

# Woman is a Parable

by  
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supervised by  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study is a contribution to the New Testament hermeneutics. It is a reinterpretation of the Parable of the "Ten Maidens" from an African Womanist Perspective consonant with an Epideictic Rhetoric approach. Through this perspective the social position of women in parables based on an androcentric world is explored. However, this position is challenged by a womanist perspective. Because it is challenged, the process of conscientization has begun and the struggle for the lack of self worth follows. With African womanist epideictic perspective the intended effect is to respond to the needs of particular individuals or communities, and to persuade the readers to bring about a change of attitude and behaviour in their situation.

This thesis opens with an exploration of the socio-historical experience of women revealed in literature of the first century Greco-Roman world; the Jewish world as well as ancient African world. A search in the literature betrays that women's experiences from different societies are generally based on a patriarchal ideology, that of women's supposed position in society. Women's view of the world was therefore along these patriarchal standards. An African womanist epideictic approach, therefore is employed as a liberative tool in dealing with this problem.

The second chapter presents women's portrayal in parables, especially those found in African literature and in the synoptic gospels. Luke, in particular, deals with women in parables very positively bringing up the whole question of relationality, that is, practising good relations with one another. This is explored further in the concluding section.

In African parables there are two sets of women behaviour. Firstly, there are those who are very much inclined with the socialization of the obedience and loyalty to males in an African cultural tradition. Secondly, there are also those who try to pull out of the patriarchal normative instructions. The behaviour of these two sets is similar to the behaviour of women found in Matthean parables. These behavioural tendencies become so significant for an African womanist that the "Parable of the Ten Maidens" in Matthew is further explored in chapter three.

The concluding chapter includes an overview of the thesis and a discussion of the ethical considerations raised when one reads the parables, especially of the "Ten Maidens" from an African womanist epideictic perspective.



## **1. INTRODUCTION: METHODOLOGY**

### **1.0 THE PROBLEM**

The status of women has been a source of controversy throughout history. In every society women have been treated as subordinate. They have remained subordinate. Women's oppression has its roots in the universal phenomenon of patriarchy. Patriarchy may be defined as the power of the "fathers," a social, ideological, and political system by which men, through force, or through ritual, tradition law, language, and the division of labour, determine what women are. As such, women's humanity, experience, perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs are defined by men.

In the first century, this subordinate position of women was reflected in literature. Do we assume, therefore, that the biblical parables portrayed women in a negative way? Insofar as patriarchy knows no historical or cultural boundaries even in antiquity, we must assume this to be the case. In this thesis I examine the role and social position of women in the ancient world. I focus on the Greco-Roman world and Jewish world and the social context of ancient Africa.

### **1.1 WOMEN IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD**

Women are not homogenous class of human species. It is impossible to generalise about their position. The social, political, and cultural position of women is far from

uniform. Within the general patriarchal framework which was present in all Greek city-states and colonies from Homeric times (700 BC) and through the age of the Roman Empire, one finds women in diverse roles and positions (Witherington, 1990:10). It is, therefore, advisable to deal with women of Greece and Rome separately.

The position of women in Grecian societies like Athens, Sparta, or Corinth was similarly not a homogenous one. However, even though the differences are distinct due to cultural and socio-political influences, patriarchal tendencies are very much apparent in fashioning women's roles in all those societies. I dedicate this section to Witherington's account on women in the Greco-Roman world as well as in the Jewish world. Her work is of very much importance for she was writing from an empathetic position about women. Nevertheless, other sources in this area will also be explored.

### 1.1.1 WOMEN IN GREECE

Athens was a city of contrasts in regard to the position and rights of women. There were three categories of women: the Concubines, Athenian citizens, and companions. Concubines were the smallest and least important group. They occupied the middle ground between legal wives and companions. Their relationship to the Athenian male was recognised by law, insofar as their main function was to care for the personal, especially sexual needs of males. In this way, a male citizen could limit his legitimate heirs without limiting his sexual activities. Prostitution was thus permitted. In this regard the position of women deteriorated.

The female Athenian citizen, by contrast, was appreciated chiefly as a proper means to legitimate male heirs. They had the right to legal marriages and to some extent were respected as wives and mothers (Witherington, 1990:11). They usually lived in a secluded and guarded place, although there is no account of whether they were ever allowed to be out of the chambers for a while. Women citizens of an advanced age were allowed to participate in some of the cults, as were the companions. As for their legal status, Athenian citizen women were not allowed to be valid witnesses in courts except possibly in homicide cases. Women in this category were denied the rights to acquire or retain personal property apart from their dowries.

The most interesting of the categories of Athenian women were the companions. As foreigners, they had no civic rights. They were not allowed to manage public affairs or to usurp citizen's women positions. Nevertheless, they were the only educated women in Athens.

Many famous Greek men, including Plato and Aristotle, had female companions. In order to be a good companion for intelligent and important men, many women studied arts, philosophy, and politics. In this regard, they became objects of affection for Athenian men. It is not surprising that in Athens there was a shrine built not to women citizens but to companions and their patron Goddess Aphrodite (Witherington, 1990:12).

Concerning an Athenian woman's religious status, little can be said. Only young women had contact with the outside world through their participation in various religious

processions, like carrying the musical box, grinding the flour for the patron's cake at ten years, and carrying the sacred basket.

By comparison to Athenian women, the Spartan woman occupied a position of relative freedom and influence. The Spartans felt it necessary to educate and train women to be strong, brave, and resolute. From the earliest times, Spartan women were involved in gymnastics, wrestling festivals, rudimentary educational schemes, and offerings of sacrifice. In general, they mingled freely and competed openly with men (Witherington, 1990:13). Underlying Spartan legislation relating to women was one issue, namely to procure a first rate breed of men. Their women were to acquire such a strong and good character that their sons would resemble this character and enter military service. This not only prepared Spartan women to be good mothers, but afforded men an opportunity to choose a proper partner. The selection process, where weaker women were disadvantaged and prevented from marrying for fear of producing weak children, was common-place.

Women viewed as good mothers, with their husbands' permission, occasionally played a role in public life. Nonetheless, that role was to be confined. The fact that Spartan women were involved in public building projects or activities, and were known to have held public office, betrays the fact that they had money, unlike Athenian women who only had dowries. Spartan women were able to avail themselves of what the law and their husbands permitted. However, they remained under the control of males.

Divorce laws gave men more freedom than women. Barrenness was one reason for a man to divorce his wife and take another. The most representative of a Spartan woman's true position and her famed fidelity are represented in the following words spoken to a man proposing an illicit relationship: "When I was a girl I was taught to obey my father and I did. When I was a wife I obeyed my husband, if then you have anything just to urge make it known to him first" (Witherington, 1990:13). This passage suggests that the Spartan woman was subordinate to her father or husband. With regard to her religious position, as elsewhere in Greece, Spartan women often participated in the cults and had official roles.

In Corinth, the city of courtesans and companions, free born citizen women participated in some festivals involving sacrifice. They were noted for their boldness, at one point defending a particular sanctuary against the attack of Spartan men ( Witherington, 1990:14). They were also remembered for their dedication to praying in the temple of Aphrodite for the salvation of Corinth from Persia.

Nonetheless, it was not only Corinthian women who played an important role in the religious cults. Rather, this was one of the few features of life that women from all over Greece had in common. Women were almost always the organs of divine inspiration and prophecy in Greece. In the cult of Apollo, only women were allowed to perform certain offices. They led the procession in the "mysteries" or secret rituals. In general, they were followers of the goddess, and when associated with the temple of the gods, their activities were limited (Witherington, 1990:14-15).

### 1.1.2 WOMEN IN ROME

In ancient Rome, the authority of the father was absolute. He had the power of life and death over his children and wife. He was so severe that the Greeks regarded Roman men as cruel and harsh (Stambaugh and Balch, 1986:124). The power of the patriarch was evident from his position in marriage arrangements. Marriages were often arranged to suit the political convenience of families. Men and women were married quite young and they remained under the authority of their fathers even after marriage. In upper class societies, marriage was an obligation for all women except for vestal virgins and women over the age of fifty.

Vestal virgins were those women who dedicated themselves to virginity for thirty years and tended the sacred flame (which represented the health and salvation of Rome). They were not under the power of any man and were considered so trustworthy that statesmen would leave important documents and wills with them to guard. They were also emissaries of peace for the state or imperial families. Vestals were women of property. They were given dowry twice as much that of a rich woman citizen and were married to the state for thirty years. There were only six vestals at a time (Witherington, 1990:22-3).

Other than vestals, the upper class mothers, wives, and daughters were expected to be modest and unobstructive and to lead an uneventful and unexciting life (Stambaugh and

Balch, 1986:111). Among the aristocracy, marriages were frequently made or broken for financial and political reasons. Women were allowed to initiate but not to refuse marriage unless they could prove their proposed husband was morally unfit. However, girls aged between twelve and fourteen years, the normal age of marriage, were given a chance to refuse a marriage under any circumstances.

It is certainly to the credit of the Romans that they at least raised the question of the place of women in society. Roman society, unlike many other societies in the Mediterranean, saw women's education not as an extravagance, but as a way to enhancement. Citizen women were well educated. Among the poorer families, daughters and sons went to school, whilst in richer families, they had tutors. Nevertheless, there was an imbalance which favoured male youth. A girl's education ceased when she married, whilst a boy, who usually did not marry before the age of seventeen or eighteen, went on to study with philosophers and rhetoricians outside the home for an additional three to four years (Witherington, 1990:21).

The fact that many Roman women were given a chance to study testifies to the fact that patriarchy need not always lead to misogyny. Despite their education, however, Roman women were not allowed to vote or to hold public office. Notwithstanding this, they were influential in affairs of the state and matters of the law. Religiously, women in Rome had fewer opportunities to be priestesses than women in Greece until the advent of the foreign cults.

## **1.2 WOMEN IN THE JEWISH WORLD**

The family was the exclusive sphere of influence for Jewish women. A wife was literally locked up in the house, she was to be seen in public as little as possible (Van der Walt,1988:7). Women in the Jewish world were viewed as the cause of sin and immortality. As a result, men were not expected to converse with women, even with their wives.

This limited sphere of female influence is partly attributed to Jewish marital custom as contained in the Mishnah - a collection of oral traditions that explained and expanded on Jewish law. As in Rome, the Jewish father had extraordinary power over his daughter, and a husband over his wife. A woman was passed from her father's to her husband's sphere of authority often without consultation. However, though a girl could not refuse a marriage arrangement made by her father, she could express her wish to stay in the home until puberty. It was within her rights to refuse any arrangements made by her mother or brothers after her father's death. Since a woman changed families when she married, she could not be expected to preserve the family name or keep property in the same family. For this reason, the laws stated that she was entitled to "maintenance" rather than "inheritance" (Witherington, 1990:4). Thus, a woman was not to own any property. The father provided his daughter with all the necessities of life, that is, maintaining her. The reason was such that, if a daughter happened to possess any of his father's property, she would inherit the property to the next family once married. Under-aged girls had no right to possessions, the fruits of their labour belonged to the



father. If sexually violated, compensation money for indignity was paid to the father. The father was therefore highly responsible for his daughter.

In her husband's family, a woman's security was limited. The husband could divorce the wife if she caused "impediment" to the marriage. This privilege of divorce was rarely extended to the wife. A wife's security was further threatened by the fact that polygyny was permitted in New Testament times, as it was in Old Testament days. However, the Mishnah does record cases of a man betrothed to two women.

This account of a Jewish woman's social position suggests that the laws of inheritance, betrothal and divorce were biased in favour of the male. Nonetheless, there were some checks and balances: a woman could demand a divorce and a daughter's maintenance. In spite of these limitations, it would be wrong to assume that a Jewish woman had no rights in Jesus' day.

Jewish writings reiterate the Old Testament rule that the mother is to be honoured equally with the father. In Exodus 20:12, we read, "Honour your father and your mother." Leviticus 9:13 reads, "Everyone of you shall revere his mother and his father." It is important to note here that the order of honour is reversed. Thus, it was deduced that they were to be revered equally. The Talmud further instructs a man to love his wife as himself and to respect her more than himself.

The home or family as a limiting sphere of a woman had a spirited significance which calls for a woman's presence or role. Rabbi Jacob asserted that "one who has no wife remains without good, a helper, joy, blessing and without atonement (Witherington, 1990:6). It was in the home that the training which equipped Jews for participation in the synagogue or temple began. This training involved knowledge of the Torah. However, there is a debate on whether or not or how much a woman should teach or be taught. Some have viewed that the Torah should be taught. Nonetheless, the saying that the Torah would be better burned rather than be taught to women was a popular one (Van der Walt, 1988:7). Women were regarded in principle as lazy, stupid, and unteachable. By contrast, Mishnah Nedarim (4:3) a Jewish guide, reads, "a father should teach Scripture to his sons and daughters."

Negative remarks about wives cannot be ignored, as Mishnah Kiddushin (4:13) tells us that a wife is not to teach her children. Perhaps this is a result of the fact that women were exempt from studying Torah. But women are said to be expected to know the holy language, and it was inferred from Exodus 19:3 that women accepted Torah before men.

By and large, the evidence concerning the Jewish women's role in religion indicates that the religious privileges and functions they had were those they could participate in at home. The biblical rules in Leviticus 15 and their rabbinic interpretations restricted a woman's participation in the temple rituals. According to these rules, a priest had to be holy and ritually clean at all times. Thus, the exclusion of women as priestesses in the

cult was because of their "uncleanliness" during their monthly menstrual period, and not because of any rabbinic prejudice aimed at women.

