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The Profiles of Women in John: House-Bound or Christ-Bound?

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Despite¹ several schemes that are implemented for the empowerment of women, both at the global and national levels, an Amnesty International Report indicates that women continue to fall victims of violence and injustice. Leadership opportunities both in state and church life are still being denied to them. Many women, due to lack of confidence, are satisfied with taking back-benches in churches, even if such opportunities are occasionally provided. Most of the denominations are still not prepared to ordain women and empower them for leadership roles.

The patriarchal society in which we live thinks that women can better build up homes than the church.

Although in the past years the world has witnessed several women leaders who have played a constructive role in the church as well as in society, this is insufficient to bring a change in the traditional thinking of our generation. When the Church of England decided in 1992 to ordain women to the office of the Presbyterian, the opposition was so severe that some clergy even left the Church. The evangelicals who opposed cited the Scripture (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:33b-36 and 1 Tim. 2:8-15) which, for them, teaches that women should not teach or hold the priestly office lest

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¹ This article, in its original form, was presented as a research paper to the audience of students, Faculty and the Board members of Union Biblical Seminary, Pune on 31 July 2001 and was published in the *Bangalore Theological Forum* 33 (2, 2001), pp. 60-79.

they exercise authority over men.² This indeed calls for a new biblical hermeneutic to make the Scripture relevant to the changing situations and to rediscover what the New Testament says on women's role in Christian ministry.

Previous works on the role of women in the church have mainly focused on Luke's concern for women and on Paul's injunction for women to keep silent in the churches. There has been less on women in the Fourth Gospel, although there are several works that have identified the leadership role played by the Johannine women.³ In this paper, I have collected together ideas expressed in previous works, but I give a new thrust to the household duties of John's women. This will raise the question: were the Johannine women house-bound or Christ-bound?

I make an attempt to trace some of the characteristics of women found

in the Gospel of John to answer this question hoping that it will effectively address our society which often considers women's role only to bear children, to serve men, to work in the kitchen, or to exercise hospitality. I am also including a study on the 'Elect Lady' and 'Your Elect Sister' of 2 John, a study which was hitherto excluded in the study of Johannine women. This will show how the unique roles played by the women in John's Gospel continued in the local churches of the Johannine community when the second letter of John was written.⁴ The main purpose of this article, then, is twofold: to motivate women to develop their leadership role in the church and to encourage men to treat women as equal partners in Christian ministry.

The Mother of Jesus—A Paradigm for Faith and Faithfulness

Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the Johannine narrative, appears in the beginning of Jesus' 'hour' (2:1-12) and then only at the fulfilment of the 'hour' (19:25-27), even though she is mentioned in 6:42.⁵ In Roman Catholic circles she is often interpreted as a symbol either of new Eve

² See R.T. France, *Women in the Church's Ministry: A Test-Case for Biblical Hermeneutics* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), pp. 9-10.

³ Notable among them are R.E. Brown, 'Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel', in *idem*, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 183-198; S.M. Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church', in M.W.G. Stibbe (ed.), *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Perspectives* (Leiden, et al.: E.J. Brill, 1993), pp. 123-143; J.A. Grassi, 'Women's Leadership Roles in John's Gospel', *Bible Today* 35 (1997), pp. 312-317. A. Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom: A Feminist Historical-Literary Analysis of the Female Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998).

⁴ I presuppose (i) that John's Gospel and epistles show traces of common tradition, because possibly they are from the same author, but finally composed and published by the Johannine community; and (ii) that John wrote his Gospel, seeing the life-history of Jesus in the light of the life and witness of the Johannine community in which he was the elder.

⁵ Note that references to the Gospel of John in the text of this paper are given as chapter and verse only without the name 'John'.

or of Zion or of the Church.⁶ The mother of Jesus is introduced as a key figure when Jesus performed his first sign to reveal his glory. Schneiders maintains that since Mary's role in John is either unique and/or universal, the femaleness of Jesus' mother is theologically irrelevant for the question of the role of women in the church today.⁷ However, Mary's faith in Jesus as the one who is able to fulfil the needs of the people by means of a sign and her faithfulness to follow him till the cross, sharing the bitter anguish and pain, make her an ideal disciple of Jesus.

John, in his redaction, places a woman at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and gives her an active role in fulfilling the needs of the people. When Jesus' mother came to know that the wine in the wedding feast ran out, she said to Jesus, 'They have no wine' (2:3). Whether Mary expected a miracle or not, she knew who Jesus was. She believed that Jesus could provide for the need and thus prepared herself and others for his provision. Even after knowing the unavailability of Jesus to act immediately (cf. 2:4), his mother began to put her faith in action, for she told the servants (*diakonoi*), 'Do whatever

he tells you' (2:5).⁸

Her personal obedience to Jesus made her *influence* others to obey him in humble trust. One can see Mary taking the *initiative* to solve the deficiency in this life-situation. While the male disciples of Jesus were passive or even were ignorant of the need of the hour, the mother of Jesus played an *active role* in helping the servants to look at Jesus and obey him. Her faithful response led the guests eventually to have an encounter with the glory of Jesus, although only a few could see and believe in him (2:11).

Mary did not underestimate herself because of gender bias. Her action influenced Jesus to supply the need and the servants to obey Jesus, and perhaps even to fulfil his role as the messianic bridegroom who supplied better wine.⁹ Therefore the sign was effective in bringing many, including Nicodemus (3:2), to the initial stage of faith in Jesus (2:23). She saw in advance through the eyes of her faith what Jesus could do! Whereas the disciples believed in Jesus only after seeing the sign, Mary believed in him before she saw it.¹⁰ Thus she fulfils in advance what Jesus would tell

6 See R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (New York, et al.: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 107-109; R.E. Brown, et al. (eds.), *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press/New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 188-194, 206-218, 288-289, 292-294.

7 Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel', p. 128.

8 Jesus' mother's contact with the servants and her exhortation to fulfil Jesus' commands do not indicate that by reasserting her maternal role, she forces Jesus not to miss an opportunity of increasing his honour in relation to the bridegroom, as Fehribach argues (see *Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, pp. 31-32). This would imply that Jesus yielded to his mother's pressure to provide wine.

9 See Fehribach, *Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, esp. pp. 29-43.

10 See Scott, *Sophia*, p. 179, who comments that Mary's discipleship shows a faith without signs.

Thomas after his resurrection, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' (20:29b) and surpasses the twelve in faith and vision.

