



Household and gender: Interpretation in dialogue between the contexts of the New Testament and contemporary cultures

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Abstract

In this paper, I will try to engage with African positions on gender and households and respond with a reading of New Testament texts from my position in a Nordic context within Europe. The terms “household” and “gender” refer to central issues in social and historical studies of societies. Household signifies a central social unit in a society whereas gender is an analytical category when discussing the social and ideological roles of men and women. The question of the forms of household and of the roles of men and women respectively, is part of the larger context of worldviews, political ideologies and ethics. The specific forms of household and gender play a large part in the societies that make up the contexts of New Testament texts, as well as in contemporary societies where these texts play important roles. In this essay, I seek a “dialogue” between the New Testament context and the church in Africa, focusing especially on the understanding of gender roles within Pentecostal churches.

Keywords

New Testament; gender; household; hermeneutics; African Pentecostalism

Introduction

During the seminar on “Gender and Household in Early Christian texts and the contemporary church”, those who participated engaged in several dialogues: First, there was a dialogue within today’s churches, with different viewpoints not only between participants from Africa and Europe, but also between members from different African countries. Then there was the dialogue between the viewpoints on gender and household

in the New Testament and other Early Christian Texts and those reflecting the situation in our own churches and societies.

In this paper, I will try to engage with African positions on gender and households and respond with a reading of New Testament texts from my position in a Nordic context within Europe. I am very open to be told whether my understandings of African positions are relevant or not; however, I hope to start a dialogue.

The terms “household” and “gender” refer to central issues in social and historical studies of societies. Household signifies a central social unit in a society whereas gender is an analytical category when discussing the social and ideological roles of men and women. The question of the forms of household and of the roles of men and women respectively, is part of the larger context of worldviews, political ideologies and ethics. The specific forms of household and gender play a large part in the societies that make up the contexts of New Testament texts, as well as in contemporary societies where these texts play important roles. When we speak of the relations between the contexts of New Testament texts and contemporary cultures the term “dialogue” is significant. The word “dialogue” signals that when household and gender are mentioned in texts in the New Testament, their meaning may be very different from those of contemporary cultures. In consequence, it is not possible to apply the models and advices in New Testament texts directly to our present situation without hermeneutical reflections.

This essay therefore employs the form of dialogue. The starting point for the conversation must be our contemporary situation, since we always must reflect on our own presuppositions and worldviews; I will start from examples of forms of household and gender in present day Africa, followed by responses from readings of New Testament texts, based on contemporary research methods and theories.

Women and marriage in African societies

I started my attempts to learn more about the African context with a review of studies on African Families over 20 years (1994–2013), written by R. Sooryamoorthy and Rosalind Chetty, at the School of Social Sciences

at the University of KwaZulu Natal, Durban (Sooryamoorthy and Chetty 2015). The studies covered many different African countries, with many differences. However, I was struck by three aspects that seemed to relate to countries in various part of the continent. The first was the very high percentage of households headed by women, especially in East and Southern Africa, e.g., Zimbabwe 45%; Namibia 44%, Kenya 36% and Tanzania 24%. One of the factors behind these high numbers was the prevalence of migrant workers; mostly men who were forced to stay away for long periods to find work. This situation resulted in a high level of poverty for female headed household. Another aspect, one that I think most Europeans are generally unaware of, is polygamy as an established and continuous form of marriage. The last factor that struck me was role of education. In particular women, when they receive education and get employment of their own, they facilitate communication within the family. Thus, the quality of life in the family is improved. I take these developments to be structural elements that form the social context for relations between the genders. This social context should be reflected in questions to texts, and in the responses from the churches to these situations.

In light of this context, the ideological positions of Pentecostal and charismatic churches and their teachings on marriage and gender are problematic. Professor Akoshus Adomako Ampofo at the University of Ghana raised the question “Are Africa’s ‘men of God’ preserving injustices against women?” (Ampofo 2017). Ampofo starts by recognizing that these churches carry out important functions that the states have neglected, for instance responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis, building hospitals and establishing universities. However, when it comes to their influential voices on gender issues, Ampofo says “injustice seems to have intensified in the church.”