The exclusion of women from cultic offices on the grounds of ritual impurity implied that they were ineligible to participate in ordinances of the law which were periodic in nature, such as feasts; daily appearances in the synagogue to make quorum; and periodic prayer (Witherington, 1990:9). Further, views about propriety appear to have taken away a woman's theoretical right to read the Scriptures in the synagogue. Women were the cause of sin and could lead men to immorality. As such, men were to sit separately from their wives in synagogue. Thus, women were subservient to men in every sphere of life; in marriage, family, religion, and social life.

### **1.3 WOMEN IN ANCIENT AFRICA**

This section relies heavily to oral sources which might or might not be documented in written form. However, Nangoli's work on "No More Lies About Africa" is consulted.

Women of ancient Africa led a more sheltered and subordinate life. All women in Africa were regarded as mothers. As a norm, each and every woman was to be under male domination. Needless to say, this invited marriage. As such, elderly people arranged marriages for their children. The relatives of the male child got together for close consultations as to who would be a suitable partner, and the families concerned negotiated. It was considered abnormal, unnatural, and ungodly not to be married.

Marriages are status symbols in African societies. A man is not considered a man in Africa unless he has a woman beside him. "A home without a woman is looked down upon and often ridiculed by society. The home is also shunned by people because it is considered unblessed hence cursed" (Nangoli, 1987:38). In African societies, however, men are given the status as head of the homestead. Nonetheless, there are exceptional societies, especially among the Akan tribes in Kenya where either a man or woman rules the tribe (see Mercy Amba Oduyoye's work on the matrilineal Akan tribe). At any rate, this occurs only in few societies. Therefore, one can still maintain that the domination and oppression by male is neither unique nor exclusive for Africans.

However, Africans have a subtle way of expressing male domination. As a positive attribute, women are to surrender to male domination for protection. A man has to protect and provide for his wife and children. For this reason, polygynous marriages became a role in Africa. Such marriages ensured first of all that everyone got married and stayed married. If the husband died, one of the brothers of the deceased married the widow. If the wife died, then the sister or close relative became the widower's wife. As such, women normally married twice in case of a husband's death, whereas men married as many wives whenever they deemed suitable, that is not only when their wives were dead. Viewing polygamy from a woman's standpoint it recognised man's weakness in his ability to fight off temptation to have more affection for other women.

Africans believed that if you did not allow a man to have more than one wife, you are letting him cheat on his wife. Africans have intensified the belief that men, unlike their women-folk, are naturally incapable of one relationship at a time. Although divorce was never allowed or encouraged in ancient African society, as marriage was treated as an affair of great interest in both families, the tradition encouraged open discussion of any problem. A woman was divorced if she eloped with another man. A man found in another relationship was understood and exempted, but a woman found with another man was considered ill mannered, and a call for divorce ensued. This made a man freer in marriage than a woman, and if a marriage failed, the woman was blamed.

Traditionally, the kitchen area was exclusively the domain of women. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that women do not have other roles other than those designated for the kitchen. The influence and the power of women insofar as stability in homes and survival in society is concerned, cannot be minimised. Women were regarded as peacemakers in most African societies. When men quarrelled and could not agree on an issue, it was the woman who intervened to bring the two sides together. In times of sorrow, everyone depended on women for comfort.

As far as rituals were concerned, women did take part. There were some rituals conducted specifically by women, for example, those involving child-birth and girls' initiation. At any rate, men were also involved in rituals of the homestead and those involving men such as boys' initiation. The reason behind this was that women were vulnerable and therefore not pure. By and large, African womens' social situation was

fashioned in such a way that they could not feel or perceive men's oppression. Men's reign over women was positively justified.

#### **1.4 WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA**

We live in a changing world from ancient Africa to contemporary Africa. It is important therefore to explore the dynamism involved in the position of women from different epochs. In contemporary Africa women are erupting in history. A world which was normally believed to be a man's has now become a shared world of man and woman. Both men and women are supplementing one another. An African saying that a man can build a house but it is up to a woman to turn that house to a home seems to be in principle. The kitchen is no longer a created space for women. They, like men, have brains and can work together as one.

In the new South Africa today women are holding positions of power as ministers. They are part of the decision makers, not just for their lives only but for the people at large, irrespective of race, gender and culture. They are no longer awaiting for the crumbs that fall from their masters table. That is, man-made decisions.

Literary, women of Africa are writing their own history. In 1989, the Circle of concerned African Theologians hereafter referred to as CIRCLE was convoked. It begun to meet as study institutes to plan relevant research, share results and prepare them for publication. The aim was and is to ensure direct voices of women in the designated

subject areas. And very important for the circle, is to further ensure that African women's speeches reaches the interested public as offerings coming directly from African women.

For women who have to live in Africa as Africans, it is important that this scholarly effort contributes positively to Africa's transformations. The research project is designed therefore to respond to the need for a more accurate picture of African women's lives and of the religious and cultural factors at work in shaping them.

Considering the fact that there is a change in a woman's position in society from ancient times to contemporary situation, there is surely an underlying factor on why men have decided to put women on the agenda. Women were not oppressed because they could not think and speak for themselves, or could not contribute to matters of the society at large, but they were silenced because men wanted to impose their power over women.

### **1.5 SOCIAL LOCATION AND STRATEGIES OF READING**

The reading of a biblical text is not conducted in a void. Rather a text must be interpreted in a broader social context. Any given text has a social base or background. There is always a society out of which a text sees the light of day. The text shares the same *sitz im leben* with an author who is part and parcel of that society. Indeed, no field of human knowledge can be divorced from its author's involvement. The text is the product of that knowledge, and all knowledge results from an occasion of encounter in

place. One has to be an insider, that is, contextually, writing about women being a woman. For a long time throughout history there has been a telling and retelling of women's history by men. The present study, therefore, calls for a reading within the framework of an Afrocentric-Womanist perspective, because African women especially were excluded from literacy. Small wonder that illiteracy is or was greatest among women in South Africa than the rest of Africa.

### **1.5.1 READING FROM AN AFROCENTRIC PERSPECTIVE**

Afrocentricity is the first and only reality for African people. It is a realization of what it means to be a real African. It is a rediscovery. Africans became conscientized and they are at the centre of their own history. Afrocentricity becomes everything an African does. Moreover, a conversion to Afrocentricity becomes real as you read, listen, or talk with others who share this collective consciousness. As such, Afrocentricity is our history, our mythology, our creative motif and our ethos. It exemplifies our collective will, suggests Asante (1988:6). He further sums up Afrocentricity as "the most complete philosophical totalization of African being-at-the centre of his or her existence" (1987:125).

Needless to say, Afrocentricity is an African contribution to hermeneutics, a perspective, a new approach, a new consciousness. It does not convert one by appealing to hatred, or lust, or greed, or violence. It is a centrepiece of human regeneration. Asante speaks of it as a transforming agent resulting in a transformation of attitudes, beliefs, and



behaviour (1988:2). With Afrocentricity, a new reality is invoked and a new vision introduced.

As a hermeneutical method, Afrocentricity has a different goal. It finds its reading to be in the harmonizing mission with the aim of making the world more meaningful to those who live in it and to create spaces of understanding. For Afrocentrists, the truth of the matter is the statement of position. That is, to begin somewhere, in some place with someone. You must always begin from where you are, if you are an African begin with African history and mythologies.

An Afrocentrist studies every thought, action, behaviour, and value and if it cannot be found in our culture and history it is dispersed with quickly. As it is, Afrocentricity is an interactive model rather than a distant, sterile, abstract, isolated or non-contact model (Asante, 1990:26). It finds its strengths in the co-operative and integrative function of the human experiences. This assumes that an Afrocentric perspective reinforces cultural and social immersion as opposed to "scientific distant" as the best approach to understand African phenomena. The researcher must have some familiarity or experience of the history, language, philosophy, and myths of the people they study. This is also pertinent to the study of women.

### **1.5.2 READING THE TEXT IN AND FROM THE MARGIN: AN AFRICAN WOMANIST PERSPECTIVE.**

Any study conducted by a womanist or a feminist calls for a reading or writing of the text from the accumulated experiences of a woman. A "womanist" is an African understanding of a woman making her history and a "feminist" refers to a western woman also making history. Although all these women are concerned with making their own history, the difference lies on the socio-political and cultural differences these women's experience in different societies. However, there is also a difference between a womanist perspective in the U.S and Africa. The fact that both womanist perspective in U.S and Africa emerged as a social movement can not be denied. They articulate the unique oppression of being both black and woman. But a womanist perspective started early for the African women in the U.S. These women are the minority and for people in diaspora the concern is to survive in that situation through rediscovery. In Africa women are the majority. They are oppressed as the majority by both the majority (black men) and the minority (white men) in their supposed land. Because they are the majority, the experiences they encountered in society became more or less normal. The self awareness campaign is a new discovery.

As a rule one starts reading from one's own experience before exploring others. A woman's experience differs from culture to culture and from society to society. Hence, women cannot speak in one voice, for they do not share the same experience.

African women are the triply oppressed. They are oppressed as women in a patriarchal world, and as Africans in a colonised world, and by other women. Women oppressors entail western women and the petty bourgeois, the upwardly mobile African women, that is the nouveau riche. The oppressive tendencies are clearly visible when women start working for other women. Nonetheless women were silenced and their voices were not heard for a long time. With the African Womanist perspective, however the voices of the voiceless became audible.

When one reads a biblical text from an African womanist perspective, one reads in and from the "margin." That is, one reads the text through the spectacles of the lowly, the disadvantaged, and the socially rejected. Liberation, therefore, is the destiny of this perspective. An African womanist perspective is in search of new values to substitute the old ones which are oppressive. Reading from this perspective opens the doors for an interpretation of reality based on evidence and data secured by reference to the African world voice.

#### **1.6 A RHETORICAL METHODOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PARABOLIC TEXT**

The vital importance of methodology in the study of parables is one of the reviews of recent developments in parabolic studies. A scholar who wishes to interpret the parables finds herself in a dilemma. Due to the origin of parables as oral tradition, a change to textuality causes some shift in context and in original meaning. How can one possibly retrieve the intended meaning of parables? In examining women as parables,

within the framework of an Afrocentric womanist perspective, this study will adopt a rhetorical methodology for analysis. The use of this approach and where it stems is outlined below.

### **1.6.1 WHY A RHETORICAL STRATEGY OF READING IS CALLED FOR.**

African womanist approach is rhetorical. It is rhetorical because it is functional. It functions as a liberative tool in search of new values to substitute the old ones which are oppressive. Therefore, an African womanist study takes along with the strategy of rhetoric very seriously. Thus, the present study employs the African womanist approach consonant with the rhetorical strategy as a tool. But, what does rhetoric mean?

Rhetoric is that quality in discourse by which a speaker or writer seeks to accomplish his or her purpose. It is considered as a persuasive tool, although to many biblical scholars, rhetoric implies style. Kennedy suggests three species of rhetoric, namely, the judicial, deliberative, and epideictic. The species is judicial when the author seeks to persuade the audience to make a judgement about events occurring in the past. It is deliberative when he or she seeks to persuade them to take some action in the future. And, epideictic when the author seeks to persuade the audience to hold or reaffirm some point of view in the present, as when he or she celebrates or denounces a person or quality (1984:19).

In this respect, rhetoric is a useful tool in the redaction process. As an historical phenomenon, rhetoric was originally intended to have an impact as speech, and then to be heard by a group. However, the rhetoric of historical periods can only be studied through text. Rhetorical criticism therefore takes a text as we have it with the ultimate goal of discovering the author's intent and how intent was transmitted through a text to an audience. It is for this reason that a rhetorical analysis is called for when interpreting a parabolic text. Moreover a parabolic text, as found in the New Testament, is a sacred text. Kennedy takes pain to highlight the rhetoric of sacred language as embodying five characteristics, namely, a purely revealing or evangelical character authoritatively proclaiming truth; is an immediate, formulated statements without mediation or contemplation. It is imaginistic and metaphorical, lending the reality of sensory appearance a new meaning. Its assertions are absolute and urgent, whatever does not fit with them is treated as outrageous. Its pronouncement are outside time (1984:6).

#### **1.6.2 THE PARABLE AND EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC.**

Kennedy's account on the characteristics of the rhetoric of sacred language above shares the same features with a parable which is viewed as a sacred text. This suggests therefore that a parable is rhetoric or rhetoric is parabolic.

This study proposes that woman is a parable. A parable is presented to us as a marshal that employs a short narrative fiction to reference a transcendent symbol. In its Greek meaning a parable embodies riddles and proverbs. In Hebrew the word parable means

"to be like." Therefore, a parable belongs to a connotative aspect of language employing non-literal language and "speaks" by indirection and suggestion (Scott, 1989:8).

Viewed in this manner, a parable demands interpretation precisely because it is about something else. In their own fashion, parables are formulated to fit their own purpose. As a form of speech, its original situation is communication and dialogue, an urgent endeavour on the part of the speaker towards the listener (Tolbert, 1966:18). However, a parable is free to "speak" and can be used for instruction or even warning. It can decisively alter the situation and can create a new possibility that did not exist before. In this sense, it is controlled by the audience.

Within the wider perspective of rhetoric, the model to be used in this study is that of epideictic rhetoric. Epideictic rhetoric fits neatly with the parable. That is, on the one hand, a parable is used to "instruct" or "warn" the listener, and, on the other epideictic is used when the author seeks to persuade the audience to hold or reaffirm some point of view. Therefore both the parable and epideictic share a similar setting in that there is the speaker/author and listeners/audience. Furthermore, both are persuasive.

