

FEMALE PROTOTYPES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Christina-Andreea MIȚARIU

Abstract: As in the Old and New Laws, women seem to have been repeatedly called to do God's will. Some of them manifested themselves as prophets, others as sinners converted after meeting the Savior, and others as true executors of the apostolic mission. But the most remarkable, noblest and holiest mission of all is fulfilled by the Blessed Virgin Mary, who would raise the human race to another level and restore to all mortals the chance of immortality.

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An extremely important first aspect in elucidating the role that women play in the New Testament is related to the fact that Jesus Christ Himself was born of the Virgin Mary. The testimony of Holy Scripture anticipates the Blessed Virgin and her mission in the birth of the Son of God. Certainly, the central place in the spectrum of female typologies illustrated in the New Testament is occupied by the Blessed Virgin Mary - Mother of God. She embodies the sum of all the qualities that could be found in a woman, brought to the superlative.

The covenant by which the Old Testament was established had no other purpose than to prepare and raise a holy humanity in the person of the great-granddaughter of King David, worthy of the descent of the Spirit upon her on the day of the Annunciation¹. Through her contribution, the Blessed Virgin Mary would transform the earth into the throne of God's glory. In fact, all that was promised in the Old Testament concerning the coming of the Savior was fulfilled. The reason for this testimony, contained in the Gospels, is to prove that the Lord was born "of the house and of the seed of David." The phrase "son of David" in the Holy Gospels shows the connection of the Savior Jesus Christ with Israel and the beginning of the Kingdom. His descent from David was necessary to be through the Virgin

¹ <https://revistaortodoxa.ro/?p=1206>.

Mary, who is also *"of the house and tribe of David."* This foreshadowing led the exegetes of the biblical text to find in the ancient Scriptures of Israel prophecies and typologies about the foreshadowing of the Mother of God, about Eve, about the Wisdom of God, and about the Bride in *the Song of Songs*. The acquisition of these prefigurations by the Christian Church of the first ages was very important in knowing the truth about the conception and birth of the Savior Christ and about the veneration of the Mother of God².

The first of the Old Testament symbols that prophesied the Mother of God is the **"ladder of Jacob."**³ This ladder, at the head of which is shown to the patriarch Jacob, in a dream, the Lord God of Abraham himself, was understood by the Holy Fathers as having at least two meanings: the descent of God into the earth through His Incarnation and the person through whom He will descend or he will incarnate, that is, the person of the Mother of God⁴. In the first sense, the messianic one, the dream of Jacob was confirmed by the Savior Himself: *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."* In the second sense, it should be noted that through the Incarnation, heaven and earth were united again, as they were prophetically united by the ladder of Jacob, thanks to the Mother of God, who gave her free and assumed consent to the fulfillment of this prophecy.

In the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary we find many of the valuable models of the Old Testament, but also of the New Testament or successive generations of Christian women who have proven throughout history to be true followers of her.

Although in the New Testament women occupy a special category, the Eastern society of the beginning of the first millennium being a strong patriarchal one, we still distinguish some female typologies whose voice and activity have not gone unnoticed.

As noted in many Old Testament historical periods, God has endowed many women with the gift of prophecy, thus communicating important messages through them. Such cases are also mentioned in the New Testament, in which the voice of the woman is heard by all the people: men and women, both contemporaries and living of the ages to come.

² IPS dr. IRINEU POPA, *Maica Domnului în iconomia mântuirii și preacinstirea ei în Biserica Ortodoxă*, curs de Istoria Dogmelor pentru anul II Master, Facultatea de Teologie din Craiova, 2014, p. 1-2.

³ Genesis 28, 12.

⁴ Ev. af. John I, 51.

One of these is the prophetess Anna, who recognized the identity of the Savior when He was only a few days old. Moreover, she would proclaim the messianic work:

“And there was a prophetess, Hannah the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old and had lived with her husband seven years after her virginity. Remaining a widow and being eighty-four years old, Hannah was not far from the Temple, and she served him day and night. She also came at the same hour and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to all who were waiting for the salvation of Jerusalem.”⁵

Another example of prophecy from a woman is found in St. Elizabeth, the mother of the last prophet, John the Baptist, who, when he meets the Blessed Virgin, addresses her:

“She cried out with a loud voice, Blessed are you! among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. How did the mother of my Lord come to me?”⁶

Through the mouth of the prophet Joel, God Himself promised that when He poured out the Grace of His Holy Spirit, both the sons and daughters of Israel would prophesy:

“After that I will pour out my Spirit on every creature; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions”⁷.

In Acts 21: 8-9, we are told that Philip the evangelist had four daughters who were prophets:

“The next day I left and went to Caesarea. I went into the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and lodged there. He had four virgin daughters who prophesied”⁸.