A leader always takes the initiative to act positively at the time of crisis and also influences others to act in the right way. In this sense Mary can be called a model leader and a faithful disciple of Jesus.¹¹ E.S. Fiorenza argues that if the Johannine community had acknowledged *diakonoi* as leading ministers of the community, then Mary's injunction has symbolic overtones in the sense that the leaders of the community are admonished to do whatever Jesus tells them.¹² Note that John refers to Jesus' mother without mentioning her name 'Mary' and this may be partly because he wanted to project her as a true leader who would readily serve others without taking a name for herself. Thus John unreservedly portrays a woman as a potential leader in the very beginning of his Gospel and this would have been impossible for him unless the Johannine community had already instituted women as leaders in key areas.

The fact that Jesus, his mother and his disciples had been invited to the wedding suggests that the wedding was for a relative or close family friend. It is possible that Mary had some responsibility in catering and

hence attempted to deal with the shortage of wine (2:3).¹³ This shows that even while Mary was committed to Jesus and his redemptive purpose, she was very much involved in family affairs. Her presence at the cross along with her sister (19:25) indicates her allegiance to the family. Even her disappearance from the Johannine text has a family note, for Mary and the beloved disciple were united in filial bond as mother and son (19:26-27). However, her commitment to Christ surpassed her engagement in household duties for she followed Jesus loyally till the cross, bearing its pain. In a way, the hour of crisis in the wedding at Cana had prepared her to face even the greater crisis!

In John, the cross is the point of Jesus' exaltation/glorification. The mother of Jesus witnessed Jesus' glory at the beginning of his ministry as well as at the supreme point of his glorification on the cross, while no other male disciples, except the beloved disciple, dared to see his glory in the humiliating death. Mary thus proved her faithfulness to Jesus more than any of the other disciples and thus she became a model for persistence and complete loyalty. Only John, among the four evangelists, mentions the mother of Jesus as standing at the cross along with the beloved disciple (19:25-27). Both the figures have symbolic value, because John never gives the personal names of these two figures and

¹¹ Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel', p. 131, rightly observes that if leadership is a function of creative initiative and decisive action, the Johannine women qualify well for the role.

¹² E.S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 327.

¹³ See D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 169.

therefore Brown thinks that their significance lies in their respective roles.¹⁴

When Jesus said to her mother, 'Woman, here is your son' (19:26) and to his disciple, 'Here is your mother' (19:27), he meant that her motherly role is no longer going to be a physical one, but one that stood in relation to the beloved disciple who represents a new community that is created at the cross. In other words, the crucified Jesus 'leaves behind him at the foot of the cross a small community of believing disciples—the kind of community, which, in other NT works, is called into being in the post-resurrectional or pentecostal period'.¹⁵ Since Jesus completed the work of creating a new community by the scene involving his mother and the beloved disciple, John comments that Jesus knew that 'all was now finished' (19:28).¹⁶ Why does John place a female figure and a male figure as those who represent the emerging new Christian community that derives its life from the cross? It is because he envisioned a community of new disciples in which men and women have equal roles to play. The concept of equality, or rather a better role for women,

in the church is also envisaged in other woman characters of John, whom we will meet as we proceed further.

2. The Woman of Samaria—an Intuitive Theologian and Missionary

The public ministry of Jesus began with the leadership role exercised by a woman, and his ministry to the Samaritans, those who were outside the fold of Judaism, began with the leadership role played by another woman, the woman of Samaria (4:3-42).

Schneiders argues that, since there is no evidence in the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus ministered in Samaria, the narrative in John 4 has its real context not in the ministry of the historical Jesus but in the history of the Johannine community, and that the conversion of Samaria is projected back into the ministry of Jesus.¹⁷ However, the absence of Jesus' ministry in Samaria in the Synoptic tradition does not nullify the historicity of his ministry there. There are many other Johannine narratives which are missing in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus' ministry is mentioned in John as having taken place specifically in Sychar (4:5), whereas Philip's ministry took place

¹⁴ Brown, *Mary in the NT*, p. 212.

¹⁵ *ibid.* For John the cross is not only the moment of Jesus' glorification but also an event which made the gift of the Spirit possible to form a community that had received new life (cf. 7:39 and 20:22).

¹⁶ *ibid.* This proves against Fehribach's thesis that the female characters of the Fourth Gospel are marginalized after they fulfil their 'androcentric and patriarchal' function (*Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, esp. p. 169).

¹⁷ Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel', p. 133; *idem*, 'Because of the Woman's Testimony...': *Reexamining the Issue of Authorship in the Fourth Gospel*, NTS 44 (1998), p. 533. So also C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2nd edn., 1978), p. 229, says that the whole story written from the standpoint of one who looks back on the Gospel story from a later time, by using the woman as a representative figure.

in 'a city of Samaria' (Act. 8:5 RSV), either in Samaria itself or in Gitta, the birthplace of Simon the sorcerer.¹⁸ The two events took place at a different time and location.

It is possible that the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria was suppressed in the evolution of the tradition mainly because she was an ungodly woman hailing from a despised community. The accurate historical and geographical knowledge displayed in John 4 and Jesus' exceptional movement from Judea to Galilee via Samaria attest the historical credibility of the story.

A positive picture of the Samaritan woman does not emerge immediately. In contrast to Rebekah who gave water to a thirsty stranger and his camels (Gen. 24:45-46), the woman of John 4 does not give water to a thirsty man. Instead, she poses a question, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (4:9), alluding to the long-time hostility that existed between Jews and Samaritans. Like Nicodemus, she too understood Jesus and his statement in earthly terms (4:11-12). Nevertheless, the woman had a spontaneous dialogue with Jesus that gradually brought a reversal in her attitude. She began to plead with Jesus for the water which he would give so that it might become a spring within her gushing up to eternal life (4:13-15). Throughout the conversation the woman displayed an excellent knowledge of the existing culture and religious history based on the

Pentateuch. For example, she knew the tradition associated with Jacob's encampment at Shechem and the possible digging of a well there (Gen. 33:18-20)¹⁹ as well as the miraculous spring of water from Jacob's well.