Epideictic, therefore, is defined by the ancients as the speech of praise and blame that demonstrated the honourable and shameful (Stowers, 1986:77). Praising or blaming was the fundamental activity through which the social construction of the ancient world

was maintained. Those who gave praise or blame located each person or thing in its proper place by bestowing honour or causing shame.

Frequently, the one who praised had a relationship of inferiority or inequality with the recipient. Furthermore, the praiser honoured and sometimes encouraged the praised for his actions. Contrary to praise, blame was a response to the lack of reciprocity in a relationship. In this sense, there is a positive relationship assumed between the writer, the one who blames and the recipient, the blamed.

By contrast, the blaming letter is a mild form of censure. The writer wants to correct and maintain a positive relationship. Hence the blaming letter is one that understands not to seem to be harsh (Stowers:1986,86).

Viewed within the framework of the Epideictic, a parable functions as a tool of praise and blame. Epideictic rhetoric is constructed to serve as a vehicle of social construction. "Woman as a parable" is praised or blamed in order to alter the situation and create a new reality. It is within that framework of a new social reality that a woman is viewed as a parable.

## 1.7 SUMMARY

Women's experience, though not unique, demonstrates a common background, that of subordination to men. In antiquity, in both Athens and Rome, women did not share the

same privileges as did men. They were asked to deny themselves and were subsumed under male domination. As a result, men did not see "womanhood" as an important aspect of their identity. This became clear in the language of domination in ancient literature of antiquity. In this literature, patriarchy was the driving force of women's oppression, although patriarchy clearly existed prior to this time. Indeed, its roots are deeply embedded in every culture so that it cannot be easily eradicated. The subordination of women is apparent both the ancient world and in the colonized world. When African people are talked about, the focus tends to be on African men, and when women are talked about, the focus tends to be on white women. It is thus no surprise that one finds women's history or experiences written by men or western women fashioned in their own way and understanding.

African women were deprived of voicing their own concerns. They were not represented. Consequently, an Afrocentrist Womanist perspective in writing about women is needed. That perspective entails reading from experience. An Afrocentrist woman starts with her own history before exploring others'.

When conducting a study about women one must be an insider so as first to rediscover one's self identity. This rediscovery of oneself yields one's empowerment. Once empowered there is a possibility of changing social and political. The suggestion that a woman is a "parable" thus serves to identify how women, like parables, can alter situations and create new possibilities.



The model of rhetoric referred to above betrays the possibility of the presence of different women as reflected in different situations. Such a difference is nourished by the style the speaker or author employs to accomplish his or her purpose. Thus, the presentation of women in parables becomes important. Epideictic rhetoric, as the speech of praise and blame, is most appropriate when exploring a parabolic text. Within the wider scope of parables, and the aid of rhetoric, it also becomes interesting to explore different parables from different life situations.

The above discussion instigates three related questions. How does the author portray women in parables? To what extent does this picture connect with the whole idea of women's oppression in an androcentric world? And what is the relationship between the author's attitude to women's oppression and the wider societies? An attempt to answer these questions will be undertaken in the next chapter.

## 2. THE PRESENCE OF WOMEN IN PARABLES

### 2.0 INTRODUCTORY

A vast number of parables occur in Biblical literature and in the synoptic gospels specifically. They are presented to us today in the form of a text. Originally, however, parables were oral traditions. Jesus was no writer but an orator. Parables can thus be viewed as an endeavour on the part of the speaker to influence listeners. Jesus' parables, in particular, reflect and instruct the largely agricultural world of his listeners in order to influence them. All his examples are drawn from Galilean peasant life.

Parables can be found more or less in all cultural settings. As a form of oral tradition, parables are more than merely spoken words, they are a genre of communication that perform a social function. Thus, orality is literature in its own right and it is from orality that other textual literatures emerged.

Parables have the power to describe everyday life. Nonetheless, whilst they narrate on the level of ordinary life, this ordinariness is put under strain insofar as parables carry within their inner meanings thoughts which seem simple but grow more complex. That is, whilst parables pretend to be plain or trivial, they have the power to embrace the extraordinary. They are more important for what they do not say than for what they say. They encourage but withhold meaning, they suggest but conceal understanding.

This chapter will illustrate the presence of women in parables as found in African tradition culture and in the synoptic gospels. Such an illustration will be qualified by examining concurrently the centrality of women in parables and the roles they play. It is important to reiterate that the centrality of women in parables depends wholly on the author's intent. In these parables women are either blamed or praised. Toward the end of this chapter, the authorial view on women in parables will be challenged.

## **2.1 WOMEN IN AFRICAN PARABLES**

Since orality is a central communicative strategy in African society, parables are a crucial tool of consolidation. African oral literature is a form that has evolved a special set of principles necessary for the socialization of thought. The spoken nature of literature guarantees the widest circulation of the communal ethic and history. Its preservation and interpretation of history aims at reinforcing powerful and fundamental laws of humanity (see Finnegan 1976). In this sense its symbols are organized to appeal to a complex and varied set of communal emotions.

The above understanding and function of oral literature becomes most plausible when applied to the question of the presence and centrality of women in African parables. In an African androcentric world women are accorded the lowest position and such a position is inherently embedded in African parables.

The image of women as portrayed in African parables reflects a typical woman in a real cultural situation. Women in African parables are either portrayed positively or negatively due to their reactions to moral instructions of the society. African parables for the most part thus reflect the manner in which a woman is expected to react or behave in a stringent social code. Various themes related to womanhood are incorporated into African parables because they are deemed suitable for this specific genre.

A closer study of African parables reveals that women feature prominently and are frequently the chief characters. Firstly, they are prominent as storytellers. Storytellers teach morals or convey information. Women therefore functioned to communicate to the young expected behaviour of an African woman. Traditionally, women of advanced age told stories. Furthermore, women assumed these duties due to their closeness to nature. Every storyteller used basic plot cores or themes related to womanhood around which she built stories or parables. As such African parables have a point to make.

There is always a link between the society and the parable. I argue that women told their life stories through parables. Indeed, Mtuzze argues that women were given the role of storytellers because they always reflected life as it was and not as they imagined it (1991:72). Hence, there is always a direct correlation between literary characters and reality. African parables depicted a particular view of reality, portraying certain norms, values, and customs. It is for this reason that Amos notes that folklore did not present the entire gamut of cultural ideals and actions of a society, but presents selected domains of themes which were deemed suitable for particular genres of expressions

(1975:181). The particular view a culture has of the subject determines its qualifications of inclusion. Nevertheless, parables told by women often supported misogynist themes. They promoted the subservience of women and the domination of men.

Secondly, in the story-world of African parables, women form part of the majority of characters. Women were used in African parables to convey certain maxims and truisms that were evidence of the consensus of opinion of the whole society. They were used to instigate events as well as provide solutions in the folktales. Therefore, the focal point of analysis should not be the characters portrayed, but the ideals and values they represented. For example, polygamy is a very popular theme in African parables and is also a very common practice in traditional African society. The storytellers socialized their children about this theme, reinforcing the fact that men in traditional culture could not afford to have only one wife.

In the stringent social codes they were expected to conform to polygamous marriages. Nonetheless, in these marriages women competed for their husband's affection. This may account for male perceptions of women's "viciousness." In polygamous marriages, conflict reigned for some women. They found themselves in conflict and consequently instigated events and solutions. Sometimes, they developed hostility towards one another. Polygamy therefore led to jealousy, witchcraft and cruelty which were all features of negative labelling, that is, bad characterization. Women who developed such tendencies were blamed by the society. Following are the examples of parables showing bad characterization of women.

The parable of UNolenti (Ndibongo, 1986:33), a witch, displays the power of a jealous woman. Nolenti, because of her developed witch-like powers, bewitches a pot. This pot was able to speak, giving instructions, which if carried out without its command would cause death. In this way, Nolenti successfully destroyed two of her husband's, for they were not aware of the fact that the pot was bewitched.

The third wife, however, did not fall prey to the pot and the witch's plot is exposed. Eventually the witch and the daughter are killed by the very pot that was bewitched. Although the moral of this story is a good one, that is, teaching children not to create bad situations for others and warning that "one bad turn deserves another," it nevertheless succeeded in characterizing African women as subservient and encouraged the acceptance of polygyny.

Women are not supposed to feel jealous in polygamous marriages and certainly warned against acting on any such feelings. Whereas polygamy could be viewed as a crime, in this story it is jealousy which is criticized. A woman giving way to her feelings of jealousy developed witch-like powers that overwhelmed her and caused her to lose control. The use of the pot as a central "actor" is in fact an important vessel in a traditional rural life (and modern urban women) and highlights house chores enacted by women, for an example; women- cooking for others. The personification of a pot is not so far fetched if one analyses the important ritual of cooking and feeding, which if not done properly could lead to certain distress and feelings of insecurity.

Once more, it is not a response to polygyny that leads to bad characterization. In the parable of the "women as thieves," a similar labelling is exposed. Scheub (1975:391-95) records the tale of a certain woman who was neglected by her own son and who decided to reside with her son-in-law. Because of hunger, the woman stole sour milk from her son-in-law and was expelled from his house. Drinking sour milk as a woman at the in-law's home was a taboo in that African tradition, hence the woman was driven out of the in-law's premises.

The woman's expulsion from her in-law's home was followed by death at the jaws of a people-eating snake. Because she had a knife with her, she managed to tear the snake's stomach open and the people she found in the snake's stomach were freed. Automatically, the people wanted to show their gratitude by offering her their livestock, but she refused. This story has an ironic twist since the woman's expulsion led to the rescue of other people's lives. Again the cultural standards do not permit a woman to go to other men's homesteads. This woman, though a thief, is the heroine in the story.

Women in African parables are not only labelled as bad. There are some instances in which women assume positive positions showing good characterization. They are declared "good" if they fulfil their roles as wives as well as mothers. The wife is required to be responsible for her husband and children. She is judged on how she behaves towards her husband and how she looks after him, his household, and his children.

An ideal wife is one who is totally committed to serving the interests of her husband and children, even at the risk of martyrdom or sacrifice (Gaidzanwa, 1985:29). She should therefore be an obedient, submissive, and faithful woman.

An example of a parable portraying good characterization of African women is the parable of Mlengana in a country disabled by poverty (Ndibongo and Ntloko, 1986:57). In this parable there was one homestead that had a cow that was about to calve. Only a few days later, after the cow had given birth, the calf was slaughtered. Whenever they wanted to milk the cow they covered a dog with the calf's hide as if it were still alive. The dog went on sucking the cow until the man hit it with a stick. The dog jumped off and the hide fell. The cow saw the dog and became angry and chased the man. While the man was running for his life, a woman shouted at him, telling him to go and sit at the top of a certain stone on which they had played whilst young. In despair and anger, and still feeling flattered cow hits itself against the stone until it died.

The above parable shows the wife coming to her husband's rescue. This is what is expected of a woman in an African culture. If a woman does not rescue her husband she might find herself answerable for his death or injury, and this is what is implied in the above parable.

Scheub (1975:286), a white person who concerns himself with African parables, records another parable in this vein, entitled: "A Boy Getting Pregnant." This parable exemplifies the folly and disobedience of a young boy who was sent to fetch medicine



for his mother longing for a second child. He was warned not to take any of the medicine for himself but could not resist the temptation. He is made to suffer the embarrassment and discomfort of pregnancy and childbirth. In traditional culture it is a disgrace to see a boy feeding a baby; breast-feeding would be even worse. It is interesting to note that even boys when they have problems turn to their mothers for help and not fathers. Whilst the boy's punishment is unrealistic in its right, it nevertheless has a recognizable justice as well as what might be termed a symbolic function, since it is through her son's misfortune that the boy's mother achieves her longing for a second child.

On the whole, good women in African parables are only good insofar as they fulfil the functions that are required of them in society. A woman is seldom portrayed as good independent of her role as a nurturing figure. Thus women in African traditional culture are subject to many humiliating practices that marginalize them and rob them of their individuality and ambition. Thus, the "good" as opposed to the "bad" needs further definition. It is obvious that good women are held up as examples, even to their own detriment. The so-called bad women, on the other hand, are not criminals, they are merely individuals who fail to live up to the expectations of African traditional society. That is, "bad" and "good" depends on the interpretation of the values of a particular society. Good and bad are not absolutes.

## 2.2 WOMEN IN THE PARABLES OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

### 2.2.0 INTRODUCTORY

Compared to the literary works of the time, the Gospels contain a surprising number of references to women. As reflected in the Gospels, Christ's action towards women were always supportive and encouraging. He knew their humiliating history. And, after Jesus' death and resurrection, the evangelists likewise felt it important to give attention to women. It is important to highlight that there was a perception of reality which encouraged the evangelists to write about women.

The inclusion of women in gospel literature was significant. Resistance to ideas pertaining to women assuming vital roles in the early church, especially among Jewish Christians was profound. The Gospel writers wanted to know whether faith in Jesus implied a necessary accommodation of or breach with the world of patriarchal misogyny (Cardenas, 1986:51). Of course, they sought their answer in `Jesus' words. However, each gospel writer projected his own understanding of the *ipsissima verba Jesu*.

The evangelists' interpretation of Jesus' teachings about women is apparent in the portrayal of women in parables. Although women featured in large numbers, they were only minimally present in the parables. Of the thirty to forty parables in canonical and non-canonical literature, only five depicted women and their world. Most of the characters in early literature are men (Praeder, 1988:100).

