteness in their market place. It is of noteworthy that, market women of West Africa and Nigeria in particular have parlayed their economic strength into political powers as well. In a nutshell, adding women into development plans and putting them to work, increase the size of economic pie.

3. **Socio-Religious Role:** - Like the case in the secular society, women equally constitute the majority in the population of any denomination today. Generally, we quite familiar with and cannot in anyway doubt the innumerable roles the Christian women play in the various denomination today. A close examination of the Neo-Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria reveals that not only are women playing prominent leadership role in Church administration on an equal footing with men, but Nigeria Pentecostalism has in fact, produced great women Church Founders, Planters, General Overseers, Prophetess, Lady Evangelists, Pastors, Teachers and so on. Besides, some of these women whose husbands are Church founders have proved themselves suitable help-mates to their husbands in co-running Church ministries.³⁶ Fatokun continues by giving examples of such women in Nigeria Neo-Pentecostal Churches. To mention but few, the Rev. Dr. (Mrs.) Sam Amaga of Foundation Faith Church (a.k.a Salem International Churches), Pastors (Mrs.) Faith Oyedepo of Winners Chapel, the Late Pastor (Mrs.) Bimbo Odukoya of Fountain of Life Bible Church, Lagos, the Revd (Dr.)Mrs. Funke Nelson Adetuberu of By Faith Ministry International Churches, and Pastor (Mrs.) Deola Ojo of Grace Family Church, Ibadan. One of the most noteworthy achievements is the full leadership status assumed by Bishop (Mrs.) Margaret Benson – Idahosa subsequent to the death of her husband in 1998. In fact, these women and others in Neo-Pentecostal circles have indeed proved through their leadership roles that women are not weaker vessels as most of our Churches today were founded by women.³⁷ A critical look at the teaching and counseling ministry of Pastor (Mrs.) Bimbo Odukoya makes it clear that both men and women are gifted by God to do his work. Bimbo Odukoya's teaching ministry has received so much public recognition and ecclesiastical approval that many different Church denominations and Campus Fellowships have invited her to conduct youth ministry. The leadership role played by this woman in the transformation of the lives of youths (males and females) alike in the area of marriage has been found to be so unique that it could be said in all fairness that no man has been able to beat her record.

The Rev. Dr. (Mrs.) Funke – Nelson Adetuberu is another woman of great importance in Pentecostal leadership. Through her woman's college of ministries, this woman like Pastor (Mrs.) Bimbo Odukoya, has transformed many lives, rebuilt many damaged homes, and restored hope to many hopeless women. Besides this, she has succeeded in preparing many women for active ministry in the Church. She has also remolded the lives of many women that they have become good housewives and loving and caring mothers.

Bishop (Mrs.) Bola Odeleke of the popular Christ Apostolic Church, Agbala Agbara Olorun Kiihati, now known as the Power Pentecostal Church, is another woman of great leadership charisma in Nigeria Pentecostal circles. This woman is not merely a female Pastor but a Church founder with male Pastors working under her. Her leadership qualities have been tested and proven in the way she was able to successfully pilot her Church through these years in the midst of the crises that followed the death of her husband (an officer in the Nigeria Army). The leadership charisma of Bishop (Mrs.) Bola Odeleke as a Church founder and Pentecostal leader has been demonstrated by many diverse signs and wonders that accompanied her ministry and are in no way inferior to those associated with the men in Nigeria Pentecostalism.³⁸