In contrast to Nicodemus, who could not understand the need and mode of rebirth, the woman at Sychar honestly acknowledged her improper life (4:16-18). This led her to a further understanding of Jesus, this time as a 'prophet' (4:19), that is, an extraordinary man with a gift of revelation. At this point she became sufficiently confident to engage in theological discussion on worship (4:20-24). She boldly raised the outstanding point of theological contention between Jews and Samaritans on the place of worship and thus 'set the stranger a testing challenge'.²⁰

Unlike Nicodemus who became passive in the course of his dialogue with Jesus, the Samaritan woman was an active respondent throughout the dialogue, exhibiting uncommon theological knowledge and interests. This prompted Jesus to directly reveal himself to her as the Messiah whom the Samaritans expected in terms of the *taheb*. The messianic revelation was given to her by using the 'I AM' formula (4:25-26), a Johannine formula used to describe Jesus as the revelation of the one God to humans. This is the first time

¹⁸ F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint, 1981), p. 177.

¹⁹ Brown, *John I-XII*, pp. 170-171, finds an allusion to the Palestinian Tg. Gen. 28:10 which speaks of the overflowing well of Haran, the place where Jacob had a vision of God.

²⁰ Carson, *John*, pp. 221-222.

in the Fourth Gospel that the formula appears in an absolute and revelatory sense and this privilege is given to a woman before it was ever revealed to the male disciples.

The disciples were astonished to see Jesus talking alone with a woman (4:27), for it was undesirable that a Rabbi should speak with women, even with his own wife, particularly in public places (*Pirke Aboth* 1.5).²¹ However, none of them had the courage to question him on this matter, but the woman was freely discussing with Jesus matters related to the human search for life. While Nicodemus disappears from the scene abruptly in the course of his dialogue with Jesus, the Samaritan is pictured as the one who was constructively engaged in the dialogue until she came to the point of seeing, though dimly, Jesus as the Messiah sent by God to reveal the truth.

John gives a positive picture of the woman, who was a Samaritan by race and corrupt in terms of religious norms, in a revolutionary way, for the Jewish society of his day regarded women as inferior to men 'in mind, in function and status'.²² His attempt to project the woman as a theologian is certainly to restore the status of women in his time when the rabbis were prohibiting knowledge of

the Law to them (M. *Sotah* 3.4).

The self-revelation of Jesus as the Messiah made such an impact on the woman that she left her jar and went to the town calling people to 'come and see' whether Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Scripture (4:28-29). The woman, who had been confined to her own house, realized a sense of freedom after her encounter with Christ to face her own people and introduce Jesus to them. Even at this stage, she had doubts about his messiahship. Her statement, *mêti houtos estin ho Christos*; ('This man is not the Christ, is he?') in 4:29 which expects an answer 'no' indicates this.²³

Such scepticism, however, was not unique only to this woman. The disciples, the crowd, and individuals like Nicodemus, Martha, and Pilate showed doubts (1:46; 3:9; 4:33; 7:41-42; 11:39; 18:33). The woman was still in the learning process until she was convinced fully along with her fellow-citizens (4:42). Had her faith been defective, it would have been impossible for the Samaritans to believe in Jesus 'because of the woman's testimony' (4:39). The fruit of her mission proves all the more that the woman truly believed in Jesus as the Messiah.

The Samaritan's act of leaving her water jar to go and call her people is reminiscent of the response which one normally gives to the call for apostleship, namely to 'leave all things', especially one's present

²¹ See Barrett, *St. John*, p. 240; Carson, *John*, p. 227; cf. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, pb print., 1975), p. 363.

²² See L. Swidler, *Women in Judaism: The Status of Women in Formative Judaism* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1976), p. 82, p. 200 n. 98.

²³ Cf. E. Danna, 'A Note on John 4:29', *Revue Biblique* 106 (1999), pp. 219-223, who argues against the usual positive claim made about the Samaritan woman.

occupation, whether symbolized by boats (e.g. Mt. 4:19-22), or tax booth (cf. Mt. 9:9), or water pot.²⁴ Her invitation to 'come and see' (*deute idete* 4:29) parallels the angel's invitation to come and see the empty tomb (Mt. 28:6) and Jesus' call to follow him (cf. Mt. 4:19; Mk. 1:17).²⁵ In this sense, John regards this woman as a mouth-piece of Jesus to call people to discipleship (cf. Jn. 1:39).

She is thus portrayed as an intuitive theologian and an apostle who brought people to Christ by her witness even before the disciples were sent out on mission. This is further confirmed by the expression *dia ton logon tês gunaikos marturousês* used for 'because of the woman's testimony' (4:39), which is similar to the *dia tou logou autôn* used in Jesus' prayer for those who would believe in Jesus by hearing the apostles' words (17:20). The woman did in advance what the apostles will do after Jesus' departure. Thus John gives the Samaritan woman apostolic status.²⁶

As an apostle who had seen Jesus as the Messiah and Saviour and who had borne witness to the people, the woman can also be understood as a missionary. John highlights her mis-

sionary role by setting her ministry in the context of Jesus' missionary challenge to his disciples (4:31-38).²⁷ The coming of the Samaritans to Jesus is metaphorically described as the 'harvest' (4:35) which, according to the Matthean tradition, is an image of mission (Mt. 9:37-38). Besides this, John 4:31-38 has several other mission terms, such as the sower and reaper, gathering of fruits, the sending of the disciples to reap others' labour, etc., implying that the woman, by sowing the seed on behalf of Jesus, has prepared for the apostolic harvest.

In the literary structure of the Fourth Gospel, her mission is connected also with the mission of Jesus whose healing in Cana of Galilee brought the whole household of the official into faith (4:46-54).²⁸ The woman's witness is identified with that of John the Baptist which is clear from the structural parallel between John 3 and 4:1-42. Just as Jesus' self-revelation (3:1-21) is placed alongside the Baptist's witness (3:22-30), in John 4 the self-revelation of Jesus (4:1-26) is placed

²⁴ See Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel', pp. 132-133.

²⁵ The word *deute* is used in the NT 12 times, out of which it appears 6 times in the mouth of Jesus (Mt. 4:19; 11:28; 25:34; Mk. 1:17; 6:31; Jn. 21:12), twice in the sayings of the angels (Mt. 28:6; Rev. 19:17), and once in the invitation of the king who arranged a wedding feast (Mt. 22:4).

²⁶ See Brown, 'Roles of Women', p. 187; Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel', p. 133.