Therefore, most parables depicted the relationship and work-worlds of men. Only the parable of the "Judge and the Widow" in Luke and the parable of the "Ten Maidens" in Matthew depicted the relationship of men and women. However, there are no narratives portraying men and women in relationships of partnership. In both narratives, the female counterparts, the "widow" and the "maidens" are cast in subordinate roles. The judge is the centre of the widow's existence, and the maidens whether sleeping or walking exist to meet the bridegroom. None of the parables portray women in dominant roles as mistress.

Parables always supplement one another. In particular, no parable featuring a woman's world occurs alone in a row. Parables set in a woman's domestic world follow parables set in the male world of agriculture or animal husbandry [cf "Lost Sheep" and "Lost Coin" parables]. This absence suggests that women and their worlds were assigned complementary, subordinate, or supplementary roles in the story world of the parabolic universe. In the following section I expose the role of women in the symbolic universe of the synoptic gospel parables. Pertinent to this exposure is the fact that parables always betrayed their social situation. The crucial point they make is always based in their situation in life. That is, the parables and the evangelists always shared the same social background.

### 2.2.1. WOMEN IN THE PARABLES OF MARK

Mark was one of the earliest evangelists to record the Jesus tradition. Throughout his literary history, however, there is no trace of the fact that he was ever concerned with the record of women. The absence of specific women parables in his gospel does not mean that he was silent about women. He was no misogynist. Viewed in its wider perspectives, his gospel reveals elements that can be identified by womanist theologians.

The reflection of women in the Gospel of Mark assumes that women were composite characters in the Markan world. They were part of the audience of Jesus. And, the problem of audience is a poignant one. In the evangelists' interlocation, the audience of Jesus is symbolically represented in concentric circles. At the centre was Jesus. Around him were his disciples, viewed as the chief followers of Jesus, followed by his opponents the Pharisees, and the crowd. The disciples and the crowd evoked the composite image of the followers of Jesus. As such, the Gospel of Mark reveals that the Markan portrait of the followers of Jesus is both composite and complex. It is composite in that it does not only include the twelve male disciples, but also the crowd.

Women were part of the crowd of the Markan Gospel. Women shed light on what it meant to follow Jesus and were especially appropriate, according to Mark, for the role of illuminating followership (Malbon, 1983:29). Other commentators have suggested that the women of Mark are to be viewed as models of discipleship. Schmitt (1981: 228-33),

posits that women provided a positive model of discipleship compared to the negative model represented by the twelve male disciples. On this point, Moltmann-Wendell (1987:110) argues that the Markan perspective highlights the fact that women were in fact the true disciples.

Nevertheless, Munro sees Mark so caught up in the patriarchal Galilean order that he suppressed the discipleship of women (1979:234-5). The positive image of women, therefore, was suppressed by the Markan author due to the androcentric bias of his culture which viewed women in terms of their relationship to men, usually as mothers, wives, or daughters (1982:225-41). This fact caused the Markan author to relegate women to a position of invisibility in parables.

However, Mark does record how Jesus attended to women and their needs. His account of the healing of females suggested that Jesus did not limit his healing powers to one gender. The public healing of a woman was thus a provocative act. One can envisage a woman's situation in an androcentric world where deprivation is her status.

In Mark's gospel we have examples of women being praised for faith. The haemorrhaging woman in Mark 5:25-34 emerged from a great crowd that followed Jesus. The presence of this woman, a presence generally obscured by the androcentric nature of the language that the Markan writer uses (masculine forms for all gender), is distinguished from other women and men in the crowd. She is bold and her faith is strong. She reasoned within herself that Jesus' power was such that the touching of his

garments would provide healing (5:28). She was proved right. The healing of this woman is unique in the Markan gospel, it takes place solely at the woman's initiative (5:28-29). Jesus feels the flow of power that stops her blood (5:30) and confirms that she will be healed. Schierling points out that the haemorrhaging woman suffered as Jesus for she was bleeding for twelve months.

Mark recognizes the suffering of this woman in society as similar to that which Jesus experienced before death. The Markan Jesus brings to an end the haemorrhaging woman's physical and social suffering with no reference to the ritual contamination cited in Leviticus (5:3): "If someone unintentionally touches anything of human origin that is unclean, he is guilty as soon as he realizes what he has done". Physically, the woman was relieved from six to twelve months bleeding. Socially, the Markan Jesus highlighted the symbolic status of the purity and impurity that was thought to defile a person. Indeed, in the first century, women were banned from worship in Canaan during their monthly period.

This sort of ceremonial uncleanness was considered a major impediment to a woman's full participation in the synagogue. Nonetheless, for Jesus ceremonial uncleanness was not a problem. It is bold faith, not bodily purity, that is a criterion for fellowship. The woman knew that what she had done was not socially acceptable. However, she acquired a new role in the world of Jesus. It is for this reason that Schierling finds Mark's gospel permeated by a reversal of expectation.

The syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-30 also characterizes bold faith. The woman reasons with Jesus that Gentiles can be served with no loss to Jews (7:28), that is, they can be attended to although they are non-Jews, and the Markan Jesus decides that she was right. The healing of the syrophenician woman's daughter is the only Markan healing that occurs at a distance from Jesus. The Syrophenician Woman's clever reply to Jesus' saying is presented as convincing (7:29). As an outsider, as a Gentile and a woman, she achieves her desire, not so much by a witty remark, but by a faith.

Despite the insult embedded in Jesus' saying, the woman is not put off. She is similar to the persistent widow of Luke 18:1-8. Jesus' willingness to talk to and help this woman is proof of his rejection of the rabbinic teachings concerning discourse with women and uncleanness of Gentiles, Witherington (1987:65).

Pertinent to the women in Mark's survey is the action of the self-denying woman in Mark 12:41-44, "The Widow's Mite." The widow deposited in the temple collection boxes a paltry sum, the smallest in circulation. This incidence might well be understood as an enacted parable parallel to the "fig tree" incident (Mark 11:20-25).

That episode introduced a series of controversies between Jesus and Jewish leaders in the temple; the account of the poor widow's gift closed the series. Great emphasis is placed on the widow's situation in life. She has nothing - no one or anything to count on. What she deposited in the collection box was useless from an economic standpoint. The rich gave a great deal and the abundance of the rich appeared side-by-side with

the want of the widow. She gives all and is in striking contrast to the scribes who take all. Nevertheless, she gives something the rich cannot give. For this reason, Jesus points to the destitute widow as a model. Faced with the contrast, Jesus decides to delve into the widow's act versus the scribe's. Jesus drew the disciples' attention to this final act in the temple in order to help them see the importance of the Kingdom of God.

It is from the widow's actions that the disciples learnt about the Kingdom of God. The widow does what any follower of Jesus must do to have absolute confidence in God. Jesus called the disciples to gather around him and listen. He used the stock-introducing-formula, "AMEN I SAY TO YOU," which always served a notice of a final outcome or definite answer (Cardenas, 1986:58). For Jesus, what the rich give is religious compromise. They give and risk nothing. What the widow gives is what she has to live on. She gives herself to God altogether. She knows how to offer true worship to God. She then becomes a fully fledged citizen of the Kingdom of God.

The account of the "Widow's Mite" is a good example of an action parable in Mark. It can be termed "action parable" because Jesus is not using the language of "likeness," but something is happening and later on he explains the incident to the disciples. The Jewish authority is challenged over the widow's offering.

The historical reality of this woman's lower status and the historical reality of women disciples together generally supports Mark's characterisation of women who exemplify the demands of followership (Parvey, 1974:117-149). Mark's women characters are



good and positive because they are bold and self denying. However, not all women in Mark are depicted as followers of Jesus, just as not all followers in Mark are women.

### 2.2.2 WOMEN IN THE PARABLES OF MATTHEW

Matthew had before him the traditional story of Jesus which was first written by a Markan author. Mark's Gospel was intended above all for those who were not Jews. As a Jew, Matthew wanted to tell the story of Jesus all over again, in his own way for the Jewish community among whom he lived. He wanted to win over Jews to the cause of Jesus. For Matthew, Jesus was the new king of Israel, who rejected his own people in favour of the new church, the new community of Jews and Gentiles (Moltmann-Wendel, 1987:122).

Matthew is presumed to have had conservative attitudes of subordinating women to men. There is no doubt that the author of the Gospel of Matthew wrote from an androcentric perspective. Whether the author is male or female, the story-world embodies patriarchal assumptions. There are many examples that illustrate this pervasive androcentricism. The opening genealogy stands out from the patriarchal background where the man makes history, the birth story centres around Joseph, and positions of power and status, including those of the Jewish leaders and the disciples, are all characterised as male.

Where do women stand in this most Jewish gospel? Examining the position of women in his gospel, Matthew made compromises. Because of his character and his upbringing, he found the stories about women in the gospel of Mark hard to take. But they were so much part of the gospel, of the message of the new church, that he could not ignore them. Thus, one may argue, Matthew had some interest in themes involving women. However, he also stressed an informed and reformed male leadership for the community that followed Jesus. Matthew took a different view about marriage to that which Mark had reported (Mark 10:17). He viewed the husband as the sole arbiter of divorce, men could divorce their wives in cases of adultery (5:32; 19:1). It was beyond his powers of imagination that a husband could forgive an unfaithful wife.

Although Matthew shows a discriminatory attitude towards women, specifically the super-ordination of men over women, he exclusively and explicitly characterizes male disciples as being of little faith. By contrast, he says of only one person, a woman, in his gospel, "your faith is great" (15:28). Thus, the theme of male-female reversal (those first becomes last and those last becomes first) is somewhat in evidence in most Jewish of all gospels. Women in Matthew are prominent in stories demonstrating faith. Wire views this as due to the fact that exemplary faith is considered most wonderful where least expected (1991:104).

The "Haemorrhaging Woman" in Matthew 9:20-22 and especially the "Canaanite Woman" in 15:21-28 play important roles. Both women are supplicants and members of the marginalized. The woman with the haemorrhage is ritually unclean. The Canaanite

woman is a Gentile. They appear alone with no indication of an embedded status in a patriarchal family. The way they are introduced emphasizes their double marginality. However, both exhibit initiative faith in their approach to Jesus, and the Matthean Jesus highlights their faith. That characterization is typical of the women who came to Jesus for help, but in Matthew's gospel the characterisation is extended to include women who are supporters of Jesus.

Nevertheless, even though women play an important part in the Matthean narrative, gender seems to prevent their identification as disciples. For Anderson (1981:16), female-gender in Matthew is paradoxically a strength and a weakness. Gender makes these women doubly marginal, but at the same time, gender heightens their accomplishments. Gender creates a contrast between their model of faith and the failings of those more privileged, such as the Jewish leaders and disciples. Indeed, these women dislocated in any patriarchal family structure show great initiative and are rewarded. Gender, therefore, is not a barrier to faith. In Matthew, the women's role is not unnoticed but is used to challenge others. Observers learn humility and faith from women. Nonetheless, women remain subordinate. The disciples, especially the twelve in Matthew, are topological; they stand for leaders in the Matthean community. Women are only used as examples; no special role is given to them.

In view of Matthew's androcentric bias, Witherington shows no strain in saying, "the Matthean editing of various Markan stories give little or no indication to any attempts to highlight women or their roles" (1990:230). Further, Matthew is not averse to adding

material that reflects negatively on women. This is apparent in the only parable about women, the kingdom parable.

The parable of the "Wise and Foolish Virgins" or "Ten Maidens" (25:1-13), unique to Matthew, represents both positive and negative impressions of women. It is singular in both its commendation of some women and its condemnation of others. From the point of view of a study on women and their roles, this is somewhat anomalous (Witherington, 1984:41). It is the only place in the gospels where Jesus utters any criticism either directly or metaphorically. The characterization of maidens as wise and foolish is unusual in the parables of Jesus, but characteristic to Matthew in the section of the coming of the kingdom.

This parable manifests the feature of a dramatic parable in Matthew, where human actions and decisions engage the hearers. The drama of the parable comes in contrast to the two groups. The delay of the bridegroom creates the maidens' lack of insight in their preparedness. The wise are prepared and the foolish are unprepared. They sleep and when the bridegroom's arrival is announced they try to remedy the situation, first by asking for oil from the wise maidens, then by seeking to buy oil. Their "foolishness" meets with a double refusal. The other maidens do not share their oil and the bridegroom does not open the door to the wedding feast. According to Via, this is a "tragic parable" in which the central thrust is the failure of the foolish maidens to take adequate preparations (1967:125).

The maidens failure in the face of the eschaton is as evil as revelling in its delay (Donahue, 1990:105). For Jeremias, the parable illustrates the theme of Jesus' teaching, "it may be too late" and is directed at the Jewish leaders who are delaying in responding to the coming of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus (1972:174-175).

The tradition that Matthew appropriates often stands in tension with the gospel. It contains some of the most anti-Jewish statements in the New Testament while being the most Jewish in tone and content. Nevertheless, the question still stands: Why did Matthew use women as characters in illustrating the delay of the kingdom? The answer, I suggest, revolves around the role of women as the objects of "shame" and the examples of anti-intellectualism in the first century Palestine.

The way Matthew depicts women betrays his traditional culture and socialization. The Jewish leaders' arrogance and inability to respond to the news of the kingdom resembles, for Matthew, a woman's character. Even though Matthew included healings and parables of women in his gospel, he had no intention to elevate them. They stay forever under male dominion.

### **2.2.3 WOMEN IN THE PARABLES OF LUKE**

With Luke we enter a different world from that portrayed in Matthew and Mark. Luke's gospel emanates less from the mystery of nature or the threat of judgement than from the mystery of human interaction. Thus, the gospel according to Luke emerges out of

real life situations. He does not develop his theological concern about Jesus in a vacuum. His treatment of material is evidence of deliberate editorial work influenced by a specific theological hermeneutic.

