

A Synodal Journey with Biblical Women as Pilgrims of Hope for the Kingdom of God: Case of Deborah, Ruth, Samaritan Woman, and Mary Magdalene

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Abstract: Using historical-critical method, literary analysis and characterization, the paper examines the biblical texts on Deborah, Ruth, Samaritan woman, and Mary Magdalene to draw out some insights on how to embark into a synodal journey as pilgrims of hope in a world full of confusion, fake news, and artificial intelligence. In spite of modern technology, advance studies on historical, philosophical, political, and socio-economic sciences, the inspired word of God, particularly on women, remains indispensable and relevant in our present synodal journey towards the kingdom of God, the ultimate goal of humanity.

Keywords: Historical-critical method, Literary analysis, Characterization, Word of God, Synodal journey, Pilgrims of hope, Kingdom of God

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This paper aims to present four women in the Bible: two in the Hebrew Bible and two in the gospels, as models for a synodal journey as pilgrims of hope. Using the method of characterization, that is, examining their words and actions in their respective narratives and how they relate with the other characters of the story, we can deduce some insights to help us navigate through this present world, that even amidst difficulties and challenges, we can at all cost reach our ultimate goal – the kingdom of God.

Introduction

In her book *Poor Banished Children of Eve, Women as Evil in the Hebrew Bible*, Gale Yee discussed the social factors that affect the biblical presentation of women as evil. She cites two main factors why the Bible has a strong patriarchal culture. First is the androcentric views of Israelite elite urban male authors. She claims, “Wicked women are literary constructions or creations of elite urban male authors. Second is the strict male codes of honor and shame especially in the area of sexuality. Elite male authors used their ideological creations for certain purpose. These elite men had little or no direct access to the separate world of women in Ancient Israel.”¹

To some degree I agree with Gale Yee, but I believe that the Holy Spirit cannot be silenced by patriarchal culture. A close reading of the biblical texts in their respective contexts can give us insights which the inspired Word of God can offer us. As the psalmist says, “Your word, O Lord, is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path” (Psalm 118:105). The Word of God serves as light to lead us in our synodal journey as pilgrims of hope toward the kingdom of God.

This leads us to the main section of this paper – a characterization of four biblical women, two in the Hebrew Bible: Deborah (Judges 4 and 5) and Ruth, and two in the gospels: the Samaritan woman (John 4:5-30) and Mary of Magdala, who is also called Mary Magdalene in the synoptic gospels. Mary Magdalene is mentioned thirteen times in the four gospels.²

¹ Gale Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve, Women as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Augsburg: Fortress Publication 2003).

² See Mk 15:40.47; 16:1.9; Mt 27:55-56.61; 28:1.7.9; Lk 8:2; 23:55; 24:10; Jn 19:25; 20:1.10-11. 14.18.

Deborah

Judges 4:4 describes Deborah as a prophetess, wife, and judge who summoned and commanded Barak to prepare for battle against the Canaanites (4:5). Culturally, the task of a judge is reserved for men. There are only five women who are called a prophet in the Hebrew Bible: Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20), Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14), and the wife of Isaiah (Isaiah 8:3). Deborah establishes a relationship with the Israelites through words and actions, the same way by which Yahweh relates with his people.

In Judges 5, Deborah is simply called “mother of Israel.” But this title capsulizes all the other titles attributed to Deborah in Judges 4:4, “judge, wife and prophetess.” Deborah performed all these tasks when there was a desolate situation in Israel – the danger posed by Canaanite invasion.

Both the narrative and the song portray Deborah performing a significant role both on the social level, as a wife, mother, and judge, and in the spiritual level, as a prophetess. The effectiveness of the performance of her role both on the social and spiritual levels is concretized in her ability to collaborate well with Barak and the other tribes of Israel in their battle against the Canaanites.

