

Why (suffering) women matter for the heart of transformative missional theology perspectives on empowered women and mission in the New Testament and early Christianity

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In this article, it is argued that from the beginning of the Christ-following movement, the gospel message represented a challenge to a male-dominated social system. Early Christian literature shows that women, whose voices were often silenced in antiquity, are empowered. This is seen most clearly in the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity. There we see how the protagonists is presented as acting counter culturally, challenging the world of men and turning patriarchal values and expectations upside down. It could be argued that the gospel message portrays women in the centre of missionary witness and empowers them in this manner. Furthermore, early Christian Martyrdom texts also show how the concept of suffering, honour and shame is redefined and how power and strength in weakness and oppression is reformulated.

Introduction

Empowered women matter when it comes to the heart of mission in the New Testament and Early Christianity.¹ From its very beginning, women played an important role in the Christian movement.² Unfortunately we cannot ignore the fact that Christian history was mostly written from an androcentric or paternalistic perspective and in the process often silenced the voice of empowered women inspired by the subversive nature of the gospel. For that reason we need to approach the source documents of Christianity with a certain sensitivity, and in such a way as to honour these silenced voices. Today we know that the mere concepts 'woman' and 'man' are in fact *cultural constructions* which take shape within specific socio-cultural and historical discourse (Sutter Rehmann 2014:418).³ For that reason we should also be critical of the inherent cultural patriarchal character of these texts.

Someone once said: 'First we shape our tools and then our tools shape us'. New tools or new optical lenses enable one to see differently. In this article we will make use of a combination of critical tools, theories and methods which will enable us to have a fresh look at the role of women in the early church.

The aim of this article is to show the critically important role that women played in the mission of the early church and the way the gospel message challenged traditional male patriarchal constructed reality. We argue that the gospel message in essence entailed a message of empowerment. On the other hand, the Bible and Christian interpretative history also bear witness to the structure of paternalism which is often seen as representing the opposite of empowerment (of women). In this article, we will engage with the conflicting voices within the New Testament and in Early Christian discourse by investigating some selected sources or case studies. We will end the article with some critical hermeneutical questions with relevance to the challenges we face today, based on the latter research outcomes.

1. See Jenkins (2007) on the role of women in the rapid expansion of the early Church. For examples of women in leadership in antiquity, based on inscriptional and archaeological sources, see Brooten (1982).

2. See Phoebe as *prostatis* (superintendent or benefactor) responsible for the congregation; Junia as woman and apostle. Some, like Sutter Rehmann (2014:421) are of the opinion that 'Christian women did not find themselves historically in a more exalted position than their Jewish sisters'. This argument is based on the work of Brooten (1982). Below it will be argued to the contrary. However, please note that elsewhere she seems to contradict the aforementioned statement when she argues that 'coworkers in the early Jesus movement, or apostles – women are much less marginalised in biblical texts than they are in the history of their interpretation' (Sutter Rehmann 2014:422). See Bosch 2011 [1991]:61; Schotroff 1993:80-130 [referring to Mt. 1]; 87; 134; 154; cf. Luke 2:36-38; Acts 21:9; Luke 1:39-56; 10:38-42; John 11:20-28; 12:2; Romans 16:1-2; Acts 12:12-17; Romans 16:7.

3. Sutter Rehmann (2014:419) argues that: 'Recent theological gender studies use the concept of "hegemonial masculinity." Masculinity is understood to be a concept shaped by norms, behavior, patterns, and qualities prevalent in society'. Cf. also Clines (1995) in this regard.

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The structure of the article will be as follows:

- remarks on the theory and method behind the argument
- understanding the ancient context
- perspectives on Jesus and women
- perpetua through new eyes
- ethical implications: Why women matter for mission?

Reflection on theory and method

Words are not passive utterances of sounds. We do things through words. Words can either sustain or transform discourses (cf. Wijsen 2014). The concept 'hegemonial masculinity', used in feminist critique, could help us to critically study early Christian source documents to investigate in which way they propagate or transform the former (Sutter Rehmann 2014:419).