As Maddox (1982) suggests, like many other gifted writers, Luke felt the urge to express his opinion about subjects that interested him. In 4:16-30, the writer indicates that the liberation of the oppressed and the poor is an essential part of any ministry modelled on the teachings of Jesus. As such, the evangelist of the third gospel is interested in social outcasts and portrays the Lord's deep concern for the ostracized.

Luke shows great concern about riches, poverty, and the use of possessions. Reference to these matters are frequent. He introduced a substantial amount of material that speaks of Jesus as caring for the disadvantaged. He also gives special attention to those who stand in more need. Johnson (1983:13) maintains that Luke's gospel is for the poor.

The poor are viewed as privileged in the eyes of God. They are among the social rejects and Luke situates his Jesus among them. They are the subordinates and the rich are the super-ordinates. Their situation invites protection, and with the coming of the Messiah we find the reversal of fortunes. Hence, God's news is directed at the poor as blessing and are heard by the rich only as woe. But who are the poor, the needy, and the disadvantaged in Luke?

O'Toole argues that Luke enlightens the reader about women (1984:125). For him, Luke stresses again and again that women were among the oppressed that Jesus came to liberate. He saw their lot as among the disadvantaged of society and wanted his reader to realize that they were the favourites of the Saviour. Right from the beginning of the Gospel, Luke identifies to whom Jesus would direct his activity.

For Talbert, Luke's purpose is evident in the prologue and continues in the entire book (1978:124). In the Magnificat (1:53), Mary praises God for the blessings of the Messiah: "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away." The same Mary describes herself as "the low estate of his handmaid." Luke intends to let us to see Mary as a key link between the life of Jesus and the life of the church. In this way, Luke presents women as active participants in God's Messianic purpose.

Women are thus examples of the lowly exalted as part of an eschatological reversal that breaks into history with, in, and through the person of Jesus. In the first place, the promise of the Saviour to the Patriarchs is now fulfilled through a woman, the one with no social status. Hence, Luke shows without resentment that men and women complement one another. He displays his interest in male-female parallelism. Luke perceives both men and women working side by side, God's initial intention in Genesis. This is evident both in Luke's noted pairing of parables where men appears first and then women vice versa. These pairs help us to understand further his stance towards women.

Luke points to a man (11:5-13) and to a widow (18:1-8) to encourage the disciples in steadfastness and confidence in prayer. Luke thus unites women to his theme of prayer and illustrates that they, like men, stay in Jerusalem and await the promise of the father. The Lukan author always fashions both men and women in similar roles. The man who loses his sheep goes after it until he finds it (Luke 15:3-7) and the woman who loses a coin sweeps the house and seeks diligently until she finds it (Luke 15:8-10).

The lost sheep and the lost coin are considered twin parables. They play on the contrast between man and woman, and perhaps between rich and poor. Indeed, they play on the contrast between the roles men and women assumed in Jesus' time. The Lukan author considered their work for equally good points of analogy to describe the activity of the heavenly father in finding the lost. They could have been cited for their carelessness, though Jesus chose to use each as an example in a positive manner, as an indication of his desire to show that even a fallible man and woman are equally good examples of God's activity.

These Lukan pairs of men and women suggest an equality. As Flender (1967:10) concludes, Luke expresses by this arrangement that man and woman stand side by side before God. They are equal in honour and grace and they are endowed with the same gifts and have the same salvific benefits. God, Christ, and the disciples act in their lives in similar fashions.



Furthermore, men and women have similar experiences and fulfil similar functions. They believe and proclaim the gospel message. However, they are alike in their sins. This assumes that Luke's universality, like his attitude towards the disadvantaged in general, depends on God's own attitude. God and Christ show no partiality, unless it be toward the disadvantaged. Women therefore, as members of the secluded group, the second class citizens with no social status, resume that privilege of being the favourites of Christ.

More than any evangelist, Luke emphasizes Jesus' concern for the widows. The text as it is needs to be seen in relation to much a wider ideology of widowhood. Widows, more disadvantaged than other women, were particular favourites of Luke. Their needy and sometimes pitiable circumstances and their sense of prayer, determination, and generosity stirred his heart. It must be noted, therefore, that Luke wrote his gospel against the background of this social reality. Social security or life insurances did not exist in those days, and for this reason a widow was not well provided for when her husband died. We have an example of the prophetess Anna who lived for seven years with her husband and for the rest of her life, she was a devoted woman who did not leave the temple but worshipped by fasting and prayer day and night. (Luke 2:36-38). She fulfils the definition which the author of I Timothy gives a widow, "She who is a real widow is left alone, has set hope in God and continues in supplication and prayers day and night (I Tim.5:5).

A widow functions in the parable of the "Unjust Judge" (Lk.18:1-8) as an example to the disciples that they ought to pray and not lose heart. The writer's choice of a woman in need of help as an example for the disciple, indicates Jesus' sympathy and concern for this particular group of people in a male oriented society.

In the parable, the narrator presents the related and interwoven issues resulting from unequal social classes and intersocial relationships by using a widow-judge pattern. In the social map of first century Palestine, a widow represented a member of the lowest social class, one without protection and honour. At the same time she is an object of shame. By contrast, the judge was an image of the powerful elite, wealthy, and honoured.

In reality, the significant role of the judge is to maintain justice. He is omnipotent and his position is unassailable. In the first century, judges were expected to serve widows, orphans, and foreigners, as the second class citizens who made up a special class in need of protection. The interaction between the judge and the widow was meant to be part of the metaphorical system that reflected the understanding and experience of God. Because of the judge's power in society, the widow persistently came to him for vindication from her opponents. Her steadfast determination brought the judge to do his duty. This parable should be seen as a struggle between the widow and the judge, for the widow's legal opponents played no part in the story. Thus what is celebrated in this parable is the woman's attitude and activity in fighting for her rights and that justice be accorded to her. The woman, and not the judge, gains victory in the end.

Similarly, Lk.15:8-10 is an interesting example of a parable that involves a woman. Jesus draws an analogy between the activity of a female and God. The behaviour of a woman who turns her house upside down because she lost one coin is seen as a characteristic of God's activity and concern for sinners. This parable should not be seen as an analogy between a woman searching for a lost coin and a person seeking the kingdom (see Matthew 13:34-5). The parable intends to show God's love for the seeking of the lost and his joy over their salvation. Luke emphasizes the aspect of joy and peace which Jesus brought by his coming.

Luke dedicates the whole of chapter 15 to this theme of joy. A shepherd, having found one lost sheep as well as a father, seeing his lost son returning home, invited neighbours to rejoice with him and is indicative. Thus joy, peace, and hope are promised to those whom society rejects.

The parables of the "Lost Coin" (Lk.1:8-10) and the "Unjust Judge and the Widow" (Lk.18:1-8) are the only parables in the gospel where women are depicted as victorious. Jesus in Luke addresses the lowest social group exemplified in the widow, who is without possession, name, or status. In these two parables, justice is done to a woman regardless of her social position. It is not accidental that the most liberating message to women and the oppressed is summed up in another woman's song, the "Magnificat." What significance does this song have in Luke? It shows that in the dispensation of Jesus' reign there will be no distinction between the rich and the poor as in the case of

the unjust judge and the widow. Such class distinctions as exist in the parable will not exist in future because people will all be alike. For the kingdom to be established, disciples have to persevere in prayer as the widow of the parable did. They should believe that their prayers will be answered because God is waiting to give his children the gift of love, unlike the unjust judge, who acted on behalf of the widow out of convenience.

By and large, women in Luke, especially in the parables, serve as good examples to follow. Luke had a gentle heart towards them and his gospel can be alternatively called the gospel of women. He elevates women from the beginning to the end of his gospel. He placed them firmly on the stage of the drama of redemption and let the light of eternity shine on them. In this way, Luke made women exemptive of his soteriological framework (Van der Walt, 1988:27).

### **2.3 SIMILARITIES AND DISSIMILARITIES IN THE PARABLES CONCERNING WOMEN**

The fact that women play a subordinate role in all socio-cultural backgrounds cannot be denied. Whoever wrote about women and their roles wrote under the intense pressure of androcentric bias on ideas pertaining to women. Such a person therefore either wrote as a deviant to androcentric norms and values to elevate women or wrote as an oppressor, intensifying women's situation in a male oriented world. One can talk of a

honour/shame pattern visible in parables. Intrinsic in all these parables is either praise or blame.

In African parables and the parables according to Luke, women played a central role. However, their centrality in these parables does not automatically suggest that they were honoured. Luke exceptionally portrays them positively. He shows no qualms in honouring them. His attitude toward women was then unique and he was surely opposed to the views and attitudes prevalent in his time.

However, for Luke women yield the way and alter the situation so stifling for them. For instance, the news of the birth of the saviour was brought to Mary personally (Lk 1:28-35). Once more, Elizabeth qualifies in her prophecy a new dispensation where women, and not men make history. All justification of the intent to subjugate a person by reason of sex has vanished, (Cardenas, 1986:53).

As such, Luke treats people of both sexes as people, responsible individuals each with their own talents, needs, and failures. This is apparent in the twin parables of the "Lost Sheep" and "Lost Coin", where both man and woman carelessly lost their possessions but are both depicted as victorious.

In the parable of the persistent widow a woman is praised by showing strong character by pestering a judge in doing his job. Women characterization in Lukan parables is

therefore absolutely impressive and could not be matched with any other women parables.

Parallel to the Lukan parables about women are African parables. Although women also play a central role in these parables, they differ considerably. These parables are in no way trying to elevate women. Women in African parables are only employed to perpetuate and depict men's views as some kind of reality on how women are supposed to conform in their world. Viewed in this manner, women in an African society will stay forever under male domination. However, some women characters in these parables show initiative in trying to sort their way out of the situation, (Ndibongo, 1986:33). Unfortunately, women of this character are blamed by the society and as such are silenced. It is only when they comply to so called "social etiquette" that they are praised. Thus, women parables in an African traditional culture intensify women's oppression where the phrase 'woman' is always read to indicate or to mean "those who enjoy incomplete rights" in a patriarchal society. Nonetheless, women in these parables are the ones who preach the gospel.

Unlike the Lukan or African parables concerning women, Matthew in his only parable about women, "The Ten Maidens" (Mtt 25:1-13), had a split decision, he is neutral. He did not want to praise or blame women outright. Half of the women were portrayed as "wise" and the other half as "foolish."

Therefore, Matthew does not take a real stand on women's presupposed roles. He does not commit himself to women. He fits neatly with the male chauvinists of his time who considered it absurd to place women and men on the same plane. He simply makes use of women as examples in showing the situation of the end of time. One may ask therefore why did he have to involve women in his end of time parable: what about the present time? Where were these invisible, shadowy little creatures during Jesus' birth, His earthly ministry, and death parables? Again this shows Matthew's lack of interest in women characters. For him women were far from making history, the world as it was remained a men's world. Men will always be at the centre of history, sociologically, ideologically and politically.

## **2.4 SUMMARY**

Parables are understood as the language of conflict which at the same time rectify the situation. In a culture in which women are not supposed to be seen or heard, one learns, especially in parables, more about their roles. Thus in parables women are employed by different authors in different situations for different reasons. The author concerned either elevates women or consolidates their position in a patriarchally nourished society.

As portrayed in African parables women play a central role which at the same time is subordinate. They are central in that they pioneer African parables both as storytellers and characters, with a duty of reinforcing to the young ones as well as other women the codes of conduct and expected behaviour towards males in an African world. Thus the

African society through parables impedes women's position and they remain subordinates.

The synoptic gospel parables have their origin in Jesus' tradition. And, Jesus exceptionally deals with women so tenderly as a result the gospel writers were to set their standards from him. All the gospels showed women's strong character, the faith and initiative of the marginal. They revealed greater perseverance, greater loyalty and greater faith than even the twelve. Such women altered the situation, for they do something unusual in a male oriented world. This entails the Haemorrhaging and the Syrophenician woman in both Mark and Matthew and the widow in Luke as good examples.

However, as far as the parabolic stories are concerned, Mark among the evangelists did not concern himself with women parables. Probably Mark was caught up in the androcentric bias of his society. His gospel is declared a parable on its own since other evangelists drew information from him and took pains to reinterpret it. Nevertheless, some evangelists shared the same sentiments with those of Jesus concerning women in their parables. Luke appropriated so explicitly women's equality to men and her new assumed roles in society, in his parables. In his work Luke highlights that mere chronological priority does not mean anything and emphasizes the theme of the reversal of fortunes.



Irrespective of the fact that Matthew depicted women in parables, he did not share the same values for elevating women as Luke in his parables. For him, women remained under male rule. At any rate, he did not want to come out clearly in oppressing women though his work insinuates women's oppression. His only woman parable was neutral about women. In the same parable he praises and blames women alike. Nevertheless, none of the two groups assume roles of power. Hence the next chapter dwells on the parable of the "Ten Maidens," applying the "praise and blame"/ epideictic rhetoric in revealing the author's intent for using women characters.

### 3. AN ANALYSIS OF THE PARABLE OF THE TEN MAIDENS: MATTHEW 25:1-13.

#### 3.0 INTRODUCTORY

The translation of the parable from the cultural and social context that influenced it to the present initiates various redactional processes that signal manifold reinterpretations. Indeed, since Jesus spoke Galilean Aramaic, and because his parables were translated, another interpretation was advanced. Because of these redactional and contextual changes, we find multi-levelled meanings. As such, two horizons are developed. There is the world of first century Christians who saw their culture re-enacted in parables, and there is the world of the author. This dual respective being the case, how does one go about interpreting the parable of the "Ten Maidens"?