Though Deborah served Israel both as a judge and prophetess, Rabbi Berechia has only words of “woes” for her generation, without any words of appreciation for Deborah’s services for the Israelites.³ For Rabbi Judah, Deborah commits the sin of vanity when she sings that the leaders of Israel ceased until she arose as a mother in Israel.⁴ For Rabbi Nahman, Deborah commits the sin of arrogance when she commanded Barak to go to battle against Sisera and his army:

Haughtiness does not befit women. There were two haughty women and their names are hateful, one being called a hornet (the literal meaning of Deborah) and the other a weasel (the literal meaning of Huldah). Of the hornet it is written, *And she sent and called Barak*, instead of going to him.⁵

The above texts from the Talmud show that although the rabbis acknowledge Deborah as a prophetess, they have a great difficulty in accepting the fact that a woman could also be a leader as well as a judge. For the rabbis,

³ Cf. S. Buber, ed., *Midrash Tehillim* (Wilna 1891 192; ET W.G. Braude, trans., *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. 1 (New Haven 1976) 116.

⁴ I. Epstein, ed. *The Babylonian Talmud*, vol. II (London 1938) 337.

⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. IV (London 1938) 83.

women should only function as wives and mothers. Seeing Deborah given by the Lord the roles of prophetess and judge, the rabbis discredit her with criticisms, rather than praise her for saving the nation in time of crisis.⁶

Deborah is considered by Origen as an example from whom women can learn the lesson not to despair of their sexuality, for even women are given the gift of prophecy.⁷

Although Ambrose does not have a special treatise on Judges 4 and 5, he mentions Deborah in his work *De Viduis* as a model of virtues.⁸ For Ambrose, Deborah is a model for widows who have the potential to become leaders even in times of adversities. Ambrose does not consider sex as the most decisive factor in life, rather, it is the practice of virtue which counts. Although Ambrose acknowledges the potential of a woman, he does not deny the need for collaboration between man and woman toward liberation.

In response to the question, “How come that a woman prophesies?,” Theodoret quotes Galatians 3:28⁹ and cites the example of Deborah. According to Theodoret, no one among men was worthy to receive the gift of prophecy, thus, the gift of prophecy was granted to Deborah.¹⁰

Fast forward, let us examine contemporary commentaries on Deborah. During the late 19th century in the United States, the person of Deborah became a rallying point for women activists who claimed their rights.¹¹ The prevailing situation of injustice and oppression, particularly of women in Latin America, has made feminists in that continent take Deborah and Jael as the appropriate examples to instruct society that man lives a true life when he does not give in to the obsession to dominate,¹² and that women have a role to play in the history of the people of Yahweh.¹³

⁶ See A. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (The Biblical Seminar q, Sheffield 1985) 56.

⁷ *Sources Chretiennes*, (Paris 1941) 384.

⁸ Sant’Ambrogio, *PL* 16, VIII in J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia cursus completus Series Graeca* (Paris 1841) 283.

⁹ “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for all are one in Jesus Christ.” (Gal 3:28, NRSV).

¹⁰ *PG* 80, 498.

¹¹ For a historical survey of feminist hermeneutics, see D.C. Bass, “Women’s Studies and Biblical Studies: An Historical Perspective,” *JSOT* 22 (1982) 6-12.

¹² See R.M. Rothe, “Duas mulheres ‘violentas’: Debora e Jael,” *EBib* 6 (1985) 21-30.

¹³ S.S. de Silva, R.F. Barbosa, and Z.R. Morais, “Debora e Jael: mulheres que fazem historia,” *EBib* 29 (1991) 59-63.

For Block,¹⁴ Deborah has saved Israel by her faith, by her contact with Yahweh, and by her good judgment. Hecht uses Judges 4 and 5 in her pastoral work, particularly in the conscientization of women on their rights and ability to contribute to the betterment of society.

Elliger uses the Deborah-Barak episode in her work of adult formation to demonstrate that collegial cooperation is not only possible, but above all, necessary for the building of the community. For Elliger, the story of Deborah and Barak teaches that for important tasks to be successful, there should be no discrimination of gender, rather men and women should work together for the welfare of the community.