Even Paul - the Apostle of the Gentiles - wrote about women prophesying in church meetings, thus strengthening posterity's belief that the role of women was not neglected at all, but that they were given uplifting missions when necessary. The fact that they could prophesy to men in the

⁵ Luca 2, 36-38, <https://biblia.resursecrestine.ro/luca/2>.

⁶ Luca 1, 42-43, http://www.mesagerul-crestin.net/CB_NT/HTM/Luca_1_39_56.htm.

⁷ Ioel 2, 28, <https://biblia.resursecrestine.ro/ioel/2/28>.

⁸ Fapte 21, 8-9, <https://biblia.resursecrestine.ro/faptele-apostolilor/21>.

name of God contradicts the notion that the woman was somehow seen as a secondary creature, with no major duties other than family / household.

We wonder if they can perform other kinds of "works" outside the mission of prophecy (when called by God)? Paul mentions in **Romans 16** a series of women who served in the ministry for the sake of the Kingdom of God. One of them is Fivi, designated as "deaconess of the Church of Chencrea" and "a helper for many", including him. Another is Priscilla, who together with her husband Aquila was doing a work appreciated by all the churches among the Gentiles. When he praises those who served as exemplary in the noble cause of Christ's ministry, Paul mentions Mary, Andronicus, and Junias, whom he identifies as his relatives and fellow prisoners, "who are prominent among the apostles."

They gained their leading place, including chronological reasons, by devoting their lives to Christ, even before the Apostle Paul. The fact that Iunia is designated as a prominent person among the apostles leads us to conclude that she herself was an apostle.

Others, even if they did not enjoy such a high rank, are mentioned as "weary" in the holy work. Thus, St. Paul urges the faithful to pray for the health of Tryphena and Tryphos, the beloved Persia, Rufus and his mother, Philologist and Julia, Mereu and his sister⁹. From all this list of names, it is very clear that women can be spiritual "workers" as well as men.

Following the same line, we might wonder if women-teachers also somehow appear in the Holy Scriptures. Unfortunately, the New Testament does not explicitly mention any, but it is not out of the question for some of them to assist their husbands in the work of education. This could be the case of Priscilla, who could be the help of her husband Aquila, "in the church that gathers in their house."

But we cannot ignore the passage in which Paul tells women to be silent in the congregation and forbids them to teach men:

*"Let the women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but to be obedient, as the law saith. If they want to learn something, ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for a woman to speak in the church."*¹⁰

The fact that this warning contradicts another of his statements in Galatians gives us food for thought: *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there*

⁹ Romans 16, 8-15.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 14, 34-35 cf. <https://www.resursecrestine.ro/predici/39920/femeia-proorocia-si-rugaciunea-in-public>.

is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"¹¹. The abolition of social, cultural and gender barriers is thus annulled, thus returning to the old differentiations.

But we must look at this "inconsistency" in the light of those times and those religious realities of the substratum. It is, in fact, about two Churches that St. Paul founded and in which he personally spent years as a pastor and teacher: Corinth and Ephesus. In both, there were temples dedicated to female deities (Aphrodite and Artemis), related to the cult of fertility, with hundreds of "priestesses" who were de facto some kind of prostitutes of the temple. Those who had carnal relations with them were believed to be fertile for fields, herds, and families. Thus, in these two cities, women played an essential part in the act of worship. The interference of Christian women in this cultic situation was delicate. One possible explanation could be that women's participation in the life of the Church could easily have become immoral.

But what totally contradicts this prohibition is that at the resurrection of the Savior, an angel delegated at least three women to teach the disciples of Jesus Christ, who were men. These women were instructed and commissioned to tell the apostles that Jesus Christ had risen and would meet them in Galilee. As a reinforcement of this assignment, Jesus Christ Himself appeared to some women and commanded them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee. It is certainly not accidental or unimportant that the Savior chose to appear first to women and only then to men. Second, if it had been wrong or immoral for women to bring the news of His Resurrection to the disciples — a matter of the utmost importance — they would not have resorted to it. We can conclude that the Son of God Himself, as the supreme authority, instructed women to teach men an essential truth and to give them some spiritual guidance in certain circumstances, so what could be more important?

Luke tells us about women who were healed of evil spirits and infirmities and who followed the Lord with the twelve disciples:

*“And there were also women who had been healed of evil spirits and diseases: Mary, said Magdalene, from whom seven devils had come out, Joanna, Cuzah's wife, Herod's steward, Susanna, and many others, who helped him with what they had”*¹².

¹¹ Galatians 3, 28 cf <https://biblia.resursecrestine.ro/galatani/3>.