This chapter will focus on previous interpretations of the parable among them studied by Dodd, Jeremias, Linnemann and Herzog. The first three scholars were influenced by one of the leading parabolic scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries namely Julicher. The chapter will also draw on the influences of historical critical methods. However, the main thrust of the chapter will be to interpret the parable from the perspective of an epideictic rhetorical method consonant with an African Womanist hermeneutic.

### **3.1. A SAMPLE OF PREVIOUS INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 25:1-13.**

The history of parabolic interpretation has been characterized by continuous modification, correction and schematization (Mazamisa, 1987:90). From the patristic period to the end of the nineteenth century, "allegory" played a key role in parabolic interpretation. Indeed, many exegetes, among them Bornkamm, contended that Matthew 25:1-13 was initially an allegory.

An allegory is a story, play, poem, or picture in which meaning of the message is represented symbolically. As Perkins observed, the most common allegory applies God/word of God/Jesus to the central character or item in a parable and Christians and various classes of humans to those who react or fail to react to the situation provided by the story (1981:101). That is, in allegory, there is the central figure representing God and the two opposing parties. One party viewed as the Christians always react positively to the situation and the other party fails to conform to the given situation.

The parable of the "Ten Maidens" gained more attention during this era. A representative example of an allegorical interpretation of this period is Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the "Ten Maidens." However, when a new day in parable research dawned, "justice has not been done concerning the present parable. Many scholars have been theoretical, fixing other parables as examples in their historical analysis. For example, parables of the Good Samaritan and that of the Prodigal son are found more or less in every period of interpretation. Almost every scholar has

commented on these parables. Hence, the present study attempts to reinterpret the parable of the "Ten Maidens."

The history of interpretation of this parable has to take into consideration the various scholars who have made a contribution on its interpretation. We now consider established scholars in the field of parabolic interpretation.

### 3.1.1. DODD

Dodd noted that parables were perhaps the most characteristic element of Jesus' teachings. Through the parables, Jesus proclaimed the nearness of the reign of God and communicated the spiritual truths and moral insights related to its advent (Herzog, 1989:10). In this respect, Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God was the key to the parables. Dodd therefore viewed the parable as indicative of what he termed a "Kingdom Parable".

In his work, Parables of the Kingdom, Dodd rejected the allegorical method proposed by Julicher. He acknowledged that whilst Julicher had laid the foundation for parabolic interpretation, his method demanded a more contextually oriented analysis.

In interpreting the parables, Dodd adopted a two-fold method, namely, to explore the eschatological dimension of parables and to determine the original intention of a given parable in its historical setting. Moreover, it is generally viewed that

"the eschatological nature of the parables confronts the interpreter with the task of finding out, if (she or) he can, the setting of a parable in the situation contemplated by the gospel, and hence the application which would suggest itself to one who stood in that situation"  
(Kissinger, 1979:118).

For Dodd, because the parables are works of art, and as such have significance beyond their original occasion, their teaching may be applied to all situations. His analysis of the parables leads to a theology of history which is characterized by crisis rather than evolution. The parables of crisis are intended to refer to the expected second advent of Christ. The parables of crisis exhort their hearers to watchfulness, and the most elaborate of these parables is the Ten Maidens.

The parable of the "Ten Maidens" is introduced as a Kingdom parable. The parable was utilised by the church in answering the questions instigated by the delay of the Parousia. At any rate, the Matthean audience was in crisis. Hence, the parable is purported to have an eschatological message. The parable heralded the warning that its listeners should be prepared for the advent of the Son of man, and the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The moment of crisis is represented by the return of the bridegroom and this is paralleled with the return of the master in the parables of the Waiting servants and the Faithful and the Unfaithful servants. Dodd (1961: 128) asserts that the dramatic detail is intended to emphasize the folly of unpreparedness and the wisdom of preparedness.

In the parables of the "Ten Maidens" and the "Waiting Servants," hearers are urged to discern "the signs of times" and to repent before it is "too late." They are warned about the grave perils that await those who refuse God's invitation to the Kingdom. They must remain alert and act with resolution lest they be caught unprepared. Consequently, the atmosphere is charged with both peril and possibility.

However, the preparedness Jesus proposed is not demanded for some future event, but for the developments actually in process in the ministry of Jesus. Indeed, Dodd asserts that it is possible to give all the "Kingdom Parables" meaning within the context of the ministry of Jesus. They were intended to enforce Jesus' appeal to people to recognize that the Kingdom of God was present, and that by their conduct they would judge themselves as faithful or unfaithful, wise or foolish. When the crisis passed, they were adapted to enforce the Kingdom parables' appeal to men to prepare for the second and final crisis which it believed to be approaching (1961:122-39).

Dodd demonstrates to us that the primary intention of the parables is not to make a moral point. Rather, the parables interpret life by imitation. The coming of the Kingdom

of God in the parable of the "Ten Maidens" is likened with the coming of the bridegroom to the wedding feast.

### 3.1.2. JEREMIAS

Jeremias acknowledged his dependence upon the works of Dodd and Julicher. He noted that Dodd's work in particular opened a new era in the study of parables. In his interpretation of the parables, he has tied the parables to a specific context in Jesus' ministry, so that not only a 'single point', but also a 'single situation' methodology is employed. He thus situates parables in the same context of "crisis" that Dodd's analysis supported.

In recovering the original significance of parables, Jeremias maintained that one thing, above all, became evident, namely that Jesus's parables compelled his hearers to "come to a decision about his person and mission" (Jeremias, 1972:230). One may conclude that the parables represented a particular trustworthy tradition and that they brought the reader into an immediate relationship with Jesus.

Nevertheless, parables confronted the reader with a difficult task. The problem, as Jeremias viewed it, was essentially that parables were not literary productions. Parables were ultimately and rhetorical apologetic in nature. They corrected, reprovved, and attacked the situation.

However, parables as they are have come down to us having a "double" historical setting. There is the original historical setting in some specific situation in the activity of Jesus. For example, Jeremias argued that Jesus was never tired of expressing the central ideas of his message in constantly changing images. The parable of the "Ten Maidens" is situated in Jesus' situation. "It may be too late" (Jeremias, 1966:135-41). Thus the reader is urged to be on the look-out in case "it may be too late" to acknowledge the signs of the end of time.

The other historical setting of the parables is grounded in the primitive church. Before they assumed a written form, they 'lived' in the early Christian community which employed the words of Jesus for purposes of preaching and teaching. The church collected and arranged Jesus' sayings in accordance with her special needs. Matthew's understanding of the parable of our study belongs to the Parousia and the realisation of the delay of Christ's return. The primitive church therefore related the parable to its concrete situation. Thus, in studying parables, it is important to be aware of the differences between the situation of Jesus and that of the primitive church.

Jeremias maintained that as soon as we ascertain the original historical setting of the parables, we meet with definite principles of transformations. Not only the vocabulary of Jesus' sayings was changed, but also the Palestinian background was translated into terms of Hellenistic environment. There was also the change of audience. No wonder the parable of the "Ten Maidens" was accessible to all generations. Jeremias believed



that the parable was originally addressed to the Pharisees, but that the primitive church related it to Jesus' disciples, and so applied it to the Christian community.

The most important result of Jeremias' study of the setting is that there was a strong tendency to add to the parables conclusion in the form of generalizing sayings. The intention of the conclusion was to give parables the widest possible application. The "watch therefore" (v.13) in the parable of the "Ten Maidens" betrays that possible range of application.

Although Jeremias' analysis of the parable, like Dodd's before him, was the object of both positive and negative criticism, it has generally been agreed that he rendered a significant service to biblical scholarship insofar as he stressed the need to recover the point of the original parables.

### 3.1.3. LINNEMANN

Linnemann made a significant contribution towards parabolic interpretation. She wrote during the early sixties, at a time when feminism was still dormant. As a result, her works were dominated by males. She followed step by step Fuch's presentation of new hermeneutic for parabolic interpretation.

Her chief contribution was that she made available to a wider, non-scholarly audience, the main themes of hermeneutical analysis. This audience was deprived access in

understanding the parable interpretation. First and foremost, Linnemann described four types of figurative speech, a knowledge of which was indispensable she argued, for the interpretation of parables. These figures of speech indicated similitude, the parable proper, the illustration, and the allegory [1966:3-12].

In her analysis, it becomes evident that parables were "language events." Central to Linnemann's view therefore was the fact that parables were set in the context of the opposition between narrator and hearer. Such oppositions penetrated the depths of existence, and most of Jesus' parables are addressed to the kind of situation in which the opposition is very pronounced.

Linnemann's reading of the parable of the "Ten Maidens" calls for a reading with a picture of the situation of the church addressed by the parable. For Linnemann, the early church shared with late Judaism the expectation of the end of the world (1966:126).

The parable of the "Ten Maidens" assumes that the wedding was a current image of the time of the end. If the church expected the coming of the Lord, that would easily suggest the coming of the bridegroom in the parable. The thought that the return of Christ was keeping the Maidens waiting would suggest the delay of the bridegroom. Nonetheless, parables do not all communicate revelations in picture language of what the kingdom of God is like. They intend mainly to move the hearer to assess correctly what is needed here and now, which is preparedness in the parable of the "Ten Maidens."

In her exposition of the parable, Linnemann mingles the "picture part" and the "reality part", that is the wedding and the expectation of the Son of Man. In order to see the historical situation correctly, one must see Jesus as a true man not as a God man. In so doing, Linnemann resorts to the rhetoric of opposition. The opposition between Jesus and his followers must be understood against the background of his proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' opponents had rather fixed ideas about the Kingdom-ideas which were influenced by Jewish nationalism and the apocalyptic thinking of late Judaism. Consequently, when Jesus announced the arrival of the Kingdom, they could not reconcile this with their understanding. (Kissinger, 1979:191)

As such, Linnemann observes that Jesus' paradoxical announcement confronted his hearers with the "subjective" decision of faith or unbelief.

The attempt to preserve the expectation of the return of Christ in its original high tension is met in the parable with the objection that it is foolish not to reckon with a longer waiting period. True readiness for the Lord does not mean holding fast to the expectation that he must come "shortly," but taking into consideration that he delays. Thus, the parable of the "Ten Maidens" is intended to help one to recognize that those

who neglect to prepare themselves for the time of waiting are in danger of losing their share in the Kingdom of God.

The parable is understood by Linnemann to overcome the opposition of the hearer to the message by inducing him or her to make a decision which is in keeping the mind of the narrator, thereby bringing him or her to a new understanding of the situation. Therefore, a parable is an event in a two-fold sense. It creates a new possibility and compels the speaker and hearer, the more significant is the decision which the parable compels him or her to make. As such, as language events, parables offer the possibility of changing one's existence, of achieving a new life.

#### 3.1.4 HERZOG

Herzog is a recent scholar of parabolic interpretation. Although he has not commented on the parable of the "Ten Maidens," his interpretation and understanding of parables is very important for the present study. Indeed, his work is remarkable for the way in which it diverts from previous scholarship. His employment of Paulo Freire's paradigm, especially his appropriation of Jesus as a pedagogue of the oppressed, is particularly noteworthy.

In Herzog's eyes, Jesus, like Freire, worked with the illiterate, the marginalized, and the poor; with the peasants and villagers in the countryside (1994:26). Both dealt with issues related to the oppression of those workers. Thus, the process of conscientization,

self awareness, and internalization as part and parcel of the situation became apparent in their work. In this regard, the subjects concerned had to learn to "read" their culture and life dilemmas.

Because he was dealing with the underprivileged, Freire used pictures to codify his teachings. By contrast, Jesus used storytelling. Herzog, therefore, views Freire's use of codified pictures and Jesus' use of parables as similar tactics as educational strategies. Hence, the parables of Jesus are not primarily vehicles to communicate theology or ethics but, stories that stimulate social analysis and expose judicial contradictions (1994:28).

Viewed in this manner, Jesus used parables to present situations familiar to the rural poor; to encode systems of oppression that controlled their lives and held them in bondage (1994:27). As such, the social context of parables became important, for they tell the reader about the world in which they lived.

### **3.1.5 EVALUATION**

The above overview demonstrates that parables are not only contested texts, but that their interpretation is also contestable. Parables are contested texts on various levels. There is the level of production and the level of interpretation. The parable of the present study is a contested text, due first to the fact that its origin is not uncontested. The origin of the parable is debatable. No consensus has been reached concerning its

origin. The question at hand is whether the parable claims its authenticity in Jesus or is it a creation of the Matthean congregation.

The views of scholars commenting on the parable of the "Ten Maidens" are varied. This alone betrays a high contestability of the parable. With regard to Dodd and Jeremias' understanding of the parable, the parable at stake claims its origin in Jesus, how he proclaims the kingdom news. Hence, their interpretation of the parable reveals the original setting of the parables. Nevertheless, their interpretation of the parable varies enormously.

According to Dodd, "all the vivid dramatic detail is intended only to emphasize the folly of unpreparedness and the wisdom of preparedness" (1961:128). This accounts for the point of crisis in the parable. He fails to see that the individual features of the parable have a function in the development of the narrative. Furthermore, he seems not to notice that the unpreparedness of the virgins is due to their failure to allow for the delay of the bridegroom. A narrator who only wanted to denounce the folly of inadequate preparation would have used some more obvious examples. Once more, one who speaks of a judgement that brings with it his own persecution and the destruction of the temple, would hardly hit upon the image of the wedding.

