

The mission of women in the bible: a feminist perspective of the study of Scripture in the African context

A missão das mulheres na Bíblia: uma perspectiva feminista do estudo das Escrituras no contexto africano

Nadi Maria de Almeida
Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná - Brasil

Abstract

This article presents the effort of African women theologians in the work of study and interpretation of the Bible in the African setting, showing the mission of women in the Scriptures and their relationship with Jesus as the liberator. It considers their views of Christology, in terms of, Christ's relation to women. It mainly explores the work of Theresa Okure and Mercy Oduyoye, on the question of how African women theologians reread and reinterpret the Bible and the main differences from men's perspective and interpretation. Thus, it analyses women's contribution to biblical-theological studies, which makes a difference for the Church, and Society concerning God's creation. To answer this question and fulfill the objectives, the work first considers women in the Old Testament, and then in the New Testament, it ends by focusing on how African women see and experience Jesus Christ in their daily lives in their context. It concludes that African women theologians have made great contributions since long ago and challenged theological studies, the Church, and society by their prophetic way of studying and reinterpretation of the Sacred Scriptures connecting with reality and pointing out matters, that were previously overlooked and neglected.

Keywords

Africa.
Mission.
Women.
Interpretation.
Bible.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta o esforço de mulheres teólogas africanas no trabalho de estudo e interpretação da Bíblia no cenário africano, mostrando a missão das mulheres nas Sagradas Escrituras e sua relação com Jesus como libertador. Considera suas visões cristológicas, em termos da relação de Cristo com as mulheres. Explora principalmente o trabalho de Theresa Okure e Mercy Oduyoye, sobre a questão de como as mulheres teólogas africanas releem e reinterpretam a Bíblia e suas principais diferenças da perspectiva e interpretação dos homens. Assim, a pesquisa analisa a contribuição das mulheres para os estudos bíblico-teológicos, que fazem a diferença para a Igreja e a Sociedade em relação à criação Divina. Para responder à questão e cumprir os objetivos, o trabalho aborda primeiro as mulheres no Antigo Testamento e depois no Novo Testamento, e, por último, foca em como as mulheres africanas veem e vivenciam Jesus Cristo em suas vidas diárias e contexto. Conclui-se que as teólogas africanas têm feito grandes contribuições há muito tempo e desafiado os estudos teológicos, a Igreja e a sociedade com sua maneira profética de estudar e reinterpretar as Sagradas Escrituras, conectando-as com a realidade, apontando questões que antes eram negligenciadas e ignoradas.

Palavras-chave

África.
Missão.
Mulheres.
Interpretação.
Bíblia.

Introduction

The topic concerning the mission of women in the Bible, by the interpretation of African women theologians, arises because of the great contribution that those women had made and that need to be well known and acknowledged. Though the women have greatly contributed to the spread of the Good News, they are still given a limited and in significant role in the ecclesial decision-making processes and the academic theological field, they are not much considered. Moreover, women theologians and writers escolar shave great contributions, especially in the study, and interpretation of the Scriptures.

This work analyses the understanding of women in the Bible, done by women. It also considers their views of Christology in terms of Jesus Christ's relation to women and their experience and relation with Jesus Christ. Presents the contribution of African women theologians to the study of Scripture in the African context. It will deal with their feminist perspective on

the role and mission of women in the Bible. First, it considered women in the Old Testament, and then in the New Testament, and it ends by focusing on how African women see and experience Jesus Christ in their daily lives in the African setting.

The research is based on the written work of African women theologians, especially on works of Theresa Okure (from Nigeria), and Mercy Oduyoye (from Ghana). They are very professional, competent writers with high experience in the Bible and fieldwork with their people. They also have passion, dedication, and capacity for dialogue with cultures, religions, and men as they focus on mission as the mission of God (*Missio Dei*). The research especially looks at their understanding of women in the Bible and considers their views of Christology in terms of Jesus Christ's relation to women and their experience and relation with Jesus Christ in African continent.