²⁷ Cf. C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, reprint., 1965), pp. 391-405, who says that John 4:31-38 contains Synoptic words and mission concepts which John adapts to fit into his own theological point and therefore that the passage exhibits earlier tradition.

²⁸ Cf. Carson, *John*, p. 229, who finds an anticipatory link between the mission of the Samaritan (4:27-38) and the mission of the Son (5:19-47). Cf. also J.J. Kanagaraj, 'Worship, Sacrifice and Mission: Themes Interlocked in John', *Indian Journal of Theology* 40 (1998), pp. 31-32 for the link between worship and mission.

alongside the woman's witness (4:27-42).²⁹ Thus what the woman did was indeed a participation in God's mission.

The initiative taken by the Samaritan woman was the fulfilment of Jesus' own missionary agenda of accomplishing the work of the Father (4:34). Jesus considered the coming of the Samaritans to him as the gathering of fruits (4:36) and hence his food (4:32,34). It is she who gave this food to Jesus rather than the male disciples whose earthly food was not acceptable to him at that stage (4:31-34). Missionary conversion, making an impact on the society, and worshipping God in spirit and in truth—are all the hallmarks of true discipleship. The woman, who exhibits all these qualities, is indeed a model disciple of Christ and a pioneer missionary apostle! The whole narrative indicates that the Johannine community received the Samaritan converts in its fold and that the leadership included women along with men.³⁰

The fact that the Samaritan woman came with a jar to draw water shows her involvement in household work. Her life that did not follow the socially acceptable norms must have caused her to be confined inside her house. Confinement excluded her from public life, but her encounter with Christ gave a shift in life-style by freeing her from the social taboo and making her bound

to Christ. If we accept Schneiders' thesis that the beloved disciple in John is a 'textual paradigm' who, as a prism, refracts the ideal discipleship into a number of characters in the Gospel, then the woman of Samaria, as Schneiders herself indicates, can well be regarded as one such character.³¹ Definitely the Fourth Evangelist exalts a despised Samaritan woman to the rank of a theologian, apostle and missionary, while he pictures the male disciples mostly as inactive, timid and slow in understanding.

3. Martha and Mary of Bethany: Paradigms for Bhakti and Service

The story of Martha and Mary of Bethany appears only in Luke and John, but in different forms and content (Lk. 10:38-42; 12:1-8). The name Lazarus is linked with Martha and Mary as their brother in the Johannine *narrative* (11:1,5,21,23,32), whereas in Luke, Lazarus appears in a *parable* (Lk. 16:19-31). Obviously the Lucan and Johannine accounts belong to two different, but not unrelated, traditions. It is unnecessary for us to discuss the historical validity of the Lazarus episode here. In the light of the semitisms traced in John 11:1-53,³² we can agree with Dodd that the traditional material

²⁹ See R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, ET, 1971), pp. 111-112, 176.

³⁰ See Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 326-329.

³¹ Schneiders, 'Because of the Woman's Testimony ...', pp. 513-535. However, it is difficult to accept Schneiders' view that the Samaritan woman is the 'textual alter ego of the evangelist' because of the Palestinian Jewish character of the Fourth Gospel.

³² See Bultmann, *John*, p. 395 n.2.

has been remoulded by the author of John to convey his own special message.³³

Jesus loved (*êgapa*) the family of Martha, Mary and Lazarus; John emphasizes this love relationship by placing the verb at the beginning of the sentence (11:5). The author does not mention anywhere in the Gospel the name of the disciple whom Jesus loved, but he mentions two women and one man as the objects of Jesus' love. This has led some scholars to identify Lazarus as the beloved disciple.³⁴ Since Lazarus himself attains his identity only through his sisters (11:1,5), why don't we consider the two women to be identified with the beloved disciple? This is certainly due to the male bias in biblical exegesis. In fact, Martha and Mary are presented as active disciples of Jesus, while Lazarus remained passive even after his resurrection!

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming to Bethany after Lazarus died, she went out to meet him out of her love and reverence for him (11:20; cf. Gen. 18:2; 19:1; 33:3-4). Her faith in Christ is revealed at the very beginning of her discourse, when she said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died' (11:21). Since Martha, like the mother of Jesus, believed that Jesus could interfere at any point of time to do good, she stated, 'But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him' (11:22). This statement anticipates what Jesus would tell his disciples about prayer in John 14:13-14 and 15:7.

Jesus' injunction to his disciples to ask in his name whatever they wish so that he might do it for God's glory, is already believed, confessed and practised by a woman disciple, and in such a critical situation as bereavement! John thus displays Martha's faith as surpassing that of the male disciples. The discourse then turned towards the doctrine of resurrection.

Martha did not understand that Jesus' promise about Lazarus rising again indicated the resurrection at the last day (11:23-24). She knew the theology of resurrection as held in Pharisaic Judaism and in Christian circles that there is a resurrection of the dead at the end-time. Martha's view of future resurrection is modified by Jesus in terms of the present resurrection experience that guarantees the future. The 'I AM' formula (used here for the second time before a woman) clarifies that Jesus is the revelation of God; by believing in him mortal human beings can rise to have eternal life now and also in the future (11:25). At a time of hopelessness Jesus gave a special call to Martha to acknowledge his life-giving power as the Son of God before he could act on her request. Immediately the woman expressed her faith by making a theologically charged confession before Jesus, 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world' (11:27).

Four important factors of this confession need our attention:

(i) Martha exhibited action-oriented faith in the person and mission of Christ at a time when usually it is hard for a bereaved person to do so.

³³ Dodd, *Historical Tradition*, p. 232.

³⁴ See Brown, *John I-XII*, p. XCV.

(ii) The great confession made by Peter, a male disciple, in the Synoptic tradition (Mt. 16:16; Mk. 8:29) is credited to a woman in John's Gospel. In fact, her confession is theologically more charged than that of Peter! This shows that the role of primacy in the church was shared with women in John's time.

(iii) Martha too showed evidence of her faith in Jesus before the sign of Lazarus' resurrection, just as the mother of Jesus did. That is to say, Martha's faith was not based on seeing the signs, but on the identity of Jesus and his words. What Jesus had to tell Thomas (20:29) was already demonstrated by a female disciple in Bethany.

(iv) The very purpose of the Fourth Gospel is to lead the readers into faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God and to confirm them in that faith (20:31). John records that this purpose is already fulfilled in a woman character whose creative faith placed her in the front-line in the community of believers.