Jeremias also understands the parable as a crisis parable. However, unlike Dodd, he stresses the theme of suddenness. Thus, their point of comparison of the parable differs. The sudden coming of the bridegroom (v.6) has its parallels in the sudden

downpour of the flood, in the unexpected entry of the thief, and in the unlooked for the return of the master of the house from the feast or journey. The common element is a figure of the unexpected incident of catastrophe. The crisis prevails. But the cry that announces the coming of the bridegroom to the virgins does not surprise them. They had been waiting for it all the time. It is therefore not the sudden coming but the long delay of the bridegroom that embarrasses the foolish virgins. It is the delay that makes readiness a problem.

Linnemann views the parable in Matthew 25:1-13 as a secondary church formation. She points out that in the context of the New Testament, we cannot hear the parables as Jesus' listeners did for they have been passed down to us through the tradition of the church. Those who transmitted the parables were not historians. They were governed by other interests. The church's interest in Jesus's teaching was also not historical; the concern of the writer was to build up the church for preaching, teaching, exhortation and proclamation. Linnemann intimates that it is through preaching that the events that happened to those who heard Jesus' parables can reoccur. The preaching process reorients the readers' existence and helps them to move from unbelief to faith.

Herzog's concern for the social context or "social scenes" is of vital importance. Such scenes tell us more of the world in which the peasants and the rural underclass lived. Herzog, of course agrees with Freire's work insofar as he views parables as codifications that are pedagogical reflections of the oppressed. Parables are "earthy stories with heavy meanings" (1994:3). Being codifications they are read from a

liberationist framework. In this respect, Jesus' parables dealt political and economic issues.

The parable of the "Ten Maidens" is thus understood by Herzog to be an eschatological warning. Nonetheless, because Matthew used the Jewish wedding to reveal the Parousia, Herzog did not worry himself about the historicity of the parable but, instead focused on the situation of the social context reflected in the scene.

The above account betrays not only the fact that parables are contested texts, but assumes that parabolic interpretation is open-ended. Dodd, Jeremias and Linnemann interpreted the parable of the "Ten Maidens" from a historical perspective, whilst Herzog explores the social context of parables. Because parabolic interpretation is open-ended, the present study intends to move away from historicism to employ an epideictic rhetorical interpretation of the parable of the "Ten Maidens."

Following Herzog's views, this parable cannot be used to search for the historical Jesus. Of greatest importance is that the parable is in Matthew, therefore we only have his account as a working document. Through redaction criticism we can ascertain that Matthew selected parables to fit the needs of his community and, what were those? Therefore, it is significant to first explore the social context of the Matthean world as reflected in the parable.



When considering the first century Mediterranean world, the reader finds that specific social norms and values existed. It is thus a natural human phenomenon to develop rules and acceptable parameters within which to conduct social relations. The Matthean world had in fact a very clearly defined societal structure that was taken seriously by the society. In this sense, we find that the values of honour and shame (Malina, 1981) were the most basic and also the most crucial aspects upon which this society operated.

Social activity and social relations and even personal relations were thus measured in terms of honour and shame, not only in terms of how the individuals view themselves, but in terms of how the public viewed them. In this sense, the way in which one was viewed in public became a central concern.

Taking the above into consideration, let us now examine the parable of the "Ten Maidens." In locating this particular parable within the Mediterranean society as described above, I now locate this particular parable within Malina's (1981) model. At the same time, I also explore the manner in which Matthew views women. Before doing so, I examine the literary context and structure of the Matthean parable.

### **3.2.THE LITERARY CONTEXT AND STRUCTURE OF MATTHEW 25:1-13**

#### **3.2.1 THE LITERARY CONTEXT**

It is common knowledge that basic to Matthew's gospel are five major discourses. These discourses entail (i) Matthew 5-7 , the Sermon on the Mount; (ii) Matthew 10, the commissioning of the disciples; (iii) Matthew 13, eschatological parables; (iv) Matthew 18, ecclesiastical admonitions and; (v) Matthew 23-25, eschatological admonitions. There is a close relationship between the first and the fifth discourse. On the one hand, the first discourse's primary stress is on ethics with concluding exhortation about the future judgement. On the other hand, the primary stress of the fifth discourse is on eschatological judgement, a judgement based on ethics. As such, both are especially concerned with ethics and eschatology.

The structure of Matthew 25:1-13 has been understood within the context of the fifth discourse, a framework embodying Matthew 23-25. A number of themes with specific interrelationships found in this parable are paralleled in Matthew's fifth discourse. The primary stress of this discourse is on the division motif in the overall theme of practising, observing and doing good deeds (Donfried, 1974:420-21).

For example, in the virgin allegory, the separation is between those who are foolish (mora) and those who are wise (phronimos), whereas in the talent story the separation is between the good and faithful servant (25:21) and the wicked and the slothful servant

(25:26). Furthermore, in Matthew 24:25 the division is between the faithful and the wise servant and the one who is not faithful and wise.

Throughout the fifth discourse, the eschatological admonitions, the wise and faithful are the ones do good deeds. Indeed, embedded in various "servant parables", parables resembling those who dedicate themselves doing the work of the Lord, is the theme of the departure and return of the Master. Sometimes he comes earlier than expected, sometimes later. Thus no uniform tendency attributable to the delay of the Parousia emerges. Instead, Jesus enjoins his follower to be faithful steward of the tasks entrusted to them, regardless of the end time.

### **3.2.2 TRANSLATION AND STRUCTURE OF THE PARABLE**

It is not what the parables as a group share but what makes each a distinctive narrative that engages the effort of an interpreter. For Tolbert, an interpreter whose goal is to understand fully one parable in terms of a particular theme, the emphasis must focus on the dramatic development of the story (1975:79). Hence the interpreter studies the surface structure of the story for it embodies the message of the parable. That is, the interpreter explores the surface structure to investigate what messages a particular story bears.

In the following section I examine the structure of the parable of the "Ten Maidens."

### 3.2.2.1 TRANSLATION

The text of the parable (Matthew 25:1-13).

"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to the ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves." And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, "Lord, Lord, open to us. "But he replied, "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you." Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

### **3.2.2.2 STRUCTURE PROPOSED BY BLOMBERG**

Structuralist studies of parables point to a consistent triadic design. Blomberg (1991:50-78) in particular shares the view. He notes, for example, that three characters appear in several parables, each interacting with one another to convey the meaning of the narrative. Of these three figures, one is the "master" and the others contrasting subordinates.

Consistently, the characters represent God, his faithful followers, and those who do not want to serve him. Therefore parables can be classified according to the manner of characterisation and the nature of the relationships among characters.

The parable of the Ten Maidens can be interpreted using Blomberg's analysis. Two sets of five women each function as a collective character. The bridegroom, representing the third party, is a common Old Testament symbol for God (see Isa. 54:4-6, Ezek.16:7-34, Hos.2:19). The wise and the foolish women represent the spiritually prepared or unprepared. Moreover, the parable as it is, is able to assume that the wedding feast is a current image for the end of time which Linnemann views as binding the "picture part" and the "reality part" for which it is coined (1966:23). In this respect, not only the "bridegroom" and the "Ten Maidens" play a crucial role in the parable. Therefore, independent significance should not be given to subordinate details, such as the bride, the oil and the oil sellers. These also help in the development of the narrative and the parable structure that they cannot be missed.

### **3.2.2.3 STRUCTURE OF THE DISCOURSE**

1: Comparison of the kingdom of heaven to the ten maidens.

2-4: Five foolish and five wise maidens.

5-6: Slumbering of the ten maidens and the announcement of the coming of the bridegroom.

7-9: The request of the five foolish and the reply of the five wise maidens.

10: The arrival of the bridegroom.

11-12: The late arrival of the five foolish maidens.

13: Warning about vigilance.

### **3.3 AN ANALYSIS OF MATTHEW 25:1-13**

This is an analysis of the parable of the "Ten Maidens" from an African womanist epideictic perception. It is clear that Matthew inserted this parable to exclusively suit his own theological and ethical designs. Writing to his Jewish audience Matthew shows a concern for the Parousia. One would say that this was his primary intention but in doing so he delimits and defines certain socio-cultural patterns in his society. Matthew of course wrote within the social, political and economic context of his community. In short this particular parable cannot be used to search for the historical Jesus. Rather, the parable provides an insight into the views and concerns of its author. Particularly, revealing in this regard are Matthew's concerns relating to gender.

The parable of the "Ten Maidens," provides the reader with the New Testament's final revelation of the Kingdom of heaven in terms of the metaphor of the wedding. Verse one sets the stage and, the subject is the "kingdom of heaven" not the "Son of man" as Matthew interprets it by means of verse thirteen, suggests Schweitzer (1975:465).

The phrase the "Kingdom of Heaven" rather than the "Kingdom of God" is employed by Matthew. In using the former, the writer views the Kingdom from "above." Thus, kingdom in Matthew's reckoning refers to the abode of the upper classes. Yet, the kingdom of God is present and future. It is supposed to be here and now with the people yielding way to the future. It directs different historical projects under different circumstances. Hence, Pixley views God's Kingdom as exploited for quite different purposes which above all is mainly bound with or in egalitarianism.

The term Kingdom in Pixley's estimate, thus means liberation; a resolution to the classism that systematically exploited the working class of Israel. In this regard, the egalitarian principles of Jesus' followers embodied the meaning of God's Kingdom. Jesus' affirmation of God's Kingdom was consequently a denial of the classism that promoted privileges for priests and pharisees-the principal beneficiaries of the class system. Therefore, God's Kingdom can be viewed as an ideological support for an oppressive regime, and assumes in general terms a society of Justice, equality and abundance (Pixley,1981:101 ). Matthew's understanding of the Kingdom thus betrays a lack of egalitarianism.

The second half of verse one, "the ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom," could be taken as a summary title. However, it probably merely marked the beginning of the narrative. In verse two, the ten maidens or bridal attendants are, according to Smith, to wait for the bridegroom to come with his companions to take the bride from her parents' house to his own. When he approached, the maidens would go out with their lamps and meet him (1932:293).

The scene presented in the parable is that of a wedding. As Schwéitzer has noted, the choice of a wedding feast reflected Matthew's concern for the end of time. Thus, "the banquet or wedding is the most typical image for the full communion with God in the coming kingdom. As it is, it symbolizes a fulfilment of history" (1975:466-7).

Whilst data pertaining to marriage ceremonies in the Bible is scarce, it is clear that the setting of the Matthean parable reflects the general pattern of Greek, Jewish, and Roman weddings. The central dress-piece of the bride, the veil, covers the face as a sign of respect or shame. Some sort of celebration however, does take place. Thus, weddings were occasions of great joy, gladness and celebration.

The marriage ritual of the Old Testament included three successive incidents, the *treditio-puellae*, the feast, and consummation (Mace, 1953:179). Supposedly, the actual wedding ceremony was preceded and followed by many minor ceremonies and customs. Scheid notes for example that in some societies it was customary to arrange a



private wedding ceremony the night before the announcement of marriage. On the following day the ceremony would be repeated in order to outwit evil spirits or malicious persons who might cast a spell on the couple (1978:18).

Ordinarily, the feast would be prolonged for seven days. At the consummation of the marriage, the bridal veil was removed and the bridegroom would see his bride's face for the first time. In this respect, arranged marriages were normative (Mace, 1953: 180-183).

In some places ceremonies were performed in the open, after nightfall. The stars were associated with God's assurance to Abraham that he would "make your descendants as numerous as the stars of Heaven." The presence of a rabbi was not essential for a marriage to be legal. It was generally accepted that a "minyan" of ten men would ensure the marriage received maximum publicity (Scheid, 1973:24).

In some communities, ashes were placed on the forehead of the groom as a symbol of mourning for the destruction of the temple. The groom was then escorted to the bride. Sometimes, torches were lit or candles carried by the mothers of the couples to ward off evil. Candles were also associated with thunder and lightning and the revelation at Mount Sinai. Thus, candle-lit processions were popular. In gentile communities, the bridegroom's parents escorted their son as part of a procession of ushers, the best man, flower girls, bridesmaids, and the bride and her parents (1973:34). In Matthew's parable,

the procession would have not have been dissimilar, thus explaining the absence of the bride.

The "pith and marrow" of a wedding, that is, "the fetching" of the bride from her parents' home to her new house, was also a customary ritual. That ritual symbolized the bride's transfer from one family to another, an event of great significance for a Hebrew woman. It is evident that at such a time a procession of some sort took place involving the bride, the bridegroom, their friends, relatives, and interested townsmen. In general, invitations were issued to friends and neighbours. Thus, in the parable of the marriage feast of the king's son (Matthew 22:2-4), mention is made of those who are specially "bidden" to be present. However, in the parable of the "Ten Maidens" a crucial element for the wedding to take place is not mentioned at all. The question is: Where is the bride?

#### "THE MISSING BRIDE".

In the parable of the "Ten Maidens," Matthew introduces the reader to the characters of the maidens and bridegroom. He misses out an important figure, the bride. She is supposed to be the centre of attraction of the scenario. Nonetheless, the Matthean community opts for a marriage where the bridegroom is the *dramatis personae*. However, this introduction is not intended to anticipate a more complete account of the Jewish wedding. The word "like" or "compared to" (in other manuscripts) when referring to the Kingdom of Heaven in verse one helps the reader to believe or not believe, or preferably to use his or her own imagination of the situation. Thus, the introductory

sketch is used to illustrate the Kingdom of God based on a selective account of the nuptial proceedings.