Women in the Old Testament

Both Mercy Oduyoye and Theresa Okure reread the Bible by reflecting on their real situation and experiences. Therefore, it is from a woman's perspective that they interpret the Bible stories on the role and contribution of women in the Old Testament and the relevance of their ministry for African women today.

Since the Bible as God's Word is expressed in the language of sinful and limited human beings, the divine and human standpoint permeates every biblical narrative. This fact needs to be discerned (Okure, 2000). For that reason, women biblical scholars and theologians, hold that in our reading of the Bible we need to consider both the divine and the human points of view and take into consideration the cultural context, because the context, in which the Bible was written, viewed women as lower-class citizen. However, it is clear that this is not God's perception (Okure, 2000).

According to Theresa Okure (2000), the Old Testament reflects a culture where only man had legal rights and obligations. Therefore, the picture of women in the Bible is complex. In certain instances, women are viewed positively; however, the negative image dominates the Bible. This negative image originates from sinful humanity and not from God's will.

Consequently, Theresa Okure (2000) says that when interpret biblical stories about women there are need to discern between what is from God and what is from the limited, even sinful, human culture.

Scholars say that the contribution of women in the Bible was either left out or played down. For instance, God is called the God of our fathers “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”, but not the God of our mothers Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. Yet in Ruth 4,11, we read “Rachael and Leah are called ‘the women who together build up the house of Israel’. They were the mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel” (Okure, 2000, p. 9).

Genesis 1,26-27 reports that God created male and female in the divine image and likeness. We see that sexuality is a gift of God to each human being, however, humans fix gender roles, and they can be unfair and discriminative. For example, the stories of Eve, the creation and the fall, have been used as the divine norm for determining the role and status of women in the Church and society. One interpretation is that the fall is the fault of women alone. However, what we see in Genesis is God personally giving to Adam the command not to eat the forbidden fruit even before the creation of the woman. Moreover, after the fall, God looked for Adam and asked what he had done, but Adam is ashamed and starts blaming the woman and God. He says: “The woman you put with me [...]”. God punishes both man and woman for their sinful act. However, “Adam’s punishment affected not only him but also the earth: ‘cursed be the soil because of you’ (Gn 3,17-18), whereas the woman’s punishment was restricted to her personally” (Okure, 2000, p. 13-14). All of this is based on misreading of the Genesis accounts of creation and the fall (Gn 1,26-2,4a; 2,4b-4,2; 5,1-2) (Okure, 1988, p. 48-49). “Such belief arises, from socio-cultural practices of the sinful world in which the biblical authors and their subsequent interpreters lived” (Okure, 1988, p. 49).

Theresa Okure starts talking about the mission of women in the Bible by referring to Eve as being the mother of all human beings. Life comes from God, and women play a role through bearing, bringing forth and nurturing life. Hence, “it is the woman’s special charisma from God, to be covenanted with life. The woman, as a mother, provides the womb and the body from which

for nine months every human being first draws life” (Okure, 1989, p. 364). The woman experience right from conception this sense of fostering and nurturing, and the intimate relationship to life, and the child experiences everything that the mother experiences.

Throughout the Bible we see that women serve as God’s co-workers and agents of life. God created women to be mothers of all the living and involved them in the activity of giving, preserving and redeeming life. For instance, Rebecca secured a paternal blessing for Jacob. The group of Egyptian women midwives worked in preserving life. The mother and sister of Moses hid him; Pharaoh’s daughter, unlike her father, was moved with pity for the Hebrew boy, (cf. Ex 1,15-2,10). Later Moses’ wife played an indispensable role in preserving life. Theresa Okure states: “Without the concerted effort and teamwork of these illustrious women, Moses would never have survived as a child, and later been spared by God. Because of them, he has become a great figure in Jewish history and the greatest prophet of the OT.” Women cooperated with God throughout the history of salvation; Theresa Okure writes that “in all instances God manifests a deep respect for women by treating them as individuals in their own right; God deals directly with them instead of first passing through their husbands” (Okure, 1988, p. 53).