Secondly, it is important to note that as gender concepts like 'man' and 'woman' are socially and historically constructed, it is vital that we carefully think about the point of view of the original authors of the early Christian source documents and the way in which they interpreted (and constructed) social reality. One of the tasks of social-scientific investigation of the New Testament and Early Christianity is to study how the texts reflect on and are a response to a specific social and cultural context (Elliott 1993). Important questions to ask are what were the gender norms in that context and in which way the texts 'disrupted' or 'interrupted' these norms. In the interpretation of ancient texts we need to be sensitive not to read it only from an etic perspective, but also from an emic perspective, that is, see how the *ancient people* thought about masculinity. In this way we will not make ourselves guilty of *ethnocentrism* or *anachronism* (Pilch 2000:2; Pilch & Malina 1998) and also appreciate the way in which some texts transform or challenge these discourses.⁴

Acknowledging the cacophony of voices within scripture

Richard Hays (1996) correctly points out that there are different voices in the New Testament and the early Church when it comes to certain ethical questions. Sometimes these voices stand in conflict with one another. For this reason we also need a method that would enable us to deal with the differences between the texts and also their commonality. To this end Hays makes use of the following analytical categories which also influenced my own process of reflection and which I will briefly explain below:

4. Also, our practical experience in the mission field challenges us to exercise a form of discernment. Some years ago we went on a missionary outreach to Mozambique on the coast North-West from South Africa. Western women were asked to always wear skirts or dresses even if that meant wearing a skirt over trousers. The missionaries did not want us to give the wrong impression to the people of Mozambique. Rather submit to the values of that culture, they argued. Others felt the culture should be challenged. This scenario represents a micro-cosmos of the debate today as well. Some people use Scripture to justify the fact that women should conform to male patriarchy and others that these texts challenge it. However, the answer is not that simple. The Bible has a cacophony of conflicting voices on the matter.

Women matter because it often deals with mission from the margin. But sometimes the margin is presented as being the true centre. Once I was in a train from Amsterdam airport to Nijmegen. I met a woman in the train. We exchanged ideas. She was an animal rights activist in government. She said that the true character of a culture is measured by the way they treat their most vulnerable. When this becomes your lens for looking at the world, you learn much. How did early Christians treat children and women? Was there anything radical or restorative in their philosophy and their practice? The WCC believe that we were called to provide life in fullness. What does that mean? Does it justify oppression?

- *The descriptive phase*: Studying the individual texts from the New Testament dealing with a specific topic in detail exegesis.
- *The analytical phase*: Carefully differentiating the difference between these texts, pointing out the cacophony of (conflicting) voices.
- *The synthetic phase*: Looking at the communalities (*Gemeinsamkeit*) between these texts and the themes that emerge on a narrative level.
- *The hermeneutic phase*: Reflecting on the ethical implication of these Christian values in our day and age from a critical correlatory point of view.

Understanding the ancient socio-historical context

Group oriented and paternalistic

Ancient Mediterranean people were *group-oriented individuals*. That means that the interests of the group were more important than that of the individual (Malina, Van der Watt & Joubert [1995] -Kok & Van Eck 2012). One of the cardinal values was that of honour and shame. It was the responsibility of the *pater familias* to protect the honour of the family and to honour the traditions of the group. Naturally it was therefore also important that children obeyed their father as head of the household. Deviance from the will of the *pater familias* was seen as very negative behaviour and punished accordingly (Shelton 1998:17). An honourable son would even go as far as to kill his own sister to protect the honour of the father and the family. It was thus a strong hierarchical and paternalistic culture (Malina, Van der Watt & Joubert [1995] -Kok & Van Eck 2012). Every person was expected to behave according to their respected roles and function in the social spaces that they were assigned to. For instance, it was considered dishonourable if a women went in public without the permission of her husband. Such behaviour would challenge his honour and he was obliged to act upon such acts of misbehaviour. Often, men treated women in abusive ways. The *paterfamilias* had absolute control over the family. This was called the *patria potestas*. A Roman father had the legal right to even decide whether he wanted to expose his own new-born child,⁵ determine who his daughter might marry and could demand that she be divorced against her own will (Shelton 1998:17). Children could even be sold into slavery and killed if they misbehaved. This is *inter alia* clearly seen in the literature itself. The ancient author Dionysius of Halicarnassus (2.26–27) said:

Romulus granted to the Roman father absolute power over his son, and this power was valid until the father's death, whether he decided to imprison him, or whip him, to put him in chains and make him work on a farm, or even to kill him, Romulus even

5. For an example, see the research in Shelton (1998:28) about the letter found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt in 1 B.C. (Oxyrhynchus Papyri 744 [Select Papyri 105]) in which a man (Hilarion) wrote to his pregnant wife Alis and told him that he was still in Alexandria but will send some money to her. However, if the child happens to be girl, she needs to dispose of the baby. The letter reads as follows (quoted from Shelton 1998:28): 'I send you my warmest greetings. I want you to know that we are still in Alexandria. And please don't worry if all the others come home but I remain in Alexandria. I beg you and entreat you to take care of the child and, if I receive my pay soon, I will send it up to you. If you have the baby before I return, if it is a boy, let it live; if it is a girl, expose it. You sent a message with Aphrodisias, 'Don't forget me'. How can I forget you? I beg you, then, not to worry.'

allowed the Roman father to sell his son into slavery. (quoted by Shelton 1998:17)

Shelton (1998) also correctly argues that:

Roman fathers greeted the birth of an infant boy with more joy than the birth of an infant girl. Indeed infant girls were sometimes unwanted and therefore exposed. Daughters who were allowed to live were often married at a very tender age to men chosen by their fathers. It was not uncommon for girls to be engaged at twelve and married at thirteen, and few were asked their opinions about prospective bridegrooms. (p. 19)

Thus, the ancient world was a world dominated by men.

With the aforementioned décor in mind we will now discuss the way Jesus is presented as someone who empowered women.

The (re)presentation of the Samaritan woman by John's Jesus

The ancient Jews were group oriented individuals, and men controlled women, as was common in the Roman world as explained above. In the Jewish symbolic universe, the world was clearly divided between holy and unholy persons, places and things (Kok 2008). It was believed that an unclean person could contaminate a Jew simply if the latter sat on or touched an object that came into contact with an unclean person.

In the first century A.D. it was believed that Samaritan women were unclean from the cradle. That means that there was absolutely no way in which a Samaritan woman could be called acceptable or clean. All interaction with such a person would have been avoided.

Thus, it is surprisingly significant to read in John 4:1–42 that Jesus not only *initiates* interaction with a Samaritan woman but also effectively transcends several religious and cultural boundaries in the process of his interaction with this woman. Even the Samaritan woman surprisingly asked Jesus how it is that a Jewish man has interaction with a Samaritan woman. Such things were simply not done in the ancient times. Not only was she unclean, but also marginalised as person. In a world where men had control over women, and women little freedom, this woman had many husbands, and the one she had at that moment was also not her husband. Whether it was due to her own lifestyle and moral behaviour or her mistreatment by men, she was a marginal woman. Unclean from her birth and marginalised in life. In a world dominated by men, she was on the bottom of the food chain, so to speak. In the (adapted) words of Bruce Springsteen and Leonard Cohen, she was a 'nothing-(wo)man' with not even as much as a *broken halleluiah*.

But this was about to change. After Jesus reveals to her that he has revelatory information and/or knowledge about her life, and she opens up to him, he offers her true spiritual life. In a significant spiritual transformation, the woman's spiritual eyes are opened and she sees that he is the Messiah. Suddenly she leaves everything and runs into the city

witnessing about the truth she had experienced. John's text makes it clear that people came to faith in Jesus *because of and through* (δία) the words of the Samaritan women. What is significant here to see is that the Samaritan women in John *becomes a missionary witness before the disciples* of Jesus do so! In John 7 the closest acquaintances and disciples of Jesus still did not believe in him (Jn 7:5) and others think that he has a demon (Jn 7:20 – δαιμόνιον ἔχεις). Thus, the Samaritan woman becomes the ideal disciple before the 'real' disciples in John become missionary plenipotentiaries of Jesus. In John 20:21, after the resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples with the mission command: 'Just as the father has sent me, I send you'. However, the Samaritan woman becomes a missionary witness already in chapter four of John as Barrett (1978:197) correctly observed: 'To bear witness is the task of a disciple. The woman joins John the Baptist as witness, and in fact precedes the disciples'.⁶

Also important to note is the important role that women play in the resurrection story. In John, Jesus appears to a woman before he appears to anyone else. A woman becomes the first witness of the history altering event of the resurrection.