She also observes that “much of the current discourse from church platforms in Africa focuses on marriage.” The same seems to be true in some churches both in the USA and in Europe. Especially among evangelical Christians (and politicians) to be “pro-family” has become a litmus test of being a true Christian. Sometimes one gets the impression that the Apostolic Creed has an extra, forth section, “I believe in the traditional, heterosexual family.” The main subjects in these discourses, according to Ampofo, are “the breakdown of marriages, preparing women to be good wives, and the

“unsuitability” of certain types of young women for marriage.” Typically, all of these topics are addressed to women. The preachers are aware that breakdown in marriages may be caused by abuse by husbands; however, the women are held responsible for keeping the marriage intact, even if it involves suffering being beaten. Thus, such sermons by men are a way of constructing the female gender as obedient, submissive to her husband, and suffering patiently. Ampofo concludes: “This leads to a devaluing of women, re-inscribing male domination and undermining female autonomy” (Ampofo 2017).

Not only women, but also the male gender is culturally constructed, according to Ampofo. Since the church has always been a male-dominated institution, the male gender is constructed to perpetuate this domination. Ampofo admits that there are positive aspects of this brand of masculinity; for instance, that men shall “eschew violence, advocate monogamy and companionship between spouses, and underscore the responsibilities of fathers and husbands” (Ampofo 2017). However, there is no doubt that women are “the weaker sex,” who need protection and guidance.

Women and African biblical hermeneutics

Rosina Mmannana Gabaitse, a lecturer in biblical studies and theology at the University of Botswana, has studied how these ideologies and practices of gender in the Pentecostal churches are culturally constructed, especially through their use of the Bible (Gabaitse 2015). I gather that she speaks from within a Pentecostal context where she identifies with the “articulated Pentecostal hermeneutic,” over against the “unarticulated Pentecostal hermeneutics.” The latter, according to Gabaitse, supports the marginalization of women. First, she describes the ambivalence to women in the Pentecostal churches: because of their faith in the Holy Spirit there is a discourse of equality between men and women, however, it is not put into practice. Therefore, in the Pentecostal movement all over the world there are structures of exclusion along gender lines, which reinforce male supremacy. Gabaitse attributes this exclusion to patriarchal prerogatives; they are kept alive and maintained through interpretation of a few biblical texts according to an “unarticulated Pentecostal hermeneutics.”

According to Gabaitse, an “articulated Pentecostal hermeneutics” refers to “an academic exercise of reading and interpreting the Bible,” where “the Bible is read and interpreted critically, taking into consideration the context in which it was produced and the culture of the time, among other things,” (Gabaitse 2015:3–4). We notice that this interpretation considers the context and the culture at the time of the Bible. Thus, the articulated Pentecostal hermeneutics recognizes both the original context of the writings and the contemporary context of interpretation.

Not so with the “unarticulated Pentecostal hermeneutics,” according to Gabaitse. It is pre-critical, and takes the Bible “at face value”

because it is not concerned with the contexts in which the Bible was produced ... It does not matter that these texts were written by Paul within Greco-Roman imperial and patriarchal environments, these texts are applied as if they were written as laws that dictate and prescribe gender relations and the status of women in the 21st century (Gabaitse 2015: 4).

Gabaitse identifies two aspects of such Pentecostal unarticulated hermeneutics. The first is a literal interpretation of the Bible; the other is proof texting with the Bible. Pentecostal literary readers do not care about the context, “especially when it comes to texts that support patriarchy,” Gabaitse adds. The reason these readers accept Paul’s commands about women without questioning, Gabaitse suggests, is “because they confirm and support the existing African dominant ideological frameworks that place women at the margins” (Gabaitse 2015:5). Thus, it is contemporary ideology, not the biblical texts, which ascribes authority to Paul’s words about submission. Gabaitse says that “There is inconsistency though in that Pentecostals do not always take the Bible literally in every sense, but when it comes to reading texts that marginalize women, they do so” (2015:5) As an example she describes an interview with a Pentecostal pastor who literary believed in the story in Genesis 2, which says that God created Adam first and then Eve from the rib of Adam, as a sign that she was inferior to Adam. To the objections that in the story in Genesis 1:27 men and women were created at the same time, the pastor argued that this text should not be taken literally!

