

## **The Roles of Women in the New Testament and Contemporary Church in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*The Canons of the New Testament scriptures are explicit in the documentation of the male disciples of Jesus but silent as regards the female gender. The reasons for this may be due to some cultural or religious factors. However, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the activities and roles of women in the New Testament became very prominent. Thus, this paper centres on the roles of women in the New Testament and contemporary church. Were women impactful in the advancement of the gospel in the New Testament times? Were they silent or active? What were the roles played by women in the New Testament? Besides, are women ministry consistent with the New Testament canons? Contextually, what are the roles or impact of women in the contemporary church? This is the thrust of this paper. The paper employs the descriptive analysis method and maintains that though there are no records of Jesus calling any female gender as disciple in the New Testament canons, women such as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, Priscilla and many other women were indispensable in the propagation of the good news about the resurrection of Jesus. In other words, women played vital roles in the New Testament for the spread of Christianity. The paper also maintains that women are vital instrument in the contemporary church. This is evidenced as will be expressed in this paper in the numerous groups and leadership positions which they occupy in the contemporary church such as teaching, preaching, music and ushering departments. The paper recommends equal treatment of male and female in the contemporary church and society.*

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**Key Words:** *Canons, Gender, New Testament, Roles, Women*

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### **Introduction**

The writers of the New Testament canons of the scriptures expresses in clear terms the names and activities of the active male disciples of Jesus but on the other hand were silent as regards the names of the female disciple. Women in the two worlds which prevailed in the New Testament times namely the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures were primarily relegated to the background in virtually all spheres of human endeavours. However, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the activities and roles of women in the New Testament became very conspicuous. Thus changing the already established views about women by the Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the roles of women in the New Testament and contemporary church. Did Jesus have women as disciples during His earthly ministry? What roles did women play in the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament and also for the spread of Christianity? Contextually, what are the roles or impact of women in the contemporary church in Nigeria? Moreover, what are the views about women in the world of the New Testament? This issues are germane in this paper.

### **Women in the New Testament World**

A careful examination of the life, activities and ministry of Jesus and also Apostle Paul in the New Testament canons reveals that women played renowned roles in the early church and for the advancement of Christianity. Prior to the advent of Jesus and Paul and the inauguration of Christianity, the Jewish culture as well as the Greco-Roman cultures gave a nodding attention to the roles and status of women. Consequent upon this, women were relegated to the background in all life endeavours. The condition of women in the Greek culture will be examined under three main areas namely Social life, Marriage and Inheritance. The Greek woman led a very confined life. She lived in her own quarters into which no one except her husband came. She never at any time appeared on the street alone or participated in outside events which men were involved (William, 2006). Schmidt (2001) adds that a respectable Greek woman was not allowed to leave the house unless a trustworthy male escort accompanied her. She was never permitted to eat or interact with male guest in her husband's home. The Greeks placed fewer premiums on the education of women. They never allowed women to speak in the public. Joseph H. Mammam (2002) asserts that women in the Greek culture were regarded as inferior being while men are regarded as superior. Marriage which is the state of being united to a person of the opposite sex as husband or wife in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law was quite different for women in ancient Greece. The Greek women were given no audience as regard making their own choice(s) of whom to marry. When a woman was due for marriage, she was simply given out for marriage against her will by her parent or relative to a man of their choice. Women were passed from the house of their fathers to their husbands. Marriage was seen as an exchange and another opportunity for men to maintain superior position. It was seen as a practical business arrangement. After marriage, Greek men were responsible with trading and hunting activities outside the home while the women were occupied with domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, baking, weaving, sewing and looking after the children in the home (Svetlana, 3).

James Hastings writing on the place of women in the Greek culture remarks that in the home, the entire administration of the household fell on the women. The women took care of the stores, arranged the meals, and particularly directed spinning and weaving to provide garments for the family. David (1979) adds that the Greek woman had no right on her to inherit property. If they were married, complete control went to their husband, if they divorced, control and rights over any property went back to their father or nearest male relative. The husband possessed, dominated and took charge of all the properties while he existed and transferred the said property to the adult male children or guardian when he died. Lacey (2013) submits that if a man dies in the Greek culture, his relative(s) shares his properties (excluding his wife) among themselves. The act of sharing inheritance among relative(s) was usually done especially when the deceased had no male child thus giving birth to a girl child was seen as an embarrassment and disgrace. Pomeroy (1990) adds that "wives did not inherit property from husbands, or daughters from father; but sisters could inherit from their brothers. Hope Amolo (2003) remarks that in the Greco-Roman world, women generally married while still teenagers and so remained dependent both financially and legally on the men. She maintains that women functioned as domestic managers while the men went out in search of livelihood. She added that most women in the Greco-Roman cultures lived below normal, however, they enjoined religious liberty. Most women in the Greco-Roman cultures performed the roles of musicians, dancers, torchbearers and prostitutes in the religious arenas but the general perception about women in that period was that they were subordinate and morally feebler than men.