6. This statement is a matter of discussion within the New Testament scholarship guild as such as I have illustrated before (Kok 2008, 2016) and repeat here also. This relates to whether it could be argued that the Samaritan woman shows 'faith' in the context of the narrative and also against the background of the fact that here we have a pre-Easter event or confession. Some scholars pointed out that here in John 4 we find *progressive degrees of revelation* so to speak. Wengst (2000:172) was of the opinion that the woman shows progression but not enough faith (... 'Aber sie Weiss noch nicht genug'). Thyen (2005:268) and Wilckens (1998 [*Das Evangelium nach Johannes*]) said that Jesus himself does not positively agree that the woman's view that he is the awaited Taheb (the Samaritan's Messiah expectation [see Dt. 18:15-18]) corresponds to himself. Thus, this woman misunderstands who he truly is, according to some scholars and Jesus does not seem to agree with her confession. However, others like Barrett (1955:204) and Kok (2008:314; see also Kok 2016) have argued that the *implicit reader* in John is guided already in John 1:12, 3:3 and 3:6 to know that faith in Jesus and spiritual insight is only possible when the Spirit reveals this truth and in John and that the status of such a person changes, as pointed out in John 5:24. So the question is whether Jesus reveals *himself* in this story and if the character(s) is presented by John as moving in the direction of the faith John envisions (cf. Jn. 20:30-31). Towards the end of the narrative, the Samaritan woman says that they know the Messiah or Christ is coming and *in the following sentence*, Jesus utters the first *ego eimi* (I am) utterance which is part of the other important *ego eimi* utterances in John's gospel: Οἶδα ὅτι Μεσσίας ἔρχεται, ὁ λεγόμενος Χριστός: ὅταν ἔλθῃ ἐκεῖνος, ἀναγγελεῖ ἡμῖν ἅπαντα. 26 λέγει αὐτῇ ὁ Ἰησοῦς Ἐγώ εἰμι, ὁ ἀλῶν σοι. Furthermore, the Samaritans at the end of the narrative unit (4:42) confess that Jesus is truly the *saviour of the world* – which in John is an important confession and not off the mark, so to speak (ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτὸν ... οὗτός ἐστιν ἡλιθῶς ὁ σωτὴρ τοῦ κόσμου). Thus, in John 4 the progressive revelation by Jesus to the woman, together with the woman's progressive actions, and the response by the Samaritans do illustrate that John wants his readers to follow the example of this woman (and the Samaritans) and also that John wanted to communicate that this woman received the 'living water' (cf. 4:10). Also, in the text, it clearly says that the Samaritans *came to faith as a direct result of the action and words of the Samaritan woman*, and especially when they personally also saw and spoke to Jesus (see the preposition διά [by the instrumentality of]). In John the implicit reader knows already from John 1:12 and 1:13 that those who believe have become children of God and from ch 3 that this is only possible when the Spirit does his work. In John those who do not believe are spiritually blind (Jn. 9:40-41; 12:40-41) but this woman 'sees' Jesus eventually (Jn. 4:25-29) and is offered living water. Also, it is very important to note that the Ἐγώ εἰμι, expression is found in this narrative and also the expression that the people came to faith. These words also create a *topos* that leads me and others to think that this woman is presented by John as having 'seen' and 'heard' who Jesus was, and that this was something that a disciple or follower of Jesus (and the implicit reader) is motivated to do by John (see Jn. 17:18; 20:21). For this reason it is agreed with Barrett (1978) who once said: 'To bear witness is the task of a disciple. The woman joins with John the Baptist as witness, and in fact precedes the apostles ...' With regard to the argument that we cannot have 'true' faith before the Easter events it is also an argument that changes when one looks at this matter from the perspective of the implicit reader. Already in 2:17-19 the reader is led by the author to see things through the lens of the resurrection and to interpret the actions of particular characters through that lens. Thus, if the argument is sustained that there is *no true faith before the Easter Event*, then all 'faith' actions in the gospel are incomplete until John 20. However, this is problematic because in each Ἐγώ εἰμι context where Jesus reveals himself becomes devoid of meaning on that level. However, if these cases of self-revelation is read as examples where the implicit reader is led to come to faith, and characters within John's gospel illustrate some of this, then the linear historical pre and post-Easter issue falls away because the text was written through the lens of the post-Easter events and the implicit reader (is led to) connects the dots, so to speak. The same happens in the way the words of Jesus is heard in John 2:17-19, that is, where the author very clearly helps the reader to understand the words and action of Jesus *through* the lens of the death and resurrection which John undoubtedly sees as an inseparable unity (as in Jn. 10:17).