The leadership role of Martha is aptly summarized by Schneiders who says,

Martha appears in this scene as the representative of the believing community responding to the word of Jesus with a full confession of Christian faith. It is a role analogous to Peter's as representative of apostolic faith in Matthew's Gospel. This representative role of Martha is difficult to understand unless women in John's community actually did function as community leaders.³⁵

No doubt, John presents Martha

as a model disciple who played a catalysing role in bringing Lazarus back to life, whereas the male disciples were merely silent listeners.

Martha attains significance in the Fourth Gospel by her role as a servant. In the dinner narrative John specifically mentions that 'Martha served (*diëkonei*)' (12:2). The imperfect mood of the verb indicates that her action was habitual with the meaning, 'Martha, as per her custom, was serving'. One of the primary marks of Jesus' disciples is servanthood and this was dramatically demonstrated by Jesus by washing the feet of 'his own' during the Passover meal (Jn. 13:1-20). By performing this act as a model for discipleship, Jesus called them to serve one another likewise (13:14-17). Martha (also Mary) had already fulfilled the role of a servant. In John it is the women followers who readily show the marks of ideal discipleship *in advance*, while the male disciples needed to be taught with a visual demonstration! The one who was distracted by many works she needed to do (Lk. 10:40) becomes the person who gladly serves in John. This shows the progress Martha had made in her 'loving devotion' (*bhakti*) to Jesus.

Schneiders argues that the meal at Bethany alludes to the Eucharist in which Jesus is the guest of honour and Martha and Mary are the ministers.³⁶ This is quite unlikely, for the meal took place 'six days before the

³⁵ Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel', p. 136.

³⁶ Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel', p. 137; she argues thus by observing that the term *diakonos* had become the title of the office of the deacon by the time John's Gospel was written.

Passover' (12:1), that is, on the preceding Saturday and not on the Sunday evening, as Schneiders judges.³⁷ The word *diakonos* is not used in John 12:1-8 as it is used in the wedding at Cana narrative. Moreover, the Gospel tradition displays Jesus not as the guest of honour in the Passover meal, but as the one who serves the meal. The dinner at Bethany was perhaps hosted to honour and thank Jesus for restoring the life of Lazarus. Besides thanksgiving, Mary's act of anointing at the meal also fulfils another spectrum of discipleship: devotion, service and participatory faith in Jesus' death. We will turn now to this part of the scene.

Mary's act seems to be a combination of the account of the anonymous woman's anointing of Jesus' head (Mk. 14:3-9; Mt. 26:6-13) and Luke's account of the sinful woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair (Lk. 7:36-50). Possibly, each evangelist used independently a separate strand of tradition that came to them with cross-combinations of different details and incorporated their own theological thought into that tradition.³⁸ John gives the identity of the woman that was unknown in the primitive tradition.

In the Johannine account the feet of Jesus attain importance. Mary fell at Jesus' feet on two occasions (11:32-33; 12:3). Her action reflects the Indian custom of paying homage to any respectable person and her

anointing of the feet alludes to the duty of Jewish slaves to wash and wipe the feet of the guests at special meals. Mary showed her *bhakti* (loving devotion) to Jesus, at first by shedding tears at his feet and then by anointing them with a costly perfume made of pure nard and wiping them with her hair. Her devotion and submission to Christ was greater than that of Martha. Both the women showed confidence in the life-giving power of Jesus, when they said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' (11:21,32). But it was Mary who aroused the compassion of Jesus to act by her tears shed at his feet (11:33) and thus she becomes the foremost of the women, who, by their devotion and fervour, move the heart of Jesus to act in favour of suffering humanity!

Obviously John commends the role of such women in his community by projecting Mary and Martha as their representative figures. While Martha demonstrated her role as servant-leader by actively serving at the table, Mary manifested her servant role in terms of sacrifice and utter devotion to Christ. Mary's anointing was not an act of penitence as Luke implies. It was not an act of *preparation for burial* either, as Matthew and Mark record (Mt. 26:12; Mk. 14:8), but it was an act performed *on the day* of his burial (12:7). Thus Mary's anointment was an act of embalming Jesus' body in advance even before his death, exhibiting her faith in Jesus' death, for the raising of Lazarus had already triggered the decision of the Jewish leaders to kill

³⁷ See Barrett, *St. John*, p. 410, who shows that for John the Passover began on the following Friday evening.

³⁸ See Dodd, *Historical Tradition*, pp. 172-173.

Jesus (11:46-53).

Nevertheless, the question is: why was the anointing done at Jesus' feet rather than on his head? Anointing at the feet differentiates Mary's action from the woman who anointed Jesus' head in Matthew and Mark. Since the anointing is followed by the wiping of his feet with hair, her act should be associated with Jesus' act of washing his disciples' feet and wiping them with his own towel in John 13 rather than with the act of the woman in Luke 7. Jesus' act taught the disciples the nature and cost of discipleship. That is, it was the symbol of humility and service which was supremely demonstrated in his death on the cross. These two central qualities of discipleship are manifested in Mary's act as well. In fact, anointing of the feet by a woman during a meal was improper in Jewish eyes.³⁹ All the more, letting her hair loose in public, in the presence of men in particular, was treated as a disgrace for a woman (cf. 1 Cor. 11:5-16). If so, the scene in Bethany depicts Mary crossing the boundaries of the then social custom in order to express the family's love for Jesus.

Scott points out the following three important parallels between Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet and the feet-washing of Jesus in John 13:⁴⁰

- (1) Both the feet-washing of Jesus and Mary's anointing of take place during the meal.

- (2) Just as Jesus humiliates himself to be a slave, Mary humiliates herself by loosing her hair to do the task of a slave.

- (3) Jesus' act is shown as an example to be followed by his disciples as a mark of true discipleship and leadership. So also Jesus' justification of the woman's act in 12:7-8 makes her an example to those who believe in his death.