4. **Political Role:** - Essentially, women constitute above half of Nigeria's population and have played essential roles not only in the family but in political stability and socio-economic development. Historically, women have contributed to both canvassing for human rights and pushing for democratization in pre and post-colonial times³⁹ women have been integral to both the social, economic and political set up of pre and post-colonial communities In Nigeria. On this, it is interesting to note that handful of women have occupied important and key administrative and leadership positions since 1999. In most instances, these women have performed credibly well thereby leaving no doubt about the ability and capabilities at all levels. Women like Hajiya Sadiya Umar Farouk, Min. of humanitarian affairs and disaster management, Hajiya Maryam kalagun, Minister of state industry, trade and investment, Hajiya Zainab Ahmed , Minister of finance, budget and national planning, Dame Pauline Tallen, Minister of women Affairs and Social Development, Rahamatu Tijani, Minister of State for FCT, Senator Gbemisola Saraki, Minister of State for Transport, Prof. Dora Akunyili, former director general, national agency for food and drugs administration control (NAFDAC) and Minister of Education before her demise, Dr. Okonjo-Iweala who as Minister of finance during Obasanjo and Jonathan's administrations worked indefatigably and secured a reprieve for Nigerians external debt among others⁴⁰. The role of these women have no doubt lifted the pedigree and profile of Nigeria's women as hard working, disciplined, thorough, creative, enterprising and productive. Their enormous contributions to national development are gradually engineering re-evaluation of the roles and capabilities of women in public capacities in positive light.

Beyond all forms of stereotypes and prejudices

Women at all levels have risen beyond all forms of stereotypes and prejudice if only they are individually and collectively ready to exhibit and display their hidden potentials as women for the development and the betterment of the country. This is evident in the fact that:

1. **Women have changed** – As women shift more of their time from domestic to paid labor; they assume the personal characteristic required to succeed in the new roles. In addition to women's increased human capitals investment, women's psychological attributes and related behaviors have changed in concept with their entry into formerly male-dominated roles⁴¹.
2. **Leadership roles have changed** – Apart from the changes noticed in the psychological attributes and women's behaviors in the contemporary society towards shifting from only being a wife and mother to acquiring leadership roles. There has also been an indication that the incongruity between male leader's roles and the female gender role has diminished.⁴² this is evident in the fact that women are now appointed as leaders to occupy some elective and man eying post in the contemporary society. Contrary to the usual saying "think manager, think male"
3. **Organization practices have changed**- Also important to women's rise is change in organizational practices. This change has brought about changes in the culture of many organizations in the world today that they now embrace the benefits of including women and minorities among their leaders.
4. **The culture have changed**- In view of changes in leaders roles and organizational practices, female leaders have come to symbolize new types of leadership that connote greater effectiveness and synergy than leadership of the past.⁴³ Appointment of women signal an organization's departure from past practices and helps it to capture the symbols of innovation and progressive change. For example the appointment of the following women as vice chancellors of some great universities in Nigeria. Prof Tenuche Ohunene Mariatu VC Prince Abubakar Audu University Anyigba (PAAU), Prof Folashade Tolulope Ogunsola VC University of Lagos (UNILAG), Prof Adenike Temidayo Oladiji VC Federal University of Technology Akure (FUTA) ⁴⁴ and many other women occupying various leadership positions in the country has helped to foster the talents of women. This symbolic shift in the meaning conveyed by appointments of women to high positions is one force underlying the surge of claims of female advantage in trade books and News papers and magazine articles in Nigeria.

Conclusion

An investigation into the nature of socio-religious and leadership roles played by women in the bible despite the stereotypes and prejudices that surround their culture indicates that leadership roles are assigned by God as spiritual gift. Though, Nigeria has at different time experienced exemplary leadership in women but unfortunately much of these experiences were short lived. But despite these improvements and

achievements in women political, economic, and religions leadership in Nigeria from pre-colonial through colonial eras the representation of women compared to men in leadership position in Nigeria is still a far cry from the global benchmark of 38% affirmation action thereby forgetting the fact that a nations competitiveness depends significantly on weather and how it educates and utilizes its female talents by giving women the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities as men.

Recommendations

This work recommends that women should endeavor to add value to themselves through education and involving in one lucrative job or the other to boost the living standard of their immediate families and the society at large. More so, girl child education should be encouraged and seen as paramount to the development of the nation at large. The work also recommends that women need to acquire skills to become more confidence and assertive and equally need to become aware of communication rituals. Similarly, the work recommends that women should invest in the technical competence, cultural and emotional intelligence. This work also recommends that women should find, mentor, sponsors and encourage proactive investment to build own brand equity and also create networks and circles of influence thereby be part of the solution to drive change.

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