Proof texting is a way of using a few biblical texts without considering how these texts relate to the Bible as whole. Examples of this type of reading are, e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:3 (“I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ”) and Ephesians 5:22 (“Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord”). Such proof texting resulted in turning a few texts into principles. The Pentecostal scholar Janet Powers says that such proof texting has led Pentecostals to claim that the subordination of women towards men is “a creation principle that must be acknowledged by anyone who acknowledges the authority of the Bible” (in Gabaitse 2015: 6–7).

Household and gender in Early Christianity

The studies by Ampofo and Gabaitse point to important issues in a dialogue between the contemporary situation and New Testament texts. The first concerns marriage and household. Ampofo pointed out that much of the discourse in the churches focuses on marriage; furthermore, this is a male dominated discourse. Both Ampofo and Gabaitse emphasized that there was a specific purpose to this discourse: to keep women in a marginal position and to enforce patriarchy and male headship. As a result, marriage was not based on equality between a man and a woman but was upheld as part of a patriarchal household with the husband as the ruler. Moreover, this ideological position does not take into consideration the many women who head households and who carry the responsibilities for children and family. What does the church have to say to these families?

When we go the New Testament from the contemporary focus on marriage in Christian discourse, we are in for a surprise. Marriage is not such an important topic as we are led to believe. Even more surprising: in Early Christianity there were strong movements that said no to marriage and instead defended asceticism (Wimbush and Vaage 1999). Marriage was not the central topic for Jesus and Paul, nor was it for other New Testament authors. Their central topic was to shape the identity of the followers of Jesus Christ as disciples, in the likeness of Jesus (Moxnes 2014). This is clearly the case in the gospels; they are written to proclaim Jesus as Lord, and to bring the disciples to follow him. Likewise, for Paul his purpose in his letters was to shape the identity of the members of the communities of Christ

believers and to establish the unity between the members (Moxnes 2014: 5–6). Issues concerned with household and marriage are discussed when they interfere with the roles of the disciples in the Christ communities. Moreover, in many texts asceticism and non-marriage are presented as the best choice for Christ believers (Wimbush and Vaage 1999). And for two to three hundred years in the post New Testament period, asceticism was the most accepted lifestyle for Christians (Brown 1988).

The second issue concerns what it means that the New Testament texts are contextually shaped. The “unarticulated Pentecostal hermeneutics” treated Paul’s words as if they were laws that prescribed gender laws in the 21st century. Instead, Gabaitse argued that it mattered that “these texts were written by Paul within Greco-Roman imperial and patriarchal environments” (Gabaitse 2015:4). My question is: in what way does it matter? The main question is whether Paul and other writers in the New Testament support the patriarchal system or are critical towards it. We will find that Paul and other New Testament authors place themselves differently in relation to these contexts. When it comes to household structures and gender there are differences between early Christian texts. Some placed themselves critically towards the context of the Empire, by representing an alternative to the structures of the Empire. Others remained uncritical: for instance, the Pastorals accepted a male-dominated perspective. Hermeneutically, this means that we must place the various texts within the larger context of the New Testament as a whole. In the end we may have to evaluate the alternatives and weigh them critically against what we find to be the central focus of the gospel.

Did Jesus grow up in a female-headed household?