¹² Luca 8, 2-3, <https://biblia.resursecrestine.ro/luca/8>.

The fact that women were allowed to follow the Savior and to serve them both with the apostles clearly shows that they were encouraged to participate in the "great work" and were considered worthy of such service and able to perform it.

A differentiation of female typologies can also be noticed when Jesus Christ enters the house of Lazarus and his sisters in Bethany. One of the two women, namely Martha, received the Lord and served Him as a caring host, while her sister, Mary, saw a much more pronounced spiritual inclination than her sister, without participating in the organizational preparations for the visit. We are told that she stood at His feet and listened to His words.

We find the model of the sensitive and empathetic woman especially in the tragic moments that precede the Crucifixion of the Savior, during this painful process and after His death and the preparation for burial.

We mention here Saint Veronica, who was miraculously healed by the Savior of a female disease that had plagued her for twelve years. According to a Western tradition, she was the woman who wiped the sorrowful face of Jesus Christ with a grudge as he was taken to Golgotha.

The image of Christ would have remained imprinted on the towel, which was later considered *"the first icon not made by human hands"*¹³. The Lord's encounter with myrrh-bearing women is recounted by St. Luke the Evangelist: And Jesus turned, and said unto them,

*"Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for your children, and for your children. For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck"*¹⁴.

We see the same empathy here.

Among the women who accompanied the Blessed Virgin Mary were Mary Magdalene, Mary - the mother of James and Joseph - and the mother of the children of Zebedee and the other Mary, the wife of Cleopas. Another Myrrh-bearing Woman is Susanna, remembered by the Evangelist Luke, and who followed the way of the Cross, being with Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary of James (Luke 24:10). Women were in many ways more daring than men. They were not afraid to accompany the Lord to the end, nor to show compassion and solidarity with His Most Holy Mother.

As for the women who stood near the Cross and at the tomb of the Lord, Saint John Chrysostom says with his specific eloquence:

¹³ <https://www.crestinortodox.ro/sfinti/sfanta-veronica-125462.html>.

¹⁴ Luca 23, 28-29, <https://biblia.resursecrestine.ro/luca/23/27>.

“The women watched what was happening; the women who had suffered with Him, who had wept for Him. Look how great their perseverance is! They followed him in serving Him and were present in the midst of danger. That’s why they saw everything: how he shouted, how he gave his soul, how the stones and everything else split. And they were the first to see the resurrected Jesus; and this damned woman, this man, was the first to enjoy the sight of goodness; this female race showed manhood (andreaia); the disciples fled, but the women remained”¹⁵.

Let us not forget that on the Cross, Jesus Christ said to the beloved disciple, *“Behold, your mother.”* This is the testament that the Savior leaves at the last moment of earthly life. We see here His care as a son for his mother, but also the chance he gives to an ordinary mortal to enjoy the status of His brother.

Saint John Chrysostom proved to be a fine connoisseur of the *“feminine tagma”* found in the pages of Scripture. Of the New Testament female figures, he most loved the widow who threw her last two pennies into the temple gift box (Luke 21: 1-4); it is the perfect model that the Holy Father had in his heart - almsgiving and devotion to the earthly¹⁶.

Of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well, St. John Chrysostom states:

“See the righteous judgment of the woman (...), how is she led, slowly, to the highest teachings?”¹⁷

The Holy Father admires her reluctance:

“Of her own free will, without anyone commanding her, she lowers her vessel with water and, fluttering with joy, performs evangelical service.”¹⁸

By evoking all these feminine typologies, different and yet similar in certain features, we see the complexity of the woman and the fact that, beyond all her weaknesses, the woman is a being capable of spiritual ascension, of fulfilling missions of unsuspected magnitude.

It is not the desire to match the man that should concern the woman, but the desire to find her own way, to reach her maximum potential without

¹⁵ cf. David C. Ford, *Bărbatul și femeia în viziunea Sfântului Ioan Gură de Aur*, Ed. Sophia, București, 2004, p. 189.

¹⁶ *idem*, p. 186.

¹⁷ Commentary on the Gospel of John, Homily XXXII, PNP 1, XIV, p. 112.

¹⁸ Commentary on the Gospel of John, Homily XXXII, PNP 1, XIV, p. 118.

comparison. Probably not in competition with the man (a sterile and useless competition, by the way) should look for its purpose and the way to salvation, but with him, cooperating.

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NOTES ON THE AUTHOR

Assoc. Prof. Dr. **Christina-Andreea MIȚARIU**

Univ. Christian "Dimitrie Cantemir" Bucharest, Faculty of Management in Tourism, Trade and Services Timisoara. christinamitaru@yahoo.com.