Deborah journeyed with Barak, and the Israelites as one tribe but along the way, Jael, a non-Israelite, joined them to put Sisera to death, the commander of the army of King Jabin, king of Canaan. It was a synodal journey from foreign invasion to freedom from oppression.

Ruth

The story of Ruth is situated by scholars during the time of judges (the same time of Deborah), a time of confusion when there was no judge to govern Israel because “the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”¹⁵ The story opens with three widows: Naomi, Ruth and Oprah. Ruth, the main character, lost her husband, father-in-law, and brother-in-law. The story is unique because the main character is not an Israelite but a Moabite.

Because of the famine in Moab, Naomi decided to return to her native land, Bethlehem. She asked her two daughters-in-law, Oprah and Ruth, to remain in Moab. In spite of Naomi’s plea for her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab, Ruth insisted to come with her with the famous phrase, “Where you go I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, there will I be buried” (1:16-17a).

When Naomi and Ruth settled in Bethlehem, Ruth worked in the field of Boaz, who was a kinsman of Elimelech, Naomi’s husband. Boaz favored her, by instructing the reapers to allow Ruth to glean even among the standing sheaves. Thus, Ruth was able to provide sustenance for her mother-in-law. Eventually, the

¹⁴ D.I. Block, “Deborah among the Judges: The Perspective of the Hebrew Historia,” in A.R. Millard, *et al.*, eds. *Faith, Tradition, and History* (Winona Lake 1994) 229-253).

¹⁵ Judges 2:11; 3:1.7.12; 4:1; 6:1; 13:1.

story ended up with Boaz marrying Ruth. They were blessed with a son named Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David.

The story gives us the ancestors of Jesus (Mt 1:5-16). Geographically, the journey of Ruth was from Moab to Israel; spiritually, it was from being an “outsider” (non-Israelite) to becoming an “insider” (an Israelite). She was a great, great grandmother of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Ruth’s life is a journey from tragedy to a fulfillment of God’s promise of a Messiah.

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Samaritan Woman

The story of the Samaritan woman is narrated only in the gospel of John 4:5-39. Jesus came to a Samaritan village called Sychar. Tired out by the journey, Jesus sat by Jacob’s well. John specifically says it was about noon (v. 6). It was at this time that a Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well. Jesus initiated the conversation by asking the woman for a drink. She answers with a question, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” The evangelist then explains that Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans (v.9). The Samaritan woman knows well their tradition.

Jesus then leads the Samaritan woman to a deeper level of understanding – to recognize him as the source of living water. Thinking practically, she replies, “Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?” (v. 11). After Jesus’ explanation that the water he will give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life, the Samaritan woman then asks for the water. Yet her motive still remains pragmatic, namely, that she may never be thirsty or have to keep coming to the well to draw water (v. 15).

But then Jesus shifts to another topic. Jesus tells her to call her husband (v. 16). She claims she has no husband. Jesus affirms her answer, yet he reminds her that she have had five husbands and presently lives with a partner. At this point the Samaritan woman perceives him to be a prophet (v. 19). This time, it is the Samaritan woman who shifts the topic. She explains “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem” (v. 20). Jesus then explains that true worship does not depend on a

place, rather true worship is to worship the Father in spirit and truth (v. 23).

At this point the Samaritan woman expresses what she knows, “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us” (v.25). Now comes the revelation when Jesus says, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you” (v. 26).

The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman was interrupted by the arrival of the disciples, who were astonished when they saw Jesus speaking with a woman. This gave the Samaritan woman time to leave, leaving her water jar behind, and went back to the city and proclaimed, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (v. 29). The evangelist explains that “Many Samaritans from the city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done’” (v. 39).

The act of leaving her water jar behind symbolizes leaving her previous life, a life unacceptable according to Jewish moral standards. Her going to the city expresses a new phase in her life, a new direction for her life – now she becomes a preacher of the coming Messiah.