The large number of female-headed households in several East African countries makes me raise the question: Did Jesus grow up in a female-headed household, with Mary at its head? There are few sources for Jesus’ birth and early childhood. The birth and infancy narratives in Luke 1–2 and Matthew 1–2 are difficult to use as historical sources. They are very different from one another and have a legendary character. However, if the birth stories can tell us little specifically about Jesus, they provide insight into the traditions of households and families at the time of Jesus (Moxnes 2003:32–38). Matthew focuses on the role of Joseph as a male head of

household; Luke provides more insight into the role of Mary as mother, wife, and an ideal figure of obedience and faith.

Apart from the tradition of Jesus' pilgrimage to Jerusalem when he was 12 years old (Lk 2:41–51), there is silence about the years before Jesus went to John the Baptist to be baptized. However, we must presume that Jesus grew up in a household in Nazareth. The conflict over Jesus when he returned to his home village in Mark's gospel (6:1–6), provides insight into the social context of his household. Mark renders the reproach from the villagers against Jesus whom they consider is "putting on ears:" "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" (Mk 6:3). In Mark's gospel, different from Matthew 13:55, it is Jesus, not Joseph, who is identified as the carpenter. Thus, as the eldest son Jesus contributed to the income of the household. His siblings are mentioned, however, only his brothers by name.

Jesus is identified as "the son of Mary;" Joseph is not mentioned. The silence about Joseph after the birth narratives in the gospels suggests that he died early. That Jesus is identified through his mother is unusual, but not unknown in Jewish tradition. Some scholars have suggested that it indicated illegitimacy, or that it was a reference to a matriarchal household. Some scholars have settled for the explanation, which I consider most plausible, that "son of Mary" was an informal way of describing Jesus that was not part of formal genealogy (Meier 1991:225–27; McArthur 1973). However, the reference to mother and siblings, but no father, suggests that Jesus lived in a female-headed household. Also, in another instance, it was his mother who came together with his brothers to bring him back home (Mk 3:20–21, 31–35).

Apart from this event, the gospels tell little about the relations between Jesus and his mother that can be used as historical evidence. However, Luke suggests a close relationship from Mary's side (Lk 2:35, 48–50) (Moxnes 2003:36–37). John's gospel, on the other hand, portrays a more problematic relationship between Jesus and his mother (Jn 2:1–5), a conflict that eventually was solved at the crucifixion (Jn 19:25–27).

Even if the gospel narratives reflect an ideological position, we may conclude that Jesus did not grow up as a modern individual. He grew up in

a household with responsibilities for the economy of the household and as a member of his social group. Many of the parables of Jesus reflect this social setting; they are often set in a peasant household (Moxnes 2003:44–45). It is striking that Jesus often speaks of a householder, a father, an owner of vineyards; the parables overwhelmingly describe a male world. It has been suggested that this focus on the father figure reflected Jesus' relation to Joseph, a father that he missed (Miller 1997). However, more than a psychological explanation, I think there are contextual, cultural reasons behind this focus. There can be no doubt that the household represented Jesus' first socialization into society. It was his first physical place, as well as his social place of identity in the group and thereby in the village. Finally, this place was an ideological representation, life in the household shaped ideals and ideas about one's place in the world. Even if Mary headed her household; households were part of a male-dominated, patriarchal world. Therefore, Jesus and his brothers were brought up to fulfil the expectations to young men, and his sisters were brought up to fulfil traditional women's roles.

Jesus from household to discipleship

To leave family and household was a dramatic disruption of Jesus' socialization into the life of his household and village. It was upon returning to Galilee after a period as a disciple of John the Baptist that Jesus left his hometown, Nazareth and went to Capernaum and started his own mission. The new beginning was indicated by a transition from his household to a new place. In the Q source there are several words by Jesus that express the dramatic loss he suffered. Instead of the house of his household, there was a "no-place": "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk 9:58)

This contrast and uncertainty extended also to those whom Jesus called to follow him: Several of the call stories have a break with a life of the "first socialization," integrated in household and village, family relations that are at the same time social and ideological relations. Jesus called the first disciples along the shore of Lake Gennesaret from the households and the socioeconomic system of fishermen. They were sons of their fathers, working together in the fishing boat; some were themselves fathers and owners of a boat. The call narratives tell the story of leaving household to

become a follower of Jesus, to be part of the movement of the Kingdom of God. How dramatic this call was, and how it meant a break with the family structure becomes obvious in an exchange between Jesus and a potential disciple:

“To another he (Jesus) said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”⁶⁰ But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Lk 9:59–60).

