


Exploring women's challenges and victories in the New Testament through liberation theology

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Women and young girls continue to face a plethora of challenges in contemporary contexts. This is caused and compounded by various factors such as male-orientated perceptions, constricted opportunities and lagging will to advance the transformation and liberation of women and young girls. This is enough to indicate that, unequivocally, there are continued setbacks that affect women. By the same token, it cannot be downplayed that women continue to overcome some of these setbacks. Therefore, this article aims to explore women's challenges and victories in the Bible, with special reference to the New Testament. To do this, liberation theology is applied as a conceptual framework to advance the discussions in selected incidents. This article makes three notable findings. Firstly, women exercise agency in resisting and denouncing oppressive structures. Secondly, there is a necessity to (re)examine certain biblical narratives with an emphasis on justice and liberation in an attempt to elicit revolutionary perspectives on narratives that have traditionally been interpreted in ways that obstruct women's roles. Thirdly, there are instances in the New Testament where women find liberation and empowerment through spiritual leadership roles. In closing, this article underscores the significance of scrutinising women's issues that transcend the biblical narratives in a bid to elicit reasonable solutions to any identified challenges.

Contribution: The scholarly contribution of this discourse lies in the exposition of women's dialogues and biblical narratives. In so doing, this article chooses to focus on liberation theology on account that it is downplayed with presumptions that it is too discipline-focused.

Keywords: women; struggles; victories; liberation theology; New Testament.

Introduction and contextual background

It is not about being perfect. It is not about where you get yourself in the end. There is power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story, in using your authentic voice. (Obama 2021).

The challenges and victories of women, whether depicted in historical narratives, literature or contemporary stories, suggest several key insights and themes. The challenges of women highlight their remarkable determination and inner strength. For example, despite facing adversity, discrimination or challenging circumstances, women demonstrate the propensity to persevere and overcome obstacles. In fact, the triumphs of women underscore the significance of agency and empowerment. This denotes that when women assert their agency, challenge communal norms or take control of their destinies, they contribute to their own triumphs and, in the process, inspire others. While this is the case, it is perceptive to acknowledge that women continue to face setbacks in contemporary contexts. For instance, Masenya (1995) makes it clear that persistent gender intolerance manifests in various forms, including unequal opportunities, pay disparities and prejudiced treatment based on gender. By the same token, Diko (2023) underlines that physical, emotional and sexual violence directed at women and young girls is a pervasive challenge. This includes domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking and other forms of abuse. It stands to reason, therefore, to suggest that women continue to face challenges even in the current context. This is additionally confirmed by Kooli (2023) who reports that women remain underrepresented in leadership positions across industries and in political institutions, obstructing their influence and decision-making power. Having said that, I argue that challenges concerning women are multifaceted and require continued scholarly dialogues in a bid to find solutions to any identified conundrums.

In the same vein, in an affluent tapestry of biblical narratives, the experiences of women in the New Testament have been downplayed or marginalised and eclipsed by the dominant male-

centric focus (Li 2023). Nevertheless, a meticulous examination through the lens of the liberation theology uncovers a profound narrative of struggle, resilience and triumph for the women who played central roles in the early Christian community. In other words, liberation theology, with its emphasis on social justice, liberation from oppression and the dignity of all individuals, provides a compelling framework for understanding the profound impact of women in the New Testament (Rieger & Silva 2023). The New Testament, comprising the Gospels, Acts, Epistles and Revelation, serves as a repository of narratives that transcend time, offering perspectives into the societal dynamic forces and challenges faced by women in the ancient world. Liberation theology, acutely rooted in the understanding that God's message is one of liberation for the oppressed, induces one to critically scrutinise how women in the New Testament navigated their complex struggles within socio-cultural and religious constraints. The struggles of women in the New Testament are patent in narratives such as Mary's acceptance of an unexpected pregnancy, the Samaritan woman's societal isolation, the healing of the bent-over woman marginalised by both physical and social afflictions and the central role played by female disciples as witnesses to the resurrection. These narratives, continually obscured by traditional explications, become affluent sources for exploring the intersection of gender, power and liberation within the Christian tradition. In other words, the narratives of women in the New Testament, which are sometimes downplayed or not fully emphasised in traditional expositions, possess significant opulence and depth. Bearing this in mind, I argue that the narratives of women in the New Testament have been downplayed given that the New Testament itself was constructed and assembled in a patriarchal society where women had subordinate roles compared to men. As a result of this imbalance, the narratives of women have been subjugated or overlooked by male authors and subsequent interpreters.

In any event, with this contextual background in mind, this article seeks to illuminate the voices of women in the New Testament, demonstrating how their victories are not only personal victories but also fundamental to the larger narrative of liberation presented in Christian theology. On the grounds of this, by applying the principles of liberation theology, this article aims to unravel the multifaceted layers of socio-cultural ethos and religious paradigms that these women confront, underscoring their agency and contributions to the broader Christian message of justice, compassion and liberation. As one embarks on this journey, the narratives of these women emerge not merely as historical accounts but as timeless beacons of inspiration for those advocating justice and liberty in the contemporary world. In other words, scrutinising women's experiences, through liberation theology, provide a more comprehensive understanding of the biblical narratives. It enriches explications of key episodes and characters, contributing to a more multifaceted comprehension of the roles women played in configuring the early Christian community. Over

and above this view, the New Testament continues to be a foundational text for Christian theology (Musa et al. 2023). In view of this reality, by probing women's struggles and triumphs, this scholarly discourse contributes to dialogues concerning gender impartiality within theological debates, challenging historical interpretations that may have subjugated or overlooked women's perspectives. Bearing this in