Similarly, Judaism which is the religion of the Jews had a perpetual despicable perception to women. Women were never regarded as persons but things. The Jewish society is highly patriarchal hence; the position of man is obviously absolutely over that of the woman in many scribed works. In the Jewish culture, the position or status of women was pathetically low and demeaning. Women were subordinated in the societal, marital, religious and educational circles. They were unconditionally at the disposal of their fathers or husbands who decide their fate. Williams (2006) underscores that a husband under Jewish law had the right to divorce his wife for any cause whereas a wife could divorce her husband for no cause. On the subordination of women in the religious circle, women were forbidden to learn the laws or participate in synagogue worship. To instruct a woman in the law was to cast pearls before swine. During synagogue worship, Jewish women were usually shut apart in a section of the synagogue or a gallery where they could not be seen. They were not allowed to speak publicly. It is believed in the Jewish culture that a man went to the synagogue to learn but at most a woman went to hear. The reading of lesson from the scripture in the synagogue was usually done by members of the congregation apart from women. The Jews were so biased against women that when a man and a woman were involved in adultery, they thought it fit to punish the woman and free the man contrary to the law of God that regards both as adulterers (John 8:1-12). Moreover, women were openly discriminated against during child birth. The slogan “happy is he whose children were males and woe to him whose children are females was popular at that period” (Kattey, 1990).

The subordination of women in the Jewish culture was such that in the Jewish Morning Prayer, a man thanked God that he was not made a Gentile, a slave or a woman (Williams, 2006). This implies that being created a woman was ignominy if not a curse. The dehumanizing view of women by the Jews is substantiated in the numbering of a crowd during an event in the account of Saint Matthew. Matthew, a Jew in reporting two feeding miracles of Jesus Christ ended the stories by stating “Those who ate were four thousand men besides women and children” (Matt. 15:38) “and those who ate were five thousand men besides women and children” (Matt. 14:31). Furthermore, a Jewish girl was under the control of her father until she came under the control of her husband. A typical Jewish girl was espoused in marriage at the age of twelve and was expected to adapt to the situation especially in a polygamous family. Afolabi J. Ampitan (2015) asserts that the low regard for women by the Jewish tradition might be adduced to the fact that the woman was taken out of man (Genesis 2:22), and also that sin crept into the world through Adam by the instrumentality of Eve (Genesis 3:6). He further maintains that it was Eve that was gullible; it was Eve who made the subtle serpent to delude her successfully, and she, in turn, convinced her husband to eat the forbidden fruit. The ineptitude of Eve, most probably, necessitated the way the Jews decided to continually relegate women to the background.

Though Jewish women faced myriads of dehumanizing experience(s) ranging from exclusion during synagogue worship, denial from reading the Torah during synagogue worship, denial of education, exclusion during *minyan* (prayers), denial of choice of marriage partner and many more within the medieval ages, the contemporary Jewish culture has a face lift for women. With the emergence of different movements in the Jewish culture ranging from Jewish feminist, humanistic Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism and reformed Judaism the status and place of women in the contemporary times has been elevated. Women are no longer regarded as inferior beings. The adherents of the above mentioned movements advocates for the inclusion of women in the performance of all male task such as leading the synagogue services, active participation in the public reading of the Torah, serving as witnesses, wearing of ritual prayer garment like *kipport* and *tallitot*. Other agenda

championed by the above mentioned movements is the advancement of the education of women, abolition of the Mehitzah (a partition separating the men from women during synagogue worship), equal employment opportunities laws, abolition of derogatory statements on women and equal placement of men and women in both religious and secular affairs.

### **Women under Christianity**

The advent of Christianity in the New Testament world changed the perception and thought of many people about women. In other words, the low perception of women changed drastically and as such the roles of women in the New Testament became very prominent. The New Testament reveals that Jesus and Paul valued women and treated them with respect and dignity. The four gospels of the New Testament contain vital information on the relationship of Jesus to women and portray the involvement of women in the life and ministry of Jesus. Women were key witnesses to the events of Jesus' life. They played prominent roles in the events surrounding his crucifixion and resurrection. The writings of John 19:25; Mark 15:47; Matthew 26:57 shows that they were willing to risk their lives for Jesus, remaining at the cross and visiting the tomb while the male disciples had fled (Akintunde, 2005).