Here Jesus addresses one of the most important household obligations for a son: to perform the ritual of “the secondary burial” for his father. A year after the first burial, the bones were put in an ossuary and placed in a grave (McCane 1990). Together with the dead father, the living members of the household are also proclaimed dead, and the son is called to become a follower of Jesus and to proclaim the message of the Kingdom of God.

What become clear in various Gospel stories, are that Jesus’ called men to leave the traditional space of the patriarchal households and thereby to give up their identities as sons or fathers. The core narrative is Mark 3:31–35, when his mother, brothers and sisters came to bring him home:

³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you.”

³³And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.

The rejection of the household group is stronger in Mark’s gospel than in Matthew and Luke. In Luke’s Gospel, Mary actually appears as fulfilling the obligations of discipleship (Lk 2:19; 8:20–21). The group of people around Jesus, who become his “brother and sister and mother,” are bound together by doing the will of God. However, discipleship was different from family. There is no father in this human group, nor does Jesus take that role. In anthropological terms, a fictive kinship group is established that takes the place of the biological family. Unlike a household, the members of a group of disciples are not biologically born into it. Family and kinship

terminology are used; however, it is through the power and the gift of God that the followers of Jesus become household.

Jesus and the transformation of masculinity

A contextual study of gender in New Testament texts must explore how these texts relate to the contexts of the Roman Empire and patriarchal structures. Gender studies have mostly focused on women; however, I will exemplify the discussion in terms of presentations of masculinities. The main reason is that studies of women share awareness that the role of women in New Testament texts is constructed, whereas the role of men as representing patriarchy has been taken for granted. Thus, it is necessary to look at men and masculinity as constructed as well, with a specific purpose from the author. Since the Roman Empire and the patriarchal structures (including Jewish society) make up the dominant context, we shall ask how the New Testament authors relate to this context. In order to make this a manageable task, I will focus on Luke's gospel and its presentations of masculinities in the last period of the 1st century, reflecting Luke's location in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean during the Roman Empire.

The excellent study by Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man. Jesus and Greco-Roman masculinity* (Conway 2008), represents a common position among scholars who have studied the masculinity of Luke's gospel. She argues that the male characters in Luke's gospel typically compete with other elites for power and influence. Conway concludes that Luke-Acts is "completely at home with the masculine power structures of the Roman Empire" (Conway 2008:127). However, I have argued for a different position. My main argument is that Luke's narrative is filled with non-elite men, and that this should be the starting point, not a stereotypical elite ideal of masculinity (Moxnes 2007). Brittany Wilson has developed a similar approach at greater length and argued that Luke's male characters in many instances look unmanly in comparison to elite masculine norms (Wilson 2015). What were these masculine norms in the Greco-Roman, including Jewish, society? Wilson lists three: Elite men should not act like women or other "non-men;" manliness manifested itself in control over one's body; power and self-control were essential

Luke's men fail in one or more of these ideals. Wilson looks at four major male figures in Luke-Acts and finds that Luke presents them as lacking in masculine power, exemplified by their lack of control of their bodies. The priest Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, lost the ability to speak and also the authority to give his son a name (Luke 1). The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 had lost control over his body when he was circumcised; moreover, as a eunuch he was "unmanly." Even Paul, who had seemed so powerful when persecuting the Christians, lost his eyesight when he encountered Jesus on his way to Damascus (Acts 9). Jesus himself had left his family and household and had chosen a different lifestyle, which I termed "queer" (Moxnes 2003:5–6), and Wilson "boundary crossing" (Wilson 2015:193–201). Jesus' death by crucifixion was one of the most shameful and unmanly ways to be killed in the Greco-Roman world. In contrast, some scholars have argued that Luke depicts Jesus' death as self-controlled, and therefore as an example of a manly, noble death (Conway 2008). However, during the passion narrative Jesus' body is under the control of his persecutors, he cannot protect the boundaries of his body. In a comparison with Greco-Roman ideals, we must say that Jesus and the other male figures in Luke-Acts do not comply with the ideals of elite masculinity.