In the Old Testament God takes women into his confidence, for instance, Sarah ensures the inheritance of Isaac over Ismael, Abraham’s first-born. In the story, God takes the part of Sarah without neglecting Hagar and God told Rebecca that her young son would rule over the older and she believes and took measures to ensure that the will of God would be done (cf. Gn 25,19-26). A time when the people of Israel were without hope, when all hope of the people of Israel has gone, Deborah emerges as a judge, a prophet and a successful political leader. Theresa Okure reminds us that

Women who aspire to take part in civilian politics may study her as a model and draw inspiration from her, and men who dislike women taking part in politics may also remember that in a culture as heavily patriarchal as the Jewish biblical one, a woman ruled Israel and was followed by men (Okure, 2000, p. 14).

Another example of faith is that of Ruth whose love transcends all tribal, ethnic, religious and national barriers. She is a very committed woman

and is one of the ancestors of Jesus (cf. Mt 1,5). Judith and Esther are other examples of faith. These women emerged in the period after the Exile. Judith risked her life to save her nation, and Esther prayed to God to save her people and to use her as an instrument of liberation. Therefore, African women's way of interpreting the Bible stems from their context and their life experience of God who empowers the life of women in the Bible.

Moreover, the concern of African women theologians is to create awareness first of all, among women about women's issues. They show that God created women with a dignity equal to that of man, in his own image and likeness. They acknowledge the need for African women to engage in theological education and to facilitate Bible studies and reflection on issues that affect them. Since no oppressive element can be attributed to God's will, there can be only one explanation for the situation of oppression found in the Bible: it was written by men in a patriarchal Jewish society and for centuries it was interpreted exclusively by men in a way that favors their patriarchal mentality (Okure, p. 1988, 54-58).

Women in the New Testament

In the New Testament women participate in a wide variety of ministries including leadership in the early Church. The writings of Theresa Okure, Mercy Oduyoye, and other African women theologians show clearly that women disciples and missionaries are present and active in the New Testament.

First, let us see the practical exercise of reading the Bible as proposed by Theresa Okure to discover the presence, and the contribution of women in the New Testament. The author said that one way to do it is by being attentive to what women are doing concretely with their influence at field work and to the way each one of them are portrayed. She states:

There are for instance, women disciples of Jesus, women prophets (Acts 21:10), Church workers (Rom. 16:1-16); women preachers of the word (Acts 18:1-19:14-18; Phil 4:1-3), pastors in their house Churches (Acts 12:12; 16:11-15, 40; Rom. 16:3-5), women with special vocations (Acts 9:36-43); and a renowned woman deacon (Rom 16:1-2) (Okure, 2000, p. 16).

Theresa Okure (2000) affirms that such an exercise will surprise us when seeing how precious and important are the contribution of women in the Bible is and how much they contribute to the spread the Good News in the world.

According to Mercy Oduyoye (2008), it is in Luke that we find the most examples of women as participants and actors in the life, ministry and parables of Jesus. Moreover, women theologians call attention to the Virgin Mary whose revolutionary ethic risked social exclusion in order to collaborate with God in His mission of salvation. God asked for Mary's consent to be the mother of His own Son and waited for her reply (cf. Lk. 1,26-38). The next person to know this great news was Elizabeth and not Joseph, her intended spouse (Oduyoye, 2008, p. 82-83).

The Incarnation, the greatest event of human history, shows us that God chose to consider a woman, Mary of Nazareth, worthy of his confidence and as his partner in bringing about this event. Mary was chosen, not to be a surrogate mother of Jesus, but to be his biological mother by the power of the Holy Spirit. Her greatness lies in her believing that she could become a mother without normal human intercourse, relying only in God's word. Elizabeth was the first to recognize and praise Mary's faith, and believe that a human impossibility was possible by God. The prophet Isaiah (52,7) says how beautiful the feet of the one who brings Good News are. Thus, "Mary was the first evangelist, bringing the Good News of Jesus to Elizabeth" (Oduyoye, 2008, p. 81), and to the world. Mary's example challenges us as Jesus' sisters and brothers to live up to our Christian vocation by listening God's word, putting it into practice, and proclaiming it to others.