Viewed in the light of what Jesus did to his disciples, Mary's performance is an exemplary act of humble service to humans and loving devotion to Jesus. It is striking that even before Jesus exemplified true discipleship and displayed his love for his own, Mary had already demonstrated these qualities. Her humble service prophetically foreshadows the feet-washing of Jesus at the Passover that signifies his impending death on the cross.⁴¹

The historical context in which Martha and Mary served Jesus and his followers makes us aware of the boldness these two women displayed. As J.A. Grassi observes, the dinner was hosted at a time when the Jewish leaders had given orders to make known to them Jesus' whereabouts so that they might arrest and put him to death (11:53,57).⁴² Also, one of the male disciples, Judas Iscariot, vehemently opposed Mary's act of self-renouncement out of his desire for selfish gain (12:4-6). In spite of this risky and unfavourable situation, the two women took courage to express their *bhakti* and submission to Jesus in their own home. John thus projects them as

³⁹ See R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Vol. 2 (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 367 and p. 522 n. 15.

⁴⁰ Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), pp. 210-211.

⁴¹ Cf. E.E. Platt, 'The Ministry of Mary of Bethany', *Theology Today* 34 (1977), p. 37.

⁴² Grassi, 'Women's Leadership Roles', p. 315.

model leaders who need to be imitated even by the male disciples!

Mary's anointing with the costly perfume made of pure nard had a silencing effect upon all those who were in the house ('The house was filled with the fragrance of perfume'—12:3b). The sacrificial act done for Jesus left its mark upon others even without her awareness. Therefore M.L. Loane comments, 'Mary could not help but sweeten the world with the beautiful qualities of life whose influence was redolent with the Master's love.'⁴³ Here is a conceptual parallel with the mission of an apostle to spread in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing Christ (2 Cor. 2:14-16).

Just as the apostles' fragrance has a double effect, death to those who are perishing and life to those who are believing, Mary's act celebrates the new life given by Jesus by his death to those who believe (12:9,11), but at the same time leads the Jews into their own destruction because they intensified their plot to kill Jesus as well as Lazarus (12:10,19). Thus Mary, as an aroma of Christ, performed an apostolic act of spreading the fragrance!

In sum, both Martha and Mary are the paradigms for ideal discipleship and hence for effective leadership in the church because they exhibited the qualities of devotion, sacrifice, submission, service, faith, boldness and of apostolic witness. We should also note that as a family, the sisters were effectively involved in house-

hold duties by extending hospitality and care. At the same time they were closely bound with Christ and to his mission of accomplishing God's redemptive plan. Both of them, then, can be regarded as ideal disciples who fulfil the role of the beloved disciple in John.⁴⁴ Such a model role played by the women-duo would be unthinkable to John unless some women in his community were active members showing extraordinary devotion to Jesus.

4. Mary Magdalene: An Apostle Sent to the Apostle-Designates

Mary of Magdala, another key figure among the women profiles of John, is the next focus of our study. This woman appears only in the passion and resurrection narrative of John (19:25; 20:1-18). This means that some women in John, particularly Mary Magdalene, played supportive roles during Jesus' hour (*hōra*), the crucial moment of Jesus' ministry that made God's love and salvation a reality to the world. Just like the mother of Jesus who had a key role in the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Samaritan woman who played the leadership role in extending the boundary of Jesus' mission to the Samaritans, and Martha and Mary who exercised an active role in Jesus' passion to the extent that their *bhakti* and service became the preamble to the whole Passion narrative of John, so also another woman, Mary

⁴³ M.L. Loane, *Mary of Bethany* (London/Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan & Scott Ltd., 2nd impr. 1955), p. 101.

⁴⁴ See Schneiders, 'Because of the Woman's Testimony ...', pp. 528, 534-535.

Magdalene, became a central figure in Jesus' resurrection and the subsequent appearances (20:11-23).⁴⁵ If Barrett's comment that in John 20:1-18 John has skilfully combined two traditions of Jesus' resurrection, resurrection appearances and the discovery of the empty tomb is correct,⁴⁶ then Mary Magdalene is the unifying figure of the two traditions.

John singles out Mary Magdalene as the only woman who *first* discovered the empty tomb (20:1-2) and who received the *first* Easter Christophany as well as the apostolic commission to announce the good news of Jesus' resurrection (20:11-18). She saw the risen Jesus first and bore witness to him (cf. Mk. 16:9-10). In Jewish tradition a woman had no right to witness because she was treated as a liar (cf. Gen. 18:15); her witness was acceptable only in exceptional cases.⁴⁷ John breaks this tradition and approves the witness of a woman. Hengel observes that Mary Magdalene in John attains the honour of being listed with the closest relatives of Jesus (19:25) and that she attains the first place in the order of revelation and in the history of the apostolic Easter message, analogous to that of Peter among the male disciples.⁴⁸ Therefore Hengel is not

wrong in calling her *die Jüngerin Jesu* (the female disciple of Jesus).⁴⁹

Mary's proclamation to the male disciples saying, 'I have seen the Lord' (20:18), has apostolic significance, for the early church regarded a vision of Jesus as the primary mark of the apostolic witness which is the foundation of Christian faith (1 Cor. 15:3-9; cf. Lk. 24:34). In this sense Mary Magdalene attains the status of an apostle, being equal in every respect to that of Peter and Paul. That is why the later Greek Fathers named her *isapostolos* ('equally an apostle').⁵⁰ In fact, Mary was given a double apostolic role: at first she carried the news about the empty tomb to Peter and the beloved disciple, inciting them to 'come and see'; and the second time she was sent to the larger group of disciples to testify that she had seen the Lord (20:17-18).⁵¹ Her love for Jesus was so deep that she was searching for him with great longing and weeping (20:11-15).

Like the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene was led from her misunderstanding to a clear vision and faith. She saw the risen Lord, received the commission directly from him and carried it out faithfully. She proclaimed to 'his brothers' the words of Jesus that in his exaltation the filial relationship between him and his disciples, and between them and the Father was confirmed. This message echoes the content of the apostolic preaching about Jesus' res-

⁴⁵ See Scott, *Sophia*, pp. 174-175, who shows that the women of John feature at key points in Jesus' ministry.

⁴⁶ Barrett, *St. John*, p. 560.

⁴⁷ See Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, pp. 374-375.

⁴⁸ Hengel, 'Maria Magdalena und die Frauen als Zeugen', in O. Betz, et al. (eds.), *Abraham unser Vater* (Leiden/Köln: EJ Brill, 1963), pp. 250-251, 256.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 252.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 251.

⁵¹ Cf. Scott, *Sophia*, p. 225.

urrection and its impact on human lives.