However, this is not the final verdict. Wilson sees Luke's presentation of gender and masculinity in the larger context of Luke's theology. She says that for Luke, God's revelation in Jesus "ultimately transforms prevalent ways of viewing the world, including conceptions of masculinity" (Wilson 2015:4). Thus, the pictures of God and of Jesus become the norm for masculinity. This is especially relevant for the relation between power and masculinity, which was so strong in the Greco-Roman world. However, in Luke it is God who with his "paradoxical act of self-emptying power sets the standard for how men are to act in the world" (2015:242). It is this "self-emptying power" that reveals itself at Jesus' crucifixion. Wilson concludes that Luke presents Jesus' crucifixion as "a necessary death that paradoxically fulfils Scripture via Jesus' bodily penetration" (2015:235). The other male figures in Luke-Acts, who appear as "unmanly" measured by Greco-Roman conceptions of masculinity, are not represented as failures. Wilson's verdict is that Luke "provides a refiguration of masculinity that is inextricably wed to his understanding of God's powerless power" (2015:263). Thus, if Jesus and his followers lack power and masculinity, they reflect God's way of acting

that becomes the new ideal of masculinity. This position is summed up in Jesus' farewell speech in Luke when he sets up a slave who serves others as an ideal for his disciples, not mighty rulers and benefactors (Lk 22:24–27).

Women and the challenge of New Testament interpretation

How can we approach the question of women in New Testament texts? How do these texts respond to the sermons by male leaders in African churches? According to professor Ampofo, they focused on “the breakdown of marriages, preparing women to be good wives, and the “unsuitability” of certain types of young women for marriage” (Ampofo 2017). Dr. Gabaitse finds an explanation for this common view in her analysis of a literal interpretation of the Bible among Pentecostals. They do not care about the context when it comes to texts that support patriarchy, “because they confirm and support the existing African dominant ideological frameworks that place women at the margins” (Gabaitse 2015:5). Professor Ampofo ascribes this type of preaching to the “men of God,” that is, the male leadership in African churches. Dr. Gabaitse, if I understand her correctly, suggests that the African dominant ideological framework of placing women at the margins is a result of a literalist reading of the Bible. Therefore, women may also support this ideology. The alternative to this ideological use of the Bible is an articulated hermeneutical position that takes into consideration that Paul's texts were written “within Greco-Roman and imperial patriarchal environments” (2015:4). I suggest that “an articulated hermeneutical position” by necessity must be “a hermeneutics of suspicion”. I will give an example of such a reading of texts in the Pastoral Epistles by my colleague, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, in her study *Gossip and Gender: Othering of speech in the Pastoral Epistles*

The text under discussion is the author's (pseudo Paul) advice concerning widows:

Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once;¹⁰ she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. ¹¹ But refuse to put younger widows on the

list; for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry,¹² and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge.¹³ Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say. So, I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us (1 Tim 5:9–14).

This admonition shares some similarities with the sermons by African male church leaders: the problem lies with young women, who, because of their unsuitable behaviour, should rather marry. Their main fault is that they are “idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, and saying what they should not say” (1 Tim 5:13). The traditional scholarly position on the Pastorals and their admonitions was that they represented a support of widows, as part of a concern for church order. We might term this a reading that took the advice at “face value,” when the author described the problems caused by the young women and their irresponsible behaviour. From the 1980’s feminist scholars have presented a very different reading (Kartzow 2009:133–43). According to them, the Pastoral letters viewed the situation in the community with a male gaze and attempted to regulate the widows in order to control them. This “male gaze” represented a patriarchal model of Greco-Roman society in which roles were determined by the dominant-submissive pattern of the family. Thus, it was the outside world that set the rules for the Christian community.