We have stories in the Hebrew bible wherein a meeting of a man and a woman at a well led to marriage, e.g., Moses and Zipporah, Rebecca and Isaac (through the servant Eliezer). In the case of the Samaritan woman, it was a bridging of the gap between Samaritans and Jews, between a man and a woman, between Jews and Gentiles. The Samaritan woman’s encounter with Jesus made her a missionary to her own people, which led the Samaritans to encounter Jesus himself and make the confession “...we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (4:42).

Led by the Samaritan woman, the Samaritans ventured into a geographical and spiritual journey: from worship at Mount Gerizim to true worship of the Father in spirit and truth; from not knowing to knowing Jesus as the true Savior of the world. This was made possible because they listened to the true leader of the pilgrimage – Jesus himself.

Let me propose two types of journeys in the story of the Samaritan woman: first is her personal journey, from being a marginalized member of society to becoming an accepted member of the community; second is her spiritual journey, from being an unbeliever to becoming a missionary – bringing her fellow

Samaritans to the Messiah, Jesus himself. The Samaritans came to Jesus and eventually invited him to stay with them. He stayed with them for two days. This living together with Jesus led many Samaritans from that city to admit, "...we know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (v. 42.).

Mary Magdalene

Let me start with a disclaimer: Mary Magdalene was never described in the gospels as a prostitute as portrayed in the movie *The Last Temptation of Jesus Christ*. Mary Magdalene is mentioned in the four gospels thirteen times.¹⁶ She is first mentioned in Lk 8:2 as one "from whom seven demons had gone out." She was among "some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities." Nowhere in the Bible is possession by demons equated to sinfulness or adultery. Demon possession and sin are two distinct issues. Jesus **cured** Mary Magdalene of evil spirits and infirmities. Note that with regard to sinfulness, the evangelists use the word "forgiven." That Mary Magdalene was a prostitute or an adulteress is a big lie; it is a misreading, a mis-interpretation of the biblical texts. Having been healed of her infirmities, Mary Magdalene becomes a follower, a disciple of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene is among the women who "provided for them," some manuscripts have "him," meaning Jesus. The Greek word is *diekonoun*, imperfect, which means a continuing action in the past. The root word is *diakoneo*, which primarily means "to wait upon, to serve or to minister." Luke 8:3 says they "provided for them out of their own resources." This implies that these women have financial means.

In 7:36-50, the story preceding 8:1-3, Luke narrates the story of a woman, described as a sinner who anointed Jesus' feet with ointment. Jesus declares that "her sins, which were many, have been forgiven, hence she has shown great love" (v. 47). The story concludes with Jesus commending her, "Your faith has saved you, go in peace" (v. 50).

In the Markan (14:3-9) and Matthean versions (26:6-12), of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, the woman who anointed him was unnamed and never described as a sinner. John the evangelist (12:12-19) narrates that Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus, anointed Jesus at his feet. Nowhere in the gospels do we find that Mary Magdalene anointed Jesus.

¹⁶ See Mk 15:40.47; 16:1.9; Mt 27:55-56.61; 28:1.7.9; Lk 8:2; 23:55; 24:10; Jn 19:25; 20:1.10-11. 14.18.

Unfortunately, some ancient writers, particularly, Origen (3rd century), John Chrysostom (4th cent.), and Pope Gregory the Great (6th cent.) have had mis-interpreted some pertinent biblical texts, thus presenting a distorted image of Mary Magdalene. Origen and John Chrysostom claimed that Mary Magdalene was not suited to be the first witness of Jesus' resurrection. I wonder what is their basis for such a claim. They wanted to rewrite the gospel story. Gregory the Great in his Easter sermon on September 14, 591 at Saint Clement Basilica, had conflated the stories about a "woman sinner who anointed Jesus" in Luke 7:36-50, and Mary Magdalene "from whom seven demons had gone out" in Luke 8:2, into Mary Magdalene as a sinner, a prostitute. Gregory the Great associated demon possession with sexual sins. He interpreted seven demons as referring to the seven vices. But nowhere in the Bible could we find that demon possession means sexual sins.