Scott argues that due to the presence of two or three layers of tradition in the resurrection narrative of John, there are some inconsistencies and duplications. For example, if the beloved disciple had already believed in the risen Jesus (20:8), what necessity was there for Mary Magdalene to go and announce it to the disciples?⁵² However, there is no inconsistency in this double account. What the beloved disciple believed was that Jesus' body was no more in the tomb. He still was ignorant of the scriptures that testify to the resurrection of Jesus (20:9)! He went back home along with Peter without real faith in Jesus' resurrection. In this situation Mary's witness must have clarified the reality of resurrection to all the disciples, including the beloved disciple. Mary's message equipped them for their future apostolic role. Hence Mary Magdalene is called *apostola apostolorum* ('the apostle to the apostles').⁵³

5. The Elect Lady: An Unnamed Pastor?

The reference to the 'Elect Lady' in 2 John needs our special attention in our endeavour to understand the leadership roles of women who feature in the Johannine writings. At the outset it should be stated that 1,2,3 John come from the same author or at least from the same community and that the epistles were written later than John's

Gospel. Therefore just like the Gospel, the epistles too generally reflect the life-situation of the Johannine community. It seems that 2 John is addressed to a community, a house-church, through an individual who was in charge of that community, just as 3 John is addressed to an individual, Gaius, with a message to the whole church.

Almost all the commentators agree that the 'elect lady' (*eklektê kyria* in 2 Jn. 1) and her 'elect sister' (*hê adelphês sou tês eklektês* in 2 Jn. 13) do not point to specific individuals. The term 'elect lady' is taken as the 'personification of the church',⁵⁴ a 'community and not an individual believer' (B.F. Westcott and S.S. Smalley), a 'local church and its members, and 'her sister' being another such local church' (C.H. Dodd), a 'personification of a local church' (John Stott), a 'metaphorical way of saying "the church and its members"' (I.H. Marshall and M.M. Thompson), and a 'church whose members are the children' (D. Jackman). The metaphorical interpretation rests on the observation that the church in the NT, similar to Jerusalem in the OT, is designated as a woman or the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-32; Jn. 3:29; Rev. 18-19) and as the 'chosen woman' (1 Pet. 5:13; cf. Rom. 8:33; 1 Pet. 1:1).

Nevertheless, three issues have not adequately been dealt with by the commentators:

- (i) If the term 'elect lady' itself means the

⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

⁵³ See Brown, 'Roles of Women', p. 190.

⁵⁴ Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*, p. 242.

church, i.e., a community consisting of several members, then why does the author refer separately to 'your children' (2 Jn. 4), by using singular 'your' (*sou*)?

(ii) If 2 John 1 does not denote an individual, why does the author use the second person singular in three verses (vv. 4, 5, 13), while using plural in other verses?

(iii) Nowhere in the NT is a church addressed as *kyria* ('lady').⁵⁵

I revive, therefore, the view that was once argued by Clement of Alexandria and others, that the 'elect lady' is an individual who represents a house church (2 Jn. 10), although it is difficult to treat the terms, *Eklekta* and *Eklekta Kyria*, as personal names. The second person plural shows definitely that the letter is meant for a community of believers. But it is natural that any letter meant for a church is addressed to the leader or guardian of that church unless otherwise stated. For example, 3 John is addressed to one Gaius, while it is meant for the whole church. It is probable, as M.D. Hutaff notes, that the elect lady of 2 John was a female leader of the house-church like Prisca (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:3), Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11), and Nympha (Col. 4:15)⁵⁶ and that her elect sister was the leader of

another local church from where the elder wrote 2 John. If this interpretation is correct, then 2 John is the only writing in the NT addressed to a woman.⁵⁷ We may also say that these women exercised a pastoral role in two different local churches over which the elder had jurisdiction.

An important characteristic of John is to use the historical figures as symbolic or representative figures (e.g.: Nicodemus in 3:1-15 where the singular and plural forms are interchangeably used, the mother of Jesus, the Samaritan woman, and even Jesus himself).⁵⁸ Likewise, the elect lady and her elect sister of 2 John are possibly historical figures whom the Johannine community set as the representatives of two separate house churches. We may also suggest that these women leaders possibly founded these churches by their labour and that is why the elder identifies the members of the churches as their children (2 Jn. 4, 13; cf. Gal. 4:19).

The female leader had three important functions in the church: to offer hospitality in her house to the travelling evangelists (cf. 2 Jn. 10, 11), to guard the church from heretical teaching that denied Christ who came in flesh (2 Jn. 7), and to preserve love, truth and the teaching (*didachē*) of Christ in the communi-

⁵⁵ Margaret Hutaff observes that the church is described as 'lady' in the *Shepherd of Hermas* (Vis. 3.1.3)—see M.D. Hutaff, 'The Johannine Epistles', in E.S. Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, Vol. 2 (London: SCM Press, 1994), pp. 423-424. However, in the *Shepherd of Hermas* the term is used as a polite term to address an 'elderly woman' and not as a designation of the church. The woman appears as an apocalyptic figure rather than a historical or representative figure. The same word is used to address also another woman named Rhoda in Rome (Vis. I.I.5).

⁵⁶ See Hutaff, 'Johannine Epistles', p. 423.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*; see also Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 248-249.

⁵⁸ See R.F. Collins, 'The Representative Figures of the Fourth Gospel', *Downside Review* 94 (1976), pp. 26-46, 118-132; S.M. Schneiders, 'History and Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel', in M. De Jonge (ed.), *L' évangile de Jean: Sources, rédaction, théologie* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1977), pp. 371-376.

ty (2 Jn. 5-9). It is unimaginable that such roles would have been attributed to a metaphorical or personified figure!⁵⁹ While the 'lady' was involved in the household duties such as hospitality, she was fulfilling the pastoral duties of the church because of her deep commitment to Christ.

As in the papyri manuscripts, the word *kyria* in Aramaic is equivalent to 'Martha'.⁶⁰ If so, there is a play on the word in 2 John 1. Although *kyria* is not a personal name, it perhaps points in a hidden way to Martha. In the light of John's fondness for double meaning displayed in his Gospel, such a hidden meaning is quite possible in the epistle. If so, it is only a step further to say that 'your elect sister' implies Mary of Bethany, Martha's sister. Since they showed a sincere *bhakti* and service to Jesus, it is no wonder that eventually they rose to the status as the heads of the churches on par with the male disciples. This proves that Martha and Mary were not marginalized after their role depicted in the Fourth Gospel.