Mahoney (1993) submits that the account of Matthew 28:1-18; Mark 1:1-19; and John 20:1-19 depicts women as the first to see Jesus after his resurrection; the first at the empty tomb and the first to proclaim the message of his resurrection. In the gospels, Jesus' attitude and behaviour towards women were in contrast to the norms of his time. Jesus healed women and allowed them touch him and also follow him. He spoke without restraint to them. He related to them primarily as humans being rather than as sexual beings (Akintunde, 2005). Jesus accepted women who were neglected and rejected within his society as persons of worth (John 8:1-2), Mahoney (1993) also underscores that the first persons to receive Paul and Silas in Macedonia were women (Acts 16:13).

Lydia, the first European convert exhibited hospitality to the apostles (Acts 16:11-15). She was wealthy, having a home large enough to accommodate her own family as well as guest rooms for Paul and Silas. In Thessalonica, many leading Greek women believed the preaching of Paul and Silas (Acts 17:4, 12) to the annoyance of the Jews. Philip had four unmarried daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:8,9). They were God spokespersons. The account of Acts 12:12 recounts that after Herod had murdered James the Brother of John on account of the gospel, he proceeded to arrest Peter because it pleased the Jews who were antagonistic to the preaching of Christ. In response, a prayer meeting for Peter's deliverance was held in the house of a woman, Mary the mother of John Mark at a risk of incurring the wrath of the arrogant and wicked Herod the King. Other women notable in the New Testament include the women of Berea who studied the scriptures diligently (Acts 17:10-17), Eunice and Lois mother and grandmother respectively of Timothy (1 Timothy 1:5). The powerful preacher, Apollos had Priscilla's help to him explain the way of God more adequately (Acts 18:24-27). Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchrae is worth mentioning, Paul described her as being a great help to many (Romans 16:2) (Mahoney 1993).

### **Women's roles in the New Testament**

From the foregoing, it is evident that the New Testament is replete with roles played by women. Since women were prominent in the ministry of Jesus, must have had ministerial roles. Women were involved in the spread of the gospel. A typical example is the action and

attitude of the woman of Samaria who after a theological discourse with Jesus went to her city to proclaim the message (John 4). The resurrection of Jesus to the world was proclaimed by women (Matthew 28:1-18; Mark 1:1-19; and John 20:1-19). This is in addition to the fact that women also helped to finance and sustain Jesus's ministry (Luke 8:1-3) and were involved in the Passion Week or crucifixion of Jesus. Philip had four unmarried daughters prophesied (Acts 21:8,9). That is, they were God's oracle for revelation. Women also played teaching and leadership roles in the New Testament. Acts 18:24-27 remarks that Priscilla assisted Apollos in the explanation of the word of God thereby making him mature in the faith and word. Similarly, Eunice and Lois, Timothy's mother and grandmother inspired him to live a godly life through teaching (1 Timothy 1:5). Phoebe, a deaconess- a term which carries the idea of servant distinguished herself in the church at Cenchrae (Romans 16: 8), thus performing the role of a leader in the church just like Stephen and Philip. Equally, women in the New Testament played the role of service and hospitality. As stated above Lydia, the first European convert showed hospitality to the apostles in Acts 16:11-15. She was affluent, having a home large enough to accommodate her own family as well as guest rooms for Paul and Silas.

### **Women's roles in the Contemporary Church in Nigeria**

The roles of women in the contemporary church in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. Just as it was in the early church and during the advent of Christianity, women in the contemporary church in Nigeria are forces to reckon with for support, viability and sustainability of any project, vision and mission. The viability and tremendous growth of the present day church depends largely on the activities and contribution of women. Some church's women ministry cannot function effectively and efficiently without the wife of the priest leading and organizing the women. As noted by Ampitan (2015) women are the major volunteers where men would show apathy or indifference. They are always seen in large numbers than their male counterpart particularly in church activities and in arranging and dusting the church pews, windows and other liturgical vestments. Women are also involved in the beautification and gleaning of the church premises. Worthy of note is the fact that in the contemporary church women are frequently more than men in the music department. Women often times compose music for festivals and ceremonies through inspiration when carrying out their domestic chores and other responsibility. The resounding voices of women in the music department serves as enticement to many into the church. In addition to music, women dance to the music which they or their male counterpart compose to showcase their African heritage. This is against most male who feel that it is not necessary to dance.