Matthew also places an important focus on women. In the genealogy of Jesus several women are mentioned in a world where women were never mentioned in such genealogies. Furthermore, these women were almost all of notorious character. They represent the 'wrong' women, the most 'unlikely' candidates which God had put into the centre of redemptive history. This clearly illustrates the way in which the Gospel message had a counter-cultural and subversive nature, if read against the background of paternalism of the time.

Sustaining the status quo? Be a 'good' woman for the sake of the Gospel (1 Peter 3)

As mentioned above, the history of the early church bears witness to different perspectives. In some of the Christian texts we see that women are encouraged to conform to the paternalistic values of society (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13; Gl. 3:28; 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 3:11 contra 1 Cor. 11). Thus, women are encouraged to submit to or integrate with the dominant paternalistic culture and be a 'better' woman in cultural context even if it means suffering or submitting to paternalistic culture. The will of the other (the man) is put above that of the woman. Let us look at an example. In 1 Peter 3:1–2 the author encourages woman to accept the authority of men over them and to conform to the dominant cultural values:

Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. (1 Pt. 3:1–2)

Women should accept the authority of the man and, like Sarah, obey their husbands and call them 'lord' (κύριον) (1 Pt. 3:6). Such women are not called to challenge the (paternalistic) system or transform the status quo, but to conform to it. The purpose of this submission has a missional thrust. The purpose is *so that these husbands may be won over to the faith*. By conforming to the status quo, these women will show exemplary conduct and in this way impress their husbands. Behind this concept lies the values of honour and shame. Naturally, these women, and their 'good' behaviour will bring honour to the men. These women are called to sustain the paternalistic discourse and not to transform it.

However, we also have many texts, both within Scripture and from early Christianity, where ideal women were presented in terms which seem to transform or challenge the status quo. Below we will look at one example.

Transforming the status quo: Good woman challenge the system

In the formation of Christian identity, from its earliest times, Martyrdom acts and texts played an important role. Below it will be argued that these texts reshaped mental models and ideology⁷ at the time and subverted the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of Roman antiquity.

7. Ideology, according to La Carpa and Kaplan (1982:284) could be understood as a 'process in which different kinds of meaning are produced and reproduced by the establishment of a mental set toward the world in which certain sign systems are privileged as necessary, even natural ways of recognising a meaning in things and others are suppressed, ignored or hidden in the process of representing a word of consciousness' (cf. also Perkins 1994:837 fn 3).

The accounts of the arrest, trial and execution of Christian Martyrs are often referred to as 'acts', 'passions', 'martyrdom' or 'legend' (Moreschini & Norelli 2005:213). These terms are not synonymous. *Passions* (*Passiones*) is understood to be eye-witness reports (Moreschini & Norelli 2005:386). 'Legends' on the other hand, refer to the tales told about the Martyrs in the time period after Constantine in the context of a developed and/or developing Martyr cult associated with the many basilicas dedicated to specific Martyrs. In these texts, as Candida Moss correctly observes, one finds a lot of *ex post facto* fabrication and interpretation of the events. But what interests us are the terms 'acta' and 'passions'. These texts were written as accounts of the acts and/or behaviour of the Martyrs and the passions and/or sufferings they experienced and the way they were witnesses (*martyria*) and/or gave testimony to God (Moreschini & Norelli 2005:213).⁸ These texts had the purpose of veneration or celebration of the Martyrs, whose example edified and strengthened believers.⁹

The passion of Perpetua¹⁰ is significant (and unique) in many ways. It is believed that Perpetua was the author of most of it, and that after her death it was edited (by a man).¹¹ This passion tells the story of the underlying motives, the arrest, imprisonment, trial and death of recently converted catechumens. They were Revocatus, the pregnant slave-woman Felicity, Saturninus, Secundulus, and of course the noble lady and protagonist of the story, Vibia Perpetua and their Christian instructor Satyrus who decided to suffer with them. It contains two sections: A narrative part told from the first-person perspective in which Perpetua gives a report of the events; and a description of the visions of Perpetua and Satyrus (Moreschini & Norelli 2005:357). The referential world (to be distinguished from the contextual world) is indicated in the text as having occurred in circa 203 in Carthage.