Nevertheless, the question is: why are the women leaders mentioned in disguise? Dodd thinks that such mystification is to give the impression to the enemies of Christianity (cf. 1 Jn.

3:13), in case the letter would fall into their hands, that it is a harmless letter to a friend.⁶¹ However, 2 John attacks not the unbelievers, but only those who have gone out of the church (v. 7). In fact, 3 John commends the travelling evangelists who accepted nothing from the 'heathen' (*ethnikoi* – 3 Jn. 7), a derogatory label used for non-Christians. If 3 John is plainly addressed to an individual, why not 2 John? It is more probable that the women leaders are presented in a hidden way so that the letter might receive wider acceptance, including in the churches that discouraged women leadership.

Schneiders has shown that the early church was retreating from the egalitarian discipleship of the Jesus Movement, while the Gnostics were assigning apostolic functions to women in their movement.⁶² She further argues that the female identity of the Beloved Disciple was disguised by the final editor of the Fourth Gospel in order to distance the Gospel from Gnostic texts and to promote its acceptance in the 'apostolic' Christian movement, which she calls the 'Great Church'.⁶³ Therefore it is possible that the identity of the 'elect lady' and her 'elect sister' was hidden for similar reasons.

If our interpretation of the 'elect lady' as an individual who played the pastoral role in the house church is correct, then it gives one more evi-

⁵⁹ It is true that 2 Jn. 6-12 has plural verbs and pronouns, but it is also true that the exhortation is directly addressed to the lady ('But now, dear lady, I ask you' in v. 5). The plural only shows that the elder's instruction is to be circulated among the members of the church.

⁶⁰ See C.H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 4 impr., 1961), p. 143; J.R.W. Stott, *The Letters of John: Revised Edition* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 203; S.S. Smalley, *1,2,3 John* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984), p. 318.

⁶¹ Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, p. 145.

⁶² Schneiders, 'Because of the Woman's Testimony ...', p. 525.

⁶³ *ibid.*, pp. 527,531,535.

dence for the women leadership admitted in the Johannine community. Like the women in the Gospel, she too was involved in such household works as providing hospitality and service and at the same time bound herself with Christ in whose power she could function as the custodian of Christian faith.

We need to ask at this point: why does John place women in a good light? They are not pictured as those who denied or betrayed Jesus nor are they presented as those who fled away from Jesus when he was arrested and tried, as the male disciples did. Why does John portray women thus? The answer probably lies in the observation that there is an undeniable link between Sophia Christology and the role of women in the Fourth Gospel. For John, Jesus, as Sophia, is equally a female expression of God.⁶⁴ He presents Jesus Sophia as the one who pre-existed with God, was involved in creation, tabernacled among human beings, exhibited God's glory, supplied bread and wine to the needy, and revealed herself to the faithful seekers. When he projects Jesus as the female expression of God, he cannot fail to present women as reflections of Jesus Sophia in their love, devotion, faith and servanthood.

⁶⁴ By this, I am not arguing that Jesus was a female by nature and gender. I only point out how the Johannine Jesus fulfils the role of Sophia which, both in Jewish and Hellenistic thoughts, was feminine. It has been well proved by scholars that the Logos and Sophia are almost identical in status and task, and therefore one can argue that men and women bear equal status and role in Jesus.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study on the woman profiles of John shows that they had unique roles in Jesus' mission of saving the suffering world. At a time when the Jewish society treated women as house-bound, John boldly presents them as models to be followed. They took the initiative to serve in and outside their homes because of their *bhakti* to Jesus and their awareness of human needs. In their service, they were readily willing to make costly sacrifices, although men with selfish ambition regarded it a waste.

The women of John were keenly engaged in theological discussions based on the scripture and the religio-social situation of the day. This was the case even though study and teaching of the Torah were forbidden for women in the Jewish world. Therefore no wonder John gives to a woman theologian the credit of confessing Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God—a credit which was given to a male disciple, Peter, in the Synoptic Gospels.

Some of them were so loyal to Jesus that they were with him in his suffering at crucifixion and after his resurrection—the climax of the revelation of God's glory, whereas almost all the male disciples had fled away from Jesus at that point. Their witness to what they had seen made an impact in the society and led many, including the disciples, to first hand knowledge of Jesus and stronger faith in him. Therefore they are known as the apostles, missionaries, and leaders of the church.

When most of the male disciples are presented by John as passive

observers of Jesus' deeds, the women are portrayed as active respondents to him. They did virtuous deeds such as hosting dinner, serving at the table, overseeing the feast, and anointing Jesus' feet—all challenging works that no other persons took the initiative to do. They performed such deeds well in advance of Jesus' instruction to the disciples to do so. The Johannine women acted thus with the prophetic spirit and clear vision.

True, almost all of them were busily engaged in household works, but at the same time they were remarkably bound with Christ. Since Christ had liberated them from male-dominated culture and set them as model leaders, the women became more challenging figures than the men.⁶⁵ They were empowered by Jesus himself, who, as the Sophia incarnate, is the female expression of God. The unique roles played by the

women in John show that they were not 'uneducated domestic recluses'.⁶⁶ The recognition of women in John's Gospel as model figures in a male dominated Jewish society makes the Gospel a Gospel of revolution and restoration.

What do the woman profiles of John have to speak to the women of our time? Let me put them in four categories:⁶⁷

- (i) Women should bind themselves with Christ who alone can empower them to do any form of service.
- (ii) They should throw off 'I am only a woman' mentality and use the available opportunities for leadership.
- (iii) We must encourage and enable more participation of women in the church, in the liturgy, decision-making bodies, house-groups, and in ordained ministry.
- (iv) We must identify and remove all forms of oppression against women in the church and society.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Gospel of Thomas* 114 where Jesus promises to make Mary a 'male', as Peter was asking Jesus to send her away, because, for him, women are not worthy of life.
⁶⁶ Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel', p. 130.

⁶⁷ For points (ii)–(iv) see Somen Das (ed.), *Women in India: Problems and Prospects* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989), pp. 1-2.

Acceptance

*The audacious self-conceit of humankind
 Misconstrues the crucial question of the Age,
 Reducing reality to our subjective plane
 We focus upon vain acceptance of our belief in God;
 Failing to see the ultimate question is:
 Does God accept us?*

Verse by Garry Harris, Adelaide, South Australia
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