Bjelland Kartzow explores one part of this “male gaze,” viz. the accusations against the young widows that they were gossiping. This criticism must be viewed in light of the admonition of women’s behaviour during worship that they should listen in silence “with full submission” (1 Tim 2:11–12). If the ideal was that a woman should keep silence, it was not strange that women’s speech was considered a negative activity. When the Pastorals mention women’s speech, it is always in a negative sense. Bjelland Kartzow calls this “labelling,” and a “rhetoric of othering” used by men to depict women in a negative way. Thus, gossiping is a gender specific activity, linked to women. Therefore, when men are accused of gossiping, it is an attempt to feminize them, to undermine their masculinity.

With a hermeneutic of suspicion, Bjelland Kartzow considers why women's speech was characterized by the stereotype of "gossip" (Kartzow 2009:151–96). She suggests that "gossip" represented an alternative discourse on the part of women, by making private information from the household public. It could also be a different expression of their belief. Luke's report of how women brought the news of the empty tomb to the apostles represents a parallel misogynistic attitude from about the same time: "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (Lk 24:11). This is similar to Gabaitse's evaluation of the present position that it is not the Bible, but "the existing African dominant ideological frameworks that place women at the margins" (Gabaitse 2015:5).

I consider this is a clear case where an "articulate hermeneutic" position must criticize the Pastorals for constructing a distorted stereotype of women. They are presented as the "other" of a masculine stereotype that is all knowing and a unique preserver of truth. The Pastorals were written towards the end of the first century, maybe as a reaction to a situation characterized by the presence and influence of women. If that is the case, we may read them as an attempt to bring a male order back to the Christian communities. Was it Paul himself who created this disorder with his most radical statements?

One in Christ: Galatians 3:28 and the end of male hierarchy

Galatians 3:28 is a well-known text: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." It has become one of the most influential texts from the New Testament. It has been termed "the Magna Carta for humanity," an expression of what faith in Christ has meant for human relations. No doubt, in modern times it has had a strong symbolic impression on issues of equal rights over divisions of ethnicity, class and gender.

However, when it comes to the meaning of the text at the time of Paul, there have been very different views among interpreters (Adelakun 2012). I will introduce a way of looking at "no longer male and female" within the larger context of Galatians as a whole, hoping that such a perspective will clarify the question. Brigitte Kahl, professor at Union Theological

Seminary in New York has explored the background of this saying by Paul (Kahl 2001). She argues that Galatians 3:28 is interwoven with the textual and theological structure of Galatians as a whole. So how can this context provide a help to understand that “in Christ” there is no longer biological sex? Notice that Paul is using the biological, sexual terms “male and female” (*arsen* and *thelu*), and not the terms for social gender, husband and wife (*aner* and *gunē*).

This focus on biological, bodily sex corresponds to Paul’s discussion of circumcision (Gal 5:11–12), which also affects the human, that is, the male body (only). The question of body and procreation comes up repeatedly in Galatians, which has a high frequency of terms related to male/female issues, e.g., fatherhood, motherhood, son ship, brotherhood, inheritance and birth. Most of these terms are related to maleness and masculinity, so it seems that in Galatians, Paul is primarily addressing men.

Moreover, Paul is addressing his addressees as “the offspring of Abraham” (Gal 3:16). To be sons of Abraham was an important identity marker for Jews, and that apparently continued for a long time among both Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Christ (Moxnes 2018). The descent from Abraham was central in Paul’s argument in Galatians 3; however, he argues for a different form of descent from that of biological procreation. He claims that “those who believe are the descendants of Abraham” (Gal 3:7). Thus, descent was a result of faith, not of biology. Moreover, Abraham’s offspring was one single person, Christ (Gal 3:16). Therefore, since believing in Christ meant to become one body with him, the conclusion of Paul’s discussion is that “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring” (Gal 3:29). However, “belonging to Christ” included both women and men; both groups were on equal terms “Abraham’s offspring.” This implied that circumcision as a sign of being a descendent of Abraham became relativized; maleness was “decentred”. “In Christ,” Abraham’s genealogy was no longer hierarchical, based on biological descent from fathers to sons; it was opened up for women, who were Abraham’s offspring in the same way as men.