These texts point to the belief that Martyrdom is the absolute highest form of dedication and pure faith that a believer could show. For this reason these texts also had a catechetical purpose of teaching, instructing and edifying the readers or hearers as they wanted to 'present the Christian interpretation of the world' to believers and catechumens (Moreschini & Norelli 2005:358). These texts are important for us on several levels. It *inter alia* gives us important insights into the mind-set of African Christianity during that time (Moreschini &

8. There is a long history in which the historical value of these texts have been debated which *inter alia* started with people like the Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye. See *Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires* (Brussels: Societe des Bollandistes).

9. In *Hist. Eccl.* 5 Eusebius recalls a collection of the early Martyrs (synagogeon archaion martyron). In this document we find the historical information but also a more theological or doctrinal interpretation thereof. The Martyrs of Palestine recalls the Martyrdom in Caesarea in the period between 303 and 311.

10. Originally written in Latin and translated into Greek.

11. Some scholars are of the opinion that the editor was Tertullian (cf. *the Soul* 55.4). Others like Moreschini and Norelli (2005:357) do not think that it was edited by Tertullian, based on the fact that there is not much which are characteristically Tertullian for instance the linguistic characteristics thereof. Some argue that the document might have close resemblance to documents produced in a Montanist atmosphere which resembles that of Tertullian also. This is evident in the visions and revelations, the focus on the work of the Spirit in them, etcetra. Others like Corsini do not think that the visions reflect Montanist tendencies. Unlike Montanists, the editor of Perpetua provides examples of faith and the *ongoing* and *constant* presence of the Spirit in the church.

Norelli 2005:358). It was also read during liturgy in Christian Africa and functioned to inspire the believers.¹²

Turning the world upside down

The self-representation of Perpetua and the transcendence of social boundaries

In a world where daughters had to submit to the authority and will of the father, the acts of Perpetua stand out. Perpetua does not adhere to her father's will. He pleads with her, falls at her feet and calls her 'mistress' (*dominam*; cf. 5:5). He is also concerned about the honour of the group. He says that her conduct will have implications for the whole family (5.4). An honourable daughter would put the values of the kinship group first and honour the will of the father. Perpetua does the opposite. She honours the will of God and not that of her father or the kinship group. Perkins (1995:105) states it well: 'What Perpetua's "own ideas" offer is a self-representation of a woman subverting and transcending her society's structures, buttressed by a growing sense of her empowerment through suffering'.

Behind her radical actions is a strong motivation and sense of identity that derives from a new understanding of God and conceptualisation of reality. Perpetua believed: 'We are not regulated by our own power anymore but by the power of and/or in God' (*scito enim nos in nostra esse potestate constitutos, sed in Dei*; cf. 5.6).

In the text the radical and revolutionary acts of Perpetua is further illustrated: She goes against both societal, familial (patriarchal) and Roman state authority. Her father asks her to be faithful to the Emperor and to bring the sacrifices that need to be brought to honour him. She refuses. The guards throw the father down to the ground and beat him due to his inability to influence his daughter, dishonouring him further. These actions are counter-cultural. The man kneels down to the ground, he looks up to the women, and then he is even further degraded.

Subsequently Perpetua was sent on to be killed by the beasts. She shows no fear but laughs (6.6) illustrating joy amidst suffering (17.1). She has a dream in which she sees her brother Dinocrates who died at the age of seven due to cancer to the face. In the underworld he was unable to eat. She believes that her own suffering enables her to help him and so she prays continuously for him (7.9). After some time she dreams of him again and suddenly sees him restored and happy, healed from his sufferings (8.4). The interesting thing is that there is a difference between the way her (unbelieving) brother is able to deal with his suffering and the way she deals with her sufferings. Her suffering is service to God and also makes her the recipient of the grace of God. She receives joy in the midst of suffering unlike her brother who is not a

12. Important to note is that the earlier accounts of Martyrdom stories focus on the acts of the Martyr. After Constantine these texts function differently: they place a strong(er) focus on monasticism (cf. Augustine and also the *Life of Anthony*). The texts that date from a later stage in history also seem to be written from a triumphalist perspective and not so close to reality. The Martyr is also presented in a more 'neutral' or anonymous way. Thus, these kind of literature function more as devotional and inspirational literature. In this regard the Passion of Perpetua is a bit different.