Let us do a background check on Mary Magdalene. Mary is identified by her town Magdala. Magdala is Migdal which means "high tower" Magdala is a town in Galilee known to be a fish port. Some say that Mary Magdalene belongs to a well-off family which is in the fishing business. Remember in Luke 8:1-3, she was among the women who followed Jesus and supported him from their own resources. Mary Magdalene is identified by her town, not with a husband or father. This implies that she is an independent woman. Greek Orthodox never regarded Mary Magdalene as a sinner.

Let us follow the journey of Mary Magdalene and the other women mentioned in Lk 8:1-3.¹⁷ We find a reference to 8:1-3 in Lk 23:49, "But all his (Jesus) acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things." Then in Lk 23:55-56 we read, "The women who had come with him (Jesus) from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandments." The story continues in 24:1-10. Verse 10 narrates, "Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joana, Mary, the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles." Except in John 19:25, Mary Magdalene is always mentioned first, pre-eminent among the women disciples.

Mary Magdalene was the last to leave the tomb and the first to witness the empty tomb. Jesus appeared to her first, giving her the command to announce to the brothers, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and my God" (John 20:17). She announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"

¹⁷ Lk 9:51-19:28 called the Travel Document.

(20:18). Saint Thomas Aquinas gave her the title “apostle to the apostles.” She was the first to be sent to announce the good news of Jesus’ resurrection.

Mary Magdalene’s journey can be described as follows: geographically, from Galilee to Jerusalem; from being possessed by seven demons to being free to follow the Lord, becoming a fervent, faithful and resilient disciple of Jesus Christ, from being a simple disciple to being the “Apostle to the apostles.”

Pope Francis considers Mary Magdalene an apostle of transformation and of hope, a fitting companion in the 2025 Jubilee of Hope.¹⁸

Synthesis

Let me summarize this presentation in three points:

First, synodal journey is a journey of faith, hope, and resilience. Pilgrims in this synodal journey need the courage to travel through an unknown path, an unknown future. We have seen this in the stories of Deborah, Ruth, Samaritan woman, and Mary Magdalene. We trust that in this journey we are not alone, the Lord is with us in this perilous and tedious journey.

Second, in this journey we have fellow pilgrims, just like Deborah who had Barak, Jael, and the Israelites; like Naomi and Ruth who supported one another and along the way had Boaz, fellow reapers and other Israelites; like the Samaritan woman who listened and conversed with Jesus, eventually leading her fellow Samaritans to Jesus; like Mary Magdalene who travelled with some women, ministering to Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. We are confident to venture into this synodal journey because we are not alone. Many also await us along the way. Above all, the Spirit of the Lord accompanies us, guiding, inspiring, and protecting us along the way.

Thirdly, the stories of Deborah, Ruth, the Samaritan woman, and Mary Magdalene confirm our hope that our earthly pilgrimage, even amidst this chaotic world, would eventually lead to a brighter future. For us disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, we believe and hope that our synodal journey would lead us to our ultimate goal – the kingdom of God. This is possible as long as we listen attentively and faithfully to the Word of God, the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6).

¹⁸ A.C. Wimmer, *National Catholic Reporter*, February 1, 2025, <https://www.ncregister.com/can/inpowerful/jubilee/message/pope/points-to-mary-magdalene/transformational/trust>.

May we become active listeners and doers of the Word of God, like Mary, the Mother of Jesus and our Mother. **PS**

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En el nombre del Padre y del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo
Amén. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

La salve Regina es una



Dulce Dios Reyna y ma
de de misericordia, vida
dulçura y esperança nra. Dios
te salve au llamamos los deste
crados hijos de Eva. Qui suspi
ramos gimiendo y llorando en
aquelle valle de lagrimas. Ca
pues abogada nuestra, buelue
nosotros a los tus misericor
diosos ojos. y despues de a.