In Galatians 3 Paul continued to use a family metaphor of fathers and sons. However, the logic of being sons of Abraham by faith, not by biological descent, made biological fathers and the patriarchal system superfluous.

Kahl points out that the “counter-patriarchal” logic of Paul reshapes his language in Galatians 4, which is dominated by a language of mothers and birth (Kahl 2001:42–43). Here we encounter the mother of Jesus, the two mothers, Sarah and Hagar, Jerusalem as mother and the barren mother in Isaiah. And most surprising, Paul describes himself as mother, when he speaks of the pain of “re-birthing” the Galatians, so that Christ may take form in them (Gal 4:19). Thus, Paul appears to be trans-gendering himself! In this chapter, there is no mention of a father, the children are qualified exclusively by their mother, either as children (*tekna*, not sons) of the free woman or of the slave woman (4:28–31).

In Gal 3:28 Paul speaks of being “one in Christ” through faith, and thereby being “children of Abraham.” This establishes a relationship to Abraham that may be experienced as “real,” since it shapes the way a Christ believer understands herself/himself. The statement that the hierarchies between Jew and Greek, free and slave, male and female are broken down, can only be understood in light of Paul’s conclusion in Gal 3:28: “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” We know that it took many centuries before this equality was established in social terms, and it has not happened everywhere or for everybody, but it started out as a statement of what it meant to be “one in Christ.”

Conclusion

The discussion of gender relations in Early Christian groups has often been whether they practiced equality between men and women in social terms, in which case it was “real,” or whether it was “only” a utopian vision (Beavis 2007). I think this is a false alternative. Language creates reality; it influences the way we think and prepares for social interaction. In many instances, male language is threatening to women. The women scholars give ample evidence of that, and at the same time, they point to ways of reading that may be helpful for women. Professor Akoshus Adomako Ampofo has explored the effects of male-dominated preaching and teaching on women and marriage; she has shown the necessity of exposing the effects upon women, their rights and personal autonomy. By analysing the hermeneutics in Pentecostal churches, Rosina M. Gabaitse has found great differences between an “articulated Pentecostal hermeneutic,” over

against an “unarticulated Pentecostal hermeneutics,” based on literal interpretation and proof texting. Her analysis points to the responsibility of biblical scholars in the churches, to challenge unarticulated hermeneutics, and to train readers in articulated hermeneutics. This is a task not only in Pentecostal churches. I know from my own context that until quite recently unarticulated hermeneutics was the dominant form of interpretation among evangelical and pietistic Christians in Norway.

The task of an “articulated hermeneutics” is both critical and constructive and requires the use of different analytical strategies of interpretation. With her hermeneutics of suspicion Marianne Bjelland Kartzow found that the way the Pastorals criticized young widows was a misrepresentation of these women. Their purpose was to protect male authority in the church. Thus, also biblical texts need to be criticized for their male bias. In her interpretation of Galatians 3:28 in the context of the letter as a whole, Brigitte Kahl identified the possibility of reading it as a subversive text, which undermined Greco-Roman and Jewish male ideology. In her discussion of masculinity in Luke’s gospel, Brittany Wilson contextualized Luke’s narrative of male figures within the central message of Luke, and she found that for Luke, God’s revelation in Jesus “ultimately transforms prevalent ways of viewing the world, including conceptions of masculinity” (Wilson 2015:4).

Biblical interpretation of gender is not an innocent activity; it takes place in a political, social and cultural context that will suppress critical and new readings of biblical texts. However, there is no way we can avoid the challenge. We must enter into the discussion and read the texts in solidarity with those who are made invisible or who have no voice.

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