Christian. Thus, we see here that early Christians developed a new conceptual framework in which suffering was (re) interpreted and experienced. Perkins (1995) is correct in observing:

Christianity offered converts a useful function for pain and a structure for understanding human suffering. Within this paradigm Perpetua is able to place her own coming death and her maternal concern for the loss of her baby. She sees her suffering as powerful and redemptive.¹³ (p. 109)

Subsequently, these texts motivated readers to get strength from the example of these martyrs. Perpetua also explicitly links this with a missionary dimension when she tells that the prison guard Pudens showed them honour and recognised that they had a significant amount of power within them (cf. 9.1). When they were given their final meal many people came. This was an opportunity for them to witness to the people there (17.1). They showed no fear but illustrated joy and told people about God's imminent judgment. Many people came to faith because of that (17.1). For the people who witnessed it, it was evidence of a supernatural event (MacMullen 1984:30). God must have been with them – there was no other way to explain it.

Narratives of empowerment

In the years to come, Martyr cults developed and they became examples to be followed. It was also read in liturgy and had the aim to inspire values. The early Christians *justified* martyrdom and in time a martyrdom spirituality developed. But how useful is this today? In a context where the mere thought of people dying as martyrs for God reminds us of terrorism and suicide bombs, how helpful is this at the end? Perhaps the difference is that Christian martyrs were dragged to their death and did not go out to kill in the first place. Martyrdom-spirituality was a mechanism they used to cope with the violence against them and not used to become people who caused violence. But is this true? Did the actions of Perpetua not lead to her father experience violence against him? Thus, had she not played a role in facilitating violence? In fact the latter could be argued. Also, in the text (in her final dream) Perpetua is presented as being in a brutal fight with an Egyptian and she steps on his head (10.10–11) and wins. After the dream she reflects on it and says that it does not really matter what will eventually happen in the arena. She knows that she is in reality actually fighting the devil and that she was already granted the victory (*in gloria*; cf. also 10.14) – thus, she already knows that her death will be victorious in some way. Thus, death was reinterpreted and the logic of this world was turned upside down by a Christ-following worldview (Christian logic; see Perkins 1994:843). The victim becomes the victor clothed in power and empowered by joy amidst suffering and persecution.¹⁴

13. Once a colleague at the University of Pretoria asked whether the Christian message in this regard is perhaps not that transformative and sustains or keeps alive or even justifies the oppression of the poor. In their Black people's experience, the gospel message implied that they simply had to accept their devastating circumstances but in the process kept them from challenging their context and situation. Some South African theologians these days rebel against that and refuse to keep intact a system that oppresses people. They are very sensitive to the way in which the contemporary social system and the gospel message preached in this context, sustain patterns of oppression and White (Western) domination.

14. For some of the latest research on persecution, see Moss (2013).

What was designed to humiliate and destroy her, gives her honour and power. This becomes clear when one examines the language of the text that derives its (metaphorical) images from the athletic sphere. The victorious martyr is often crowned as they would have been in a contest. For that reason it is also interesting to note that the keywords of the athletic code are also found in the martyrdom narratives, namely courage (*andreia*), toil (*ponos*) and endurance (*karteria*) (cf. Pleket 1975:49–90). Perkins (1994:844) is correct when she observes: ‘The martyrs are never portrayed as victims, but their ordeals are incorporated into the universal and traditional ideology of the athletic games’.