Additionally, women serve as leaders in house cells or fellowship in the Orthodox and Neo-Pentecostal Churches such as the Anglican Church, Methodist Church, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper Life Bible Church and Salvation Ministry. Thus, serving in the capacity as propagators of the word of God. Women are involved in televangelism and one-on-one evangelism, thereby enabling in the spread of the gospel and winning of souls for the kingdom of God. Oyibo (2005) recounting the activities and contributions of women in the contemporary Christian church submits that women such as prophetess F.E. Alaba founded God's Grace Church in Ilorin, Grace E. B Kolawale and prophetess G.I. Ayinla founded and leads Saint Peter's spiritual church and Christ the Messiah Church Ilorin respectively. Women notable for their outstanding performance(s) in the church especially in the Pentecostal and Aladura churches are Archbishop (Mrs.) Margaret Idahosa of the Church of God mission, a Pentecostal Church. With the death of Benson Idahosa who was the pioneer founder of the church, Margaret stood in the gap making sure the life of the church comprising of the spirituality and administrative trend(s) is hitherto sustained. With the effort

and administrative acumen Mrs. Margaret Idahosa has been able to establish churches in most part of the Nigeria and abroad with myriads of men as serving pastors. Other prominent women in the list of Pentecostal Church founders are Archbishop Margaret Bola Odeleke of the Power Pentecostal Church. The church which has remained hitherto is sound in biblical interpretation.

In the Aladura churches, women like Captain Christiana Abiodun Akinsowo, Evangelist Florence Babalola, Evangelist Bola and Prophetess Deborah Aboyin are important figures. Their charismatic gifts of preaching, teaching, healing, praying, and performing prophetic utterances makes them unique. Omotoye (2011) writing on the works of Captain Christiana Abiodun in Christianizing the Yoruba land attests that the revival team she led to the Yoruba land in 1927 recorded tremendous achievements. The preaching of Abiodun in conjunction with her miraculous healing of the sick permeated the minds of pagan worshippers at her time and that made them surrender their charms, idols, and fetish objects for destruction.

In view of the significant contributions of women in the contemporary Christian church, the role of Madam Deborah Erinwo Ejieowhor in the Christianization of Ibaa community of the Eastern Niger Delta is worth scribbling. Madam Deborah Erinwo Ejieowhor like Mary Slessor of Calabar led the liberation campaign for the emancipation of twin killing, human sacrifices, and ban on the breaking of kernel on *ekeh* day, destruction of shrines and other obnoxious traditions and beliefs in Ibaa community. Her evangelistic campaign led to the establishment of the first church St. Agnes C.M.S (Now Holy Trinity Anglican Church) in the area. Madam Deborah's wind of revival enveloped areas like Elele Alimini, Isiokpo, Omudioga and other villages in the northwest part of Ikwerre ethnic nationality. Chiefs, elders, medicine men and women voluntarily presented themselves to the Lordship of Christ and reverted their obnoxious customs and traditions. Thus, the chiefs, men and women of the area became part of the evangelical campaign.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper examined the roles of women in the New Testament and contemporary church in Nigeria. The views about women from the two cultures that make up the new testament was examined thereafter, women under Christianity, women's roles in the new testament and Women's roles in the Contemporary Church in Nigeria were carefully discussed. From the foregoing, it is evident that women were never silent but functioned effectively in their various capacities in the New Testament. Women were effective instrument in the ministry of Jesus. The paper maintains that irrespective of the fact that no woman was specifically called by Jesus in the New Testament times to be his disciple as he did to the male disciples, women were not seen as merely observers but full participants in different fields of endeavour such as teaching and preaching the good news about Christ. Women were involved in nurturing the young and also rendered selfless services to the early apostles, thereby promoting the gospel. Similarly, in the contemporary church like in the New Testament women seen and are still useful vessel in the proclamation of the gospel, teaching and counselling. The effectiveness and efficiency of the contemporary church cannot be fully ascertained without the concerted effort of women. Thus, women must be incorporated and given adequate opportunity in the contemporary church to advance the gospel of salvation. In order words, there no need any longer to restrain women especially in the Orthodox tradition from carrying out their divinely endowed roles in the contemporary church since such roles and activities were exemplified in the New Testament time.

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