Mary and Martha's relationship with Jesus is a favorite study for African women theologians. They explore this relationship in the areas of hospitality, choosing of the better part and their trust in the power of Jesus. There are two events in the Bible where their intimate relationship with Jesus is presented: the visitation of Jesus to their home and the raising of their brother to life. "If you were here our brother would not have died" (Jo 11,21), shows that Jesus was for them the source of life. Oduyoye says that these two women "stories of the Gospel have become more or less 'the Bible'

of Church women and women theologians” (Oduyoye, 2008, p. 83). The author also states that Jesus believes in women sufficiently to reveal himself first to them. For instance, the Samaritan woman received a startling revelation when Jesus reveals himself to her: “I am he, the one who is speaking with you” (Jn 4,25). She went straight to spread the Good News of her encounter with Jesus to her neighbors. Hence, we see how Jesus related with women as human beings, treating them with dignity, respect and trust.

Luke clearly presents women accompanying Jesus from Galilee throughout his life. They do not abandon Jesus at his crucial time, on the way to Calvary, and at the moment of his death on the cross (Oduyoye, 2008, p. 86-87). At the foot of the cross we see the caring presence of the Virgin Mary, Mary of Clopas and Mary of Magdala (John 19,25). They dare to get close to Jesus and be with Him. Surely only a great love could move those women to such courageous actions.

In the Gospel of Mark, there were a number of women watching Jesus on the cross. They were there all the time and they saw where they laid him. Afterwards, they prepared spices and perfume and came back to anoint His body. They received the Good News that Jesus had risen from the dead. As well, the women were then, sent on mission to announce this Good News to the disciples.

Moreover, in the crucial event of the resurrection, Jesus chooses a woman to carry the Good News to others. Mercy Oduyoye wonders: “why Jesus gave the burden message to women, knowing well that the tradition was against them and that their witness carried little weight in the courts” (Oduyoye, 2008, p. 89). Besides, the women’s perception in faith is quite receptive. Instead the disciples doubt at first, since the story of the resurrection seemed to them nonsense. For instance, the disciples of Emmaus knew that the women had seen the Lord, but they did not believe and run away for fear. Only after Jesus had broken the bread with them did they came to recognise him and believe (Oduyoye, 2008, p. 88-89).

The Gospel of John presents us with a remarkable action of a woman: Mary’s anointing of the feet of Jesus. Judas complains about it, saying that the money should be given to the poor. On the contrary, Jesus praises her

action as the highest act of love, and says that this deed would be remembered throughout all generations, whenever the Gospel is proclaimed. In an analogous way, Jesus says that the imitation of his gesture of service, experienced in the Eucharist, is the memorial of his self-giving (Mk 14,9; Mt 26,13 and Lk 22, 19). Theresa Okure (2000, p. 18-19) states that, Jesus “himself is inspired by the anointing in Bethany to do the same to his disciples at the Last Supper, a few days later.” When the mother of John and James pleaded on behalf of her sons, Mercy Oduyoye (2008, p. 85) sees it as showing that she was more intimate with Jesus than her sons.

In the Gospels, many times Jesus tells stories using the example of the action of women, for instance, in the case of the woman who lost a precious pearl, searched the entire house to find it, and shared her joy with others after she had found it. In the farewell discourses in John’s Gospel, Jesus compares the situation of his disciples to that of a woman in labour pain. Mercy Oduyoye agrees that the feminine figures of speech are not very many, yet what we have there is deep, significant, and unforgettable (Oduyoye, 2008, p. 86).

