

Roles of women in the fourth gospel religion essay



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The voice of Raymond E. Brown concerning the Gospels, and especially the Fourth Gospel is an authoritative one. His bold and un-conventional opinions regarding the Gospels and Gospel studies have already made controversies chiefly among the conservative scholars. This article, " Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel" is another study of Brown which touches a hot " contemporary debate about the role of women in the Church and about the possibility of ordaining women to the priesthood." Though thirty six years have been passed after the publication of this article, still this is a ' contemporary' debate in the Catholic Church, though the Magisterium has " infallibly" declared the impossibility of women's ordination since it is " founded on the written Word of God, and from the beginning constantly preserved and applied in the tradition of the Church".

Brown begins his article stating the possibility of different approaches concerning the biblical evidences in this particular debate. One approach that he mentions is a general discussion of first-century ecclesiology found in the NT texts. But he asks whether such evidence " about the foundation of the Church and the institution of the sacraments..... is culturally conditioned?" The second approach he points out is the discussion of the explicit texts that " refer respectively to the equality and the subordination of women in society and cult." He bluntly states that he is not convinced of this discussion, since each text has a counter-text to support or deny. A third approach, that he wishes to follow is considering the general picture of women in the fourth Gospel, and in Johannine community. Before beginning the study he gives a general introduction to the Evangelist and his community. He highlights the peculiarity of the Johannine community,

namely the importance given to the following of Christ and obeying his word, rather than having “ special ecclesiastical charism from God”.

Brown starts his discussion saying that we do not have much information about “ church offices” in the fourth Gospel, and about “ women in church offices”. But he says the text of Martha serving at the table (diakonein) has a significance in the historical context (in the 90’s) when such a service had been already become a ministry of an “ ordained” person. Except for this one passage, Brown reminds, our discussion will be on “ the general position of women in the Johannine community”.

The story of the Samaritan woman is the first one to be discussed. Samaritan woman who perceives Jesus as Christ testifies this to others. The Evangelist’s comment that the Samaritan villagers believe because of the woman’s word (4, 39. 42: dia ton logon pisteuein), says Brown, is noteworthy because it occurs again in the “ priestly” prayer of Jesus for his disciples: “ I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word” (17, 20). Brown writes that the “ Evangelist can describe both a woman and disciples at he Last Supper as bearing witness to Jesus through preaching and thus bringing people to believe in him on the strength of their word”. Then the author deals with the dialogue between Jesus and the disciples soon after the leaving of the Samaritan woman and just before the coming of the Samaritans to Jesus because of what the woman has told them. The important terms like apostellein, to sow, and to reap in this passage are clear proof of the real missionary function of the Samaritan woman, Brown states. The story explicates that “ the woman has sown the seed and thus prepared for the apostolic harvest”.

Chapter 20 is another example given by Brown to explain that the evangelist gives a “ quasi-apostolic role to a woman”. Seeing the risen Christ is considered to be an integral part of the apostolate (1 Cor 9, 1-2; Gal 1, 11-16; 1 Cor 15, 5; Lk 24, 34). In the Fourth Gospel, it is a woman, Mary Magdalene who sees the risen Lord for the first time and is sent by the Lord himself to give the message to his “ brothers”. Brown notes that “ what she proclaims is the standard apostolic announcement of the Resurrection: I have seen the Lord.” She is the “ apostle to the apostles”.

In the story of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, the confession of Martha: “ You are the Christ, the Son of God” (11, 27) substitutes the supreme confession of Peter which is found in other gospels.

Considering the place of women in Johannine patterns, Brown makes another interesting observation. He notes that “ discipleship is the primary Christian category for John, and the disciple par excellence is the Disciple whom Jesus loved”. But in 11, 5 we see “ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” Another proof is given from Chapter 20 again, where Mary Magdalene recognizes the voice of her master. In an allegorical parable (10, 3-5) a disciple is like a sheep who recognizes the voice of its shepherd. Since the sheep are “ his own” (twice in 11, 3-5), it is clear that even woman can be in the “ same category of relationship to Jesus as the Twelve”.

The second part of the article is dedicated to another important “ woman” in the fourth Gospel, who is none other than the mother of Jesus. After explaining the tradition behind the miracle at Cana in detail, Brown indicates that the evangelist understands the role of the mother in relation to

discipleship. This point is clear from the second scene where she appears - at the foot of the cross (19, 25-27). There are two great symbolic figures whose personal names are never mentioned in the Gospel. The reason, says Brown, is that " their primary (not sole) importance is in their symbolism for discipleship rather than in their historical careers."

The women, in this Gospel, are " first-class" disciples by telling that Jesus loved Martha and Mary and that Mary Magdalene was one of " his own" sheep. The mother of Jesus is given a further important role. She shares with the Beloved Discipleship " an equal plane as part of Jesus' true family."

Brown is sure, after researching the evidence of the fourth Gospel, that the Johannine community valued the following of Christ and there was no difference male and female in that. To end the article, Raymond Brown writes: " but even John has left us with one curious note of incompleteness: the disciples, surprised at Jesus' openness with a woman, still did not dare to ask him, " What do you want of a woman?" (4: 27). That may well be a question whose time has come in the Church of Jesus Christ."

The Magisterium has " closed" any discussion on the possibility of ordaining women. But this article of Raymond E. Brown convinces his readers that there is still possibility of a discussion about the role of women in the Church as real " missionaries" and " apostles" to testify the risen Lord to the whole world. I may end my overview of this article with the words of Brown which he puts in one of his footnotes:

" At a time when we are engaged in a necessary debate as to who among the baptized can be ordained to priesthood or bishopric, it may be useful to

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remind ourselves that it remains more important to be baptized than to be ordained, more important to be a Christian than to be a priest, bishop, or pope.”