New Testament scholars, among them Batey (1971:46), and Bear (1981:480-81), cite the omission of the bride as evidence that the Parable of the Ten Maidens is not even a representative account of a Jewish wedding. If it is supposed to be a wedding, I argue, one can probably explain the omission by suggesting that the bridegroom is coming to claim her at her father's house or, it might happen that the bridegroom was still to choose a bride from the ten Maidens. Hence, Green (1975:204) views the use of the maidens as corporately standing for the otherwise unmentioned bride.

In my view, however, the bride was omitted in Matthew's androcentric account in order that the bridegroom could be independently honoured and his status as a referent to "Christ" advanced.

Jewish wedding processions composed of two main groups. First, the bridegroom and his wedding party. Traditionally, this group took the bride from her father's house. Matthew refers to this group or party of friends as the "sons of the bride chamber" (Matthew 9:15). One of these friends acted as "master of ceremonies" (Mace, 1953:180). Second, the bride was accompanied by selected companions. These companions, or "parthenos," composed of unmarried women, particularly unmarried virgins or teenage girls (Praeder, 1988:75). They were unmarried friends, relatives, or townspeople attached to the wedding procession. Both parties, once elected, would proceed under

normal circumstances to the house of the bridegroom. In exceptional cases (Gen. 29:22) the celebration could take place in the home of the bride. Indeed, in the parable of the "Ten Maidens" it appears that female attendants went to meet the bridegroom and his party before accompanying them to the house of the bride (Mckenzie, 1968:106). Whether the feast was held in the house of the bride's father or in the house of the bridegroom is not clear. What is clear, however, is that it is the wedding feast from which the five foolish female companions are excluded (Matthew 25:10).

In the New Testament, the marriage feast is often referred to as a "supper" (Rev.19:9). Mace, Mckenzie, Praeder, and Witherington, all assert that this Jewish supper was held in the thick of darkness. The bridal couple were consequently accompanied by torch-bearers and lamps. This was the case in the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), as well as in the parable of the servants who waited by lamplight for the return of the master from the wedding (Luke 12:35-38).

In the parable of the "Ten Maidens", Matthew uses the word "lampades", to suggest that lamps, torches and various other lighting devices were also used at this supper. As Praeder notes (1988: 75-78), these "lampades" were used only at ceremonial events, in contrast to household, or domestic lamps known as "lynchnos." Nevertheless, in Matthew's account "lynchnos" and not "lampades" are used, hence the use of oil is mentioned.

The young maidens actually played a crucial part in Jewish nuptial celebrations. They were assigned duties as torch-bearers in the procession to the groom's house, and as dancers in the nocturnal torchlight celebrations outside that house (Witherington, 1990:58). However this study adopts "lynchnos" (oil lamps) in place of torches. The message of preparation was emphasized. They were to wait in full preparation at the bride's house until that time of the groom's arrival. It was incumbent upon them to bring extra oil in order to keep their lamps burning, for they do not know when the bridegroom would come. This betrays the fact that the whole question of lighting and keeping the lamps burning is very significant to the parable.

But, this parable compels us into asking the question if the subjects were really the girls as assumed. The first verse says: the ten girls set out to meet the bridegroom. But where do they go? Do they stop on the way? Do they rest, or fall asleep on the street, or at the city gate? And how can we imagine such a scene in the middle of the night when we take into account the structures of feminine conduct? What can the girls do in the open air with their small oil lamps made of baked clay? Why, too, does the question of lighting receive such emphasis in the parable? These are questions that go unanswered in the parable.

In the parable of the "Ten Maidens," the Kingdom of Heaven is compared to the specific actions of the female attendants. Such actions include "the taking of oil with" and "not taking oil with" (Matt 25: 3-4). The oil becomes so significant for the characterization of the maidens that the crux of the story is that five of the maidens are described by

Matthew as "foolish" whilst the other five are described as "wise" according to their ability to conserve oil. An obvious judgement has therefore been made concerning these women, and the hearer must decide which type to imitate (Filson, 1960:263). The question which we will now concern ourselves with relates to how this specific judgement came about.

In Jewish society, particularly in the Matthean context, a woman's worth and value was measured in terms of "shame." That value was contrasted with the notion of male "honour." It was therefore good for a woman to have "shame," or to be subservient, silent, obedient, and respectful towards the male, be it her husband, son, or father. In fact, a woman's worth was measured in terms of her maidenhead, that is virginity, and it was up to the male figures in her life, that is within the family, to protect this maidenhead from the outside world.

Women operated within the specific social boundaries of the household. In this sense, when Matthew uses the term of "maidens," we are alerted to the fact that he is talking about "female shame." The figure of the bridegroom symbolizes the figure of Jesus, a male with "ascribed honour" suggested by Malina, who must be treated with the utmost respect.

The fact that it is ten maidens who go to meet the groom, indicates just how honourable a person the groom was, and how high his status in society. This must be seen in view

of the fact that women represented a "scarce" resource, and were, as a consequence, protected.

As indicated in verse five, the bridegroom delayed. Indeed, Matthew does not criticize the women for falling asleep. Considering the timing of the wedding, the maidens had a right to sleep.

The fact that the bridegroom did not appear when the maidens went out to meet him is also not seen in a bad light. In fact, what this emphasises is the fact that the bridegroom, because of his honourable status as a male was allowed to appear whenever he chose, without fear of ridicule or refusal. The fact that the maidens waited patiently for him, with anticipation, indicates that they acted in accordance with what was expected of them. This "unquestioning" attitude affirmed their respect for the honourable status of the bridegroom. The groom is thus honoured even in his absence. Likewise, Matthew suggests, Jesus should be honoured, even though he appears absent.

Another way of viewing this "unquestioning" stance of the maidens, is in the light of the fact that they do not regard themselves as equal in status to the bridegroom. Ultimately, because the bridegroom is superior in status, the maidens cannot challenge his late arrival. In this regard, the maidens "wisely" preserve their shame.

When the bridegroom finally arrives, the distinction between those who are "foolish" and those who are "wise" (Matt 25:6-9) is fully delineated. The arrival is prefaced by a sequence of events, starting from the announcement of the coming of the bridegroom and by the trimming of the "lampades." The five maidens who are described as "foolish" because they had no oil are deserved as disrespectful. They are seen as deviant because they do not fulfil to their female duties. Malina (1981:34) affirms their "devianceness" when he states that: "Great stress is put on face to face courtesy in terms of formalities."

The five foolish maidens, in failing to meet the bridegroom, indirectly challenged male authority. But because women were considered of a lower status, their challenge is viewed as unfounded and absurd. They are fair to have acted shamelessly. The bridegroom, were he to wait for them, would consequently have acknowledged the women as his "equals." Because they were unprepared, the foolish maidens, in Malina's (1981:35) words, "refused to recognise the bridegroom's honour and prestige."

In any situation where a challenge is made between equals, there is the factor of "riposte," or the reaction by the challenged to the challenger. However, if the challenge is made by someone of unequal status, the challenged person, of higher status, can simply choose to ignore the challenge, thus maintaining their honour, or they can choose to punish the audacity of the challenger. In the parable of the "Ten Maidens," the bridegroom opts for the latter, that is punishing the challenger. In fact, he punishes the disrespectful, foolish maidens by "locking them out" of the celebrations. In view of



the preparations that the maidens made, and in view of the festivity of the occasion, their exclusion appears shocking. This apparently shocking behaviour, suggests Lambrecht (1981:126), shatters the optimism of the event. The bridegroom makes the women's shameless behaviour public.

The five wise maidens, who carried out all the duties ascribed to female activity, by contrast occupied an "acceptable" social status. In fact, by refusing to share their oil with the foolish maidens, the five wise maidens protected the honour of the bridegroom, whom they respected. However, Lambrecht (1981:155) maintains that the refusal of the "wise" virgins to aid the "foolish" (Matt 25:7-9) was not in accordance with Christ's command of love of neighbours. This betrays a lack of humanity and social solidarity. Were they not all friends? If the five wise maidens shared their oil, would they participate in shameless behaviour? Would they have entered the polluted space of the "foolish," and would they have compromised their shame? I would argue that, in the "collective honour," whereby a group preserves the honour of their leader, the "wise" women would have been "defiled."

Indeed, because the five foolish maidens disrespected the boundaries between normative behaviour and disrespect, the wise women would have contributed to disunity, disorder and chaos, had they shared their light. Moreover, the bridegroom, as the head of the maidens, would have participated in that disorder had he accepted the foolish maidens. Therefore, to preserve his own honour in the eyes of

the five wise maidens and the public, the bridegroom also excluded the five foolish maidens.

The fact that the maidens go to the shops alone, unaccompanied by a male partner, provides another example of the shameless behaviour of the "foolish." According to the rules of the Mediterranean society, they were not supposed to be out at night and as such would be considered as out of bounds. Is there any reason to that the dealers' shops were still open that time of the night? After all, the incident does not take place in a modern city. And on the girls' supposed return why should they address the groom as Lord, Lord (v11), when he was expected to be their familiar friend or at least neighbour. Via (1967:123) argues that the double use of Kyrie and the "I do not know you" (v12) are reminiscent of Mtt 7:22-23 and Lk 13:25-27, both of which contain elements of doubtful authenticity. Therefore in terms of the insider/outsider categories, the foolish maidens become outsiders, part of the non-representatives of the society. They have no shame therefore they are anti-society.

Coming back to the initial question on how Matthew views women, one can clearly see from the above that he associates himself very much with this type of a Mediterranean social climate. He relates and speaks to women from within the specific context of the Mediterranean world of Canaan. Thus, Matthew replicates a patriarchal, male-centred world view in which women are marginalized in society and made accountable to men.

The biological differences are clearly shown in the parable of the "Ten Maidens." The ten maidens are depicted as sub-ordinate to the dominant male, the bridegroom. In this parable, the social meanings of power, social status, and religion, where women are viewed as less important, are clearly depicted. The women have to wait for the male even though he is late. They have to provide their own oil; they are refused entry when they arrive late. The bridegroom shows them no mercy or grace. He is depicted as being in control and controlling the destiny of females.

Viewed within the framework of an African womanist epideictic perspective, the parable of the "Ten Maidens" displayed above resembles women in an African setting. Women in an African setting are either praised or blamed in a similar fashion with that of the women of the parable. The honour and shame pattern which characterize the relationship of men and women is the same. The bridegroom behaves exactly the same way an African man could have responded to an African woman if she was in a similar position as the foolish maidens.

#### **4. SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION**

In the course of the study it became apparent that biblical interpretation, like all other scholarly inquiry, is a communicative practice, that involves interests, values and visions. These interests and values however do not always reflect the perspectives of biblical texts. One's social location or rhetorical context is decisive for how one sees the world, reads the context, constructs reality or interprets biblical texts. What we see depends on where we stand.

The relationship between women and men, especially in parables, is naturally one of the issues raised in this study. Different authors have displayed women's position in parables. Most of these parables are man-made and this suggests that the social world of parables was basically androcentric. African parables and the Matthean parables are the most appropriate parables displaying this androcentrism. Needless to say, women in an androcentric world would never assume an equal status to that of men. They automatically live according to male standards.

Within the framework of an African womanist epideictic perspective it has been discovered that inherent in parables concerning women, especially in Matthew and in an African setting, are organized blocks of moral instructions. Normative patterns of actions declare the ordinary life situation and circumstances of the human life cycle and social relations. That is, for the most part these moral instructions are directed to everyday life. They are intended to provide general and practical guidance for human behaviour within

They are intended to provide general and practical guidance for human behaviour within previously shaped, comprehensive understanding. They create a context in which some actions are right and other actions are wrong. However, these moral instructions do not simply establish standards of ethical actions, they includes a dynamic range of human responses to those standards.

In African parables marriage ritual is viewed as an ideal pattern of action that determines the range of expectations for the relationships between genders. Similarly, the parable of the "Ten Maidens" in Matthew betrays the same view. In both instances, there is a call for ethics of obedience. A woman is to be loyal to his man even at the expense of martyring herself. This type of moral instruction is the "order model" which normally leads to internalized oppression. For example, in the parable of the "Ten Maidens" the "wise" maidens are at their most oppressed. They had to stay for more or less the whole night waiting for the bridegroom. Nevertheless, they felt that the delay and the late arrival of the bridegroom was natural and proper for at his arrival they went out to welcome him. Because moral instructions are usually followed by different responses, in the same parable the so called "foolish" maidens try to subvert the moral instruction of obedience, through the "conflict model." They are not in favour of the bridegroom's behaviour and challenge the bridegroom. They did not prepare enough in case the bridegroom delays. However, this is the view of the powerless and oppressed, having no power and control in the wider social order. Nevertheless, when the view of the world changes, existing moral instruction may cease to be appropriate, and may

need radical reworking. That is, the conflict model leads to "destabilization" and "resocialization" for the position of equality and power.

It is up to the reaction of these "foolish" maidens that there is a call for a change in the social order. Woman is a parable. The womanist response towards the ethics of obedience is the response beyond obedience. Such a response attacks gender discrimination. Women are to reclaim their humanity and not to be referred to as the "Other Being" which Daly (1973:23) calls a "non-being." Men are to acknowledge a woman's full status, that is, her humanity. They are to be relational. Relationality is a key concept to understand what it means to be human from a woman's perspective which is based on love and justice (Ackermann, 1991:100). As it is, relationality is opposed to alienation and sexism expressed in patriarchal structures and male centred thought patterns. With relationality there is a demand for a change in societal structures, away from male dominated hierarchies and divisions. Its visions are truly egalitarian as befitting with the "reign" of God expressed in parables.

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