Thus, in the four Gospels we see women being very close to Jesus. Mary Magdala did not leave without making sure that nothing untoward, happened to the body of Jesus. She was rewarded with a personal encounter with him. Her deep love and faithfulness immortalised her memory. All who tell the event of the resurrection point to her as the key witness (Oduyoye, 2008, p. 89).

The Gospels shows Jesus as being a friend of women, accepting their service and discipleship. He recognised that they are able to transmit great love by listening to and proclaiming the Good News. Also Jesus “rendered them service, teaching them, healing them, waking up their dead, saving them from exploitation and victimisation” (Oduyoye, 2008, p. 83). Jesus praises the widow’s offering who has given all she had. He understood the compassionate and caring role of women who always anticipate people’s needs. Hence, Okure is right when she says that “Jesus did not have to call the women because they were already there” (Okure, 1993, p. 6).

The letters of St. Paul provide the earliest canonical evidence for women's involvement in Christian mission. "Paul speaks of them as co-workers with God (1Cor 3,9; 1Thes 3,2), co-workers in Christ (Rom 16,3, 9)" (Reid, 1998, p 480). In the letter to the Rom.16, one third of Paul's greetings are to women (Reid, 1998, p. 482). For instance, he greets Julia and Nereu's sister and sees the care of Rufus's mother as being mother-like towards him. There is a recommendation for Phoebe, who was a "deaconess" at the Church at Cenchreae. "That she is in need of a letter of introduction to another community attests that she was a traveling missionary, much like Paul himself" (Reid, 1998, p. 481). In the letter to Philemon, Paul also sends greetings to Apphia, "our sister" (Philm 2). Thus, it means that these women had played an important role in the community, since Paul publicly recognised them.

There are also a number of passages in which Paul speaks about women in an egalitarian way. In Gal 3,28, he states that "there is no male and female; for you are one in Christ Jesus". In 1Cor 7,3-5, he endorses the equality between husband and wife, by asserting that each one has their duty towards the other. In 1Cor 11,11-12 he writes, "Woman is not independent of man or man of woman in the Lord. For just as woman comes from man, so man is born of woman; but all things are from God." This means there cannot be reasons for superiority or inferiority, only God is above us (Reid, 1998, p. 483).

Theresa Okure affirms that today we need inspired leaders like Paul who led the mission to the Gentiles, who, basing himself on the scriptural reading about the promise of Abraham (Gal. 3,16-18), persuaded the apostles to accept the mission to the gentiles. On the same scriptural ground he demonstrated convincingly that the practice of excluding women from ministry is opposed to the expressed will of God revealed in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ (Okure, 1988, p. 54-55).

The Bible embodies extensive liberating elements with respect to women. Okure says that "to continue to exclude women from certain Christian ministries on the basis of reason inspired by outmoded Jewish taboos is to render null and void the liberation that Jesus won for us, (Gal. 3,26-28)"

(Okure, 1988, p. 54-55). Hence, there is an urgent need to consider the interpretation of scriptures from feminist perspective.

In synthesis, Theresa Okure and Mercy Oduyoye help us to reinterpret the stories of women in the Bible with new eyes, ears and heart. Their contributions present the important roles that women played in the Bible as God's co-workers - a role that for years has not been given adequate attention by male Scripture scholars. Theresa Okure asserts the indispensable role of women when she states that "without them there would not have been Moses, leader of the chosen People in the Old Testament, or Jesus, the Son of God, Son of Mary and the saviour of the world (Jn 4,42)" (Okure, 2000, p. 20).

Christ and African Women's Experience

Concerning Christology and the way African women relate to and experience Jesus Christ, Theresa Okure (1989, p. 366), says: "We read in the Scripture that God sent forth his Son, born of a woman' (Gal. 4,4); so we discover the meaning of being a human being in Jesus. So it is in Christ that we can and must endeavor to realise our vocation to be human." This means that in Christ, African women find their liberation, their dignity as daughters of God. For Christian African women, Jesus Christ is the only valid standpoint, from which they can correctly view life, culture, development, and appreciate all people as equals. It is in Jesus that they can get strength to stand firm in fight for their rights.

By being faithful to their vocation, African women are able to see things through the eyes of Jesus. Therefore, they engage in an inclusive mission where treat equally male and female. They act as Jesus would act today among the people where they engage in mission. Jesus enables them to work for the transformation of culture and to participate actively in God's mission that is working for the transformation of people's lives. This means being committed to truth and to the liberation from all kinds of oppression (Okure, 1989, p. 367).

Elizabeth Amoah, a Ghanaian with a doctorate in religious studies, and Mercy Oduyoye remind us that, even though male theologians authored most of the published studies on Christ, today there are many reflections done by

women that need to be considerate. Women see Jesus as influencing society positively. Their faith perception of the cross makes them admire what Jesus has done for humanity. From his example, they get strength for their struggle for liberation (Amoah; Oduyoye, 1988, p. 41-42).

Thérèse Songa, an African theologian from Cameroon states: “The realism of the cross everyday tells me as a woman of the Third World that the laws of history can be overcome by means of crucified love.” (Songa, 1988, p. 22). Jesus is the one who transcends and transforms cultures and liberates African women (Amoah; Oduyoye, 1988, p. 43). He recognised and promoted the integrity of women both bodily and spiritually.

For African women, Jesus is the saviour and the liberator of all women and men from any kind of prejudice and authoritarianism against women. Theresa Okure makes it clear that both “women and men need liberation, woman from subjection and oppression, and men from their evil tendency to lord it over women and treat them as inferior, a tendency that is fundamentally unchristian (cf. Phil. 2,1-12)” (Okure, 1988, p. 56). Thus, African women put all their trust and hope in Christ who is their friend and companion and who frees them from the oppressions of patriarchal societies (Amoah; Oduyoye, 1988, p. 45).

African women are becoming more aware of the uniqueness of the message of the Gospel and the hope it holds for them. They began to understand how this message relates also to their everyday life. They are, thus, encouraged to reject systems, practices and customs in the society, in the Church and in their culture that diminishes their dignity as God’s children. For African women the Gospel is not a message addressed only to them, but also to their community, where together they have to interpret it so as to find meaning for their communal life. In this way, the experience of Christ brings a fruitful renewal to them and to the whole community, and consequently it brings hope and change in society.

African women theologians see Jesus as the one who came and changed the pyramidal structure of society, and transformed it into a circular one. In Him, we are all equal, daughters and sons of the same Father. Hence, there is

no more division of race, gender, and culture. As it is stated in Gal 3,28, Col 3,11 and Jn 15,1-8, we are all one in Christ.

Unfortunately, today according to Theresa Okure, we are back in the pyramidal stage. We are betraying the New Covenant, made by Christ, because of the hierarchy of the Church, of social class, and of their increasing gap between those developed and those who are not. Thus, she says that women's experience of Christ helps them in their mission as women to restore the circle of the new creation in Christ (Okure, 1989, p. 368).

Jesus gave special attention to women and was very sensitive to their situation delivering them from physical, moral and spiritual miseries. He established friendships with women, revealed himself to them, and made women the first messengers of his resurrection. This is exactly what African women are experiencing in their relationship with Christ. They sense that Christ is one who is with them in their daily situations, liberating and giving them attention, listening to them and strengthening them in their mission as women on earth.

Louise Tappa, a protestant theologian from Cameroon, states that the Jesus of African women is defined by his mission of liberation (cf. Lk 4,18-19). About contextualization, she holds that today it is impossible for an African theology to prosper unless both the church and theology in Africa starts from, and develop the situation of women in the African context and reality (Songa, 1988. p. 33).

Isabel Phiri underlines that throughout the years the Bible has been interpreted by male theologians who tended to belittle women or present them negatively. For African women, Jesus Christ is their consoler and liberator. They find meaning in life through a relationship with Jesus Christ, whose message is found in the Bible. The same Bible read from women's perspective is used to argue for the liberation of both women and men in the Church, because in the Gospel they find the liberation of human race from all enslavements (Phiri, 2009, p. 74).

In Jesus, women experience a God who is love and forgives sins, and a prophet who challenges oppression and hypocrisy. Women see and feel themselves as being in the image of God even if sexism denies their dignity

(Oduyoye, 1997, p. 495). Thus, Oduyoye writes: “Despite sexism making it difficult for women to experience God in the Church, women have nevertheless witnessed to their experience of God in Christ, the one who brings salvation” (Oduyoye, 1997, p. 495).

Rereading Scriptures, especially the stories of women in the Bible, has brought a new vision and experience of God and brought Him close to them. Hence, women who have a deep awareness of being made in the image of God, see him in the faces of the poor, the oppressed and the needy suffering in Africa. So by experience the love of God, women are able to express what is proper to them by nature; the caring tenderness and compassionate love of God that easily communicated by them to others.

Furthermore, African women’s Christology derives from the relationship of women with Jesus as narrated in the Gospel. Jesus brought liberation from all forms of oppression. Therefore, women in relating with him find their human dignity enhanced and they feel strengthened to reject and fight against all kinds of exploitation, to speak out against subordination and exclusion, and to challenge the Church and society regarding injustice and oppressive structures. Empowered by their experience of Christ, women are helping the Church to wake up and be more inclusive. They become aware and convinced of the truth that in God’s heart there is space for everyone equally, and that we are all His children.

African women also experience Jesus as healer, curing their wounds and enhancing their dignity. So that, they are able to stand up and help their brothers, also to experience a God who does not discriminate, and who has created all human beings with the same dignity. God creates women and men to live side-by side, cooperating with each other and being happy in the same family.

Additionally, the Christ whom African women worship and honour, is the victorious Christ, the liberator who frees them from the enslavement of disease, and all kinds of taboos, and ideologies against women, racism, poverty and sexism. Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Oduyoye (1988, p. 44) states: “Christ for us is the Jesus of Nazareth, the servant who washed the disciples, feet, the Good Shepherd who leads us only to ‘green pastures’, to the

Kingdom of God, who in fact comes after us to draw us back to God.” Mercy Oduyoye goes on describing Christ for African women as the one who is ready to help in all their needs and the one who frees them from fears of physical death. He gave his life for them and teaches them that the true sacrifice is that which is freely made in response to God’s love.

Moreover, Christ approves all that is noble, motivated by love and gratitude. Women have by nature these gifts of tenderness, love, and care, because as mothers, sisters, daughters, friends and faithful neighbours, they in their actions know how to combine mind and heart. Christ ensures the dignity and integrity of every woman born in any particular culture as a person and as a daughter of God belonging to the community of Christ. In the Gospel Jesus interacts and deals with women and with all excluded people from the community: sinners, sick, handicapped and so on. He denounces oppressive practices of religious regimes that ignore the well-being of the poor and needy. Mercy Oduyoye affirms that for African women Christ has become their saviour and liberator, helping them integrates body and soul and realise fully their dignity as daughters of his own Father.

In synthesis, we have seen that Christ’s message is always one of hope, liberation and love. It inspires African women to continue understanding the Christian faith in their challenging social and ecclesial situations. “Christ is in solidarity with African women for they incarnate the suffering of the African people” (Tappa, 1988, p. 33).

Mercy Oduyoye and Theresa Okure reinterpret the Bible by presenting the significant mission of women in the Bible both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. The feminist reading of the Bible offers a great contribution to the Church, as it liberates women and men; the former from their ignorance that they are made different in dignity from men, and the latter from their domination over women. Finally, we have given a Christological presentation from the perspective of African feminist theologians, especially Mercy Oduyoye and Theresa Okure, on how African women experience Christ in their lives. The work could continue giving an analyzing to women contribution on ecclesiology, ecumenism, inter religious

dialogue, justice and peace, and integrity of creation, thus, a work for farther research.

Final Remarks

This analysis helped us know more about the contribution that African women theologians made and are making to the mission of the Church in Africa with their prophetic voices by reinterpreting the Bible and questioning and challenging the society's and Church's attitudes and behaviour towards women. Women's work is truly connected to God's mission since it helps and challenges the traditional theology's interpretation of the Bible to get two wings and broaden its vision. The women's interpretation of the Scriptures is inclusive and holistic, since it touches all aspects of the real lives of people and the situation of the contemporary world.

Women theologians have a good understanding of the reality of people because they do theology and reread the Bible from within their concrete situations and from the reality of people's lives. They are usually good listener and easily share life with their struggles with the poor and the oppressed looking for liberation and the promotion of human dignity. Besides, they easily understand the situation of the poor and the oppressed, read the scripture with connection to reality, and can write about their situation and point out their rights with sympathy and respect. However, Women theologians struggle for gender equality, peace with justice, and dignity of life for all the children of God.

The study and interpretation of African women theologians on the mission of women in the Bible here explored especially the work of Mercy Oduyoye and Theresa Okure, two renowned theologians with great courage, enthusiasm, capability, and professional expertise. Even though one is Methodist and the other a Catholic nun, their ideas and concerns are very much connected and similar. In particular, in their prophetic way. They announce the Gospel and denounce the exploitation by being the voice of the oppressed, the women, and the poor on the African continent. They contribute to the Church and theology by writing, educating people, and challenging the Church and society to change and to be more inclusive.

Mainly it was explored their work on the interpretation of the mission of women in the Bible, an area that has been neglected and not much touched on by male theologians. Thus, in their re-reading of the Bible, they presented women as the main “instrument” of work utilized by God in the history of the salvation of his people. Beginning with Eve, they represent women in the Bible who cooperated with God in the history of salvation. Besides, there is a big difference when men interpret and write about women in the Bible, and when women interpret and write about them.

Therefore, no matter what the patriarchal mentality claims, the truth is that God created women and men equal, in his image and likeness, and only by the work of both together can they be able to fulfill the will of God who commanded them to care for each other and for the whole creation. Hence, whenever women and men unite their gifts, the will of God will be fulfilled in them, because one completes the other and only together in cooperation with each other can they be fully image and likeness of God.

The last point developed, focused on how Christ relates with women in the Gospels and how African women experience Jesus. Okure, Oduyoye and some other African women theologians present with clarity how African women perceive Jesus as their liberator and saviour from patriarchy and oppression. They believe that the will of God preached by Jesus and by the Church, that is, love and dignity of life, will one day come to be a reality for all God’s children, and that one day there will be equality and dignity for women as for men in the Church and in society.

Unfortunately, today gender equality is still a big problem in the Church and we know that this is not the will of God who created human beings equal in dignity and always treated them as equal. Oduyoye makes clear that women are very open and have willingness and ability to work in partnership with their ordained brothers, and with others religions, since they believe that only by working together can they get the world on the right path as God created and intended all his creation to be.

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Nadi Maria de Almeida

Doutora em Teologia pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná - PUCPR (2022); Mestra em Teologia pela PUCPR, (2018); Especialista em Formação de Docente para EAD, pelo Centro Internacional Universitário UNINTER (2022); Especialista em Metodologia do Ensino na Educação Superior pelo UNINTER (2018); Especialista em Mission Studies by The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, CUEA - Nairóbi - Quênia (2010); Bacharel em Relações internacionais pelo UNINTER (2017); Bacharel em Teologia (reconhecimento do curso livre), pelo Centro Universitário Filadélfia, UNIFIL, Londrina, Brasil (2016); Bachelor of Theology, in The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, CUEA, Quênia (2010); Licenciatura em Ciências da Religião pela PUCPR, (1996); Licenciatura em Letras e Português pelo Centro Internacional Universitário UNINTER (2024). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5344-6378>. E-mail: nadinadimaria@gmail.com