The narrator or editor that tells the story of the last minutes of the earthly life of Perpetua continues to paint a picture of a woman who transcends the boundaries, who goes against the stream and does so with courage and joy. The narrator tells that Perpetua:

went along with a shining face and a quiet poise, as the beloved of God (*Dei delicate*), a wife of Christ (*Matrona Christi*) and beating back the gaze of the crowd with the power of her eyes (*uigore oculorum deicens omnium conspectum*). (18.1–2; translation adapted from Perkins 1994:844)

Perpetua refuses to be the object or victim of the patriarchal gaze, so to speak, or play the passive role expected by women of her day. Women were expected to look down. It is her Christian identity that empowers her. She constructs a symbolic world upside down – a world in which death and humiliation becomes victory, and suffering becomes honour and joy. Perpetua is not dragged to her death but an active participant in it. When an inexperienced gladiator did not succeed in providing the death blow, Perpetua guided the sword towards her neck and in this way ‘helped’ the gladiator to kill her. This picture is often portrayed in art works depicting Perpetua. It was as if she could only be killed if she agreed to it (21:9). This reminds us of course of John’s Jesus who is in total control of his own death, which at the end is reinterpreted as glory (and life). This line of thought is not only found in Perpetua, as Perkins (1994:846) rightly points out: It is also found for instance in the *Acts of Lyons and Vienne* where suffering is clearly interpreted as empowerment. Here we also see the Christian inversion of paternalistic societal values. In that text Blandina, the victim, is also presented as an athlete putting on Christ, who is portrayed in that text as the ‘mighty and invisible athlete’ (cf. 1.42). It is interesting to note that many of these Martyrdom narratives’ protagonist sufferers represent the most vulnerable in society (Blandina as slave women; Perpetua as mother; Felicitas as pregnant; Pothius [Bishop of Lyons] as old, weak man [90 years old]; Polycarp [86 years old]). In all these cases Christ is the strength within them. It does not come from themselves: ‘Christ is the one that triumphs in them’ (Perkins 1994:847). In weakness, God’s strength is revealed – and it turns the paternalistic world of the day upside down.

Why women (will ways) matter?

When we carefully read (often between the lines) the New Testament we will clearly see that from the beginning

women played an important role in die God’s redemptive history and in the mission of the church (cf. Mt. 1; Mk. 15:40). From the beginning we see how the gospel message did not silence the voice of women, but rather painted a picture of empowering woman, giving a voice to the voiceless. I agree with Luzia Sutter Rehmann (2014:422) in the recently published *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics* that ‘women are much less marginalised in biblical texts than they are in the history of their interpretation’. Unfortunately, Christian history was written from an androcentric perspective, effectively (often) silencing the voice of women. However, this does not mean that those voices are not to be heard within the layers of the texts. This poses the challenge to us to critique, deconstruct and unpack these patriarchal embedded texts and reflect on the transformative messages in those texts that point to the innovative discourses within it. This way one might suddenly find a kaleidoscope of new perspectives that open up new ways of appreciating the role of women in the construction of early Christian identity and the way in which this understanding transcended social hierarchy, social boundaries and culturally conditioned (gender) roles in the early Church. The challenge for us today is to break through the ‘androcentric construction of reality’ making use of social-historical methods in an attempt to reimagine or reconceptualise the role of women in the Christian movement. Today, this type of critical (re)reading of the ancient texts are valuable and necessary as we critically correlate¹⁵ the past with the present. I agree with Sutter Rehmann (2014:422) that: ‘As these readings raise new questions and call for new research methods that deliver answers to the conditions of women’s live, the androcentric history of exclusion is interrupted’. Thus, we are ‘un-silencing’ woman. In this way we contribute new knowledge as well as *transform* the accepted hegemony of knowledge of the past, providing new perspectives for the role of women in the present. Naturally this changes the way we engage with these matters of research in future and shape an alternative future with possibilities. This way of reading could be understood as an act of liberation. By giving women a voice, and by telling their stories from an empowered woman’s perspective, like that of Perpetua, we release women from roles as victims and acknowledge the important role they play(ed) in advancing the mission of the church. In this way we are challenged to read texts, both ancient and contemporary, against the grain of patriarchal rhetoric (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:41) and acknowledge the contributions and struggles of women and the role they play in the ongoing construction of Christian identity (Sutter Rehmann 2014:419).

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¹⁵For perspectives on Tillich and/or Schillebeeckx on critical correlation between past and present experiences, see Kok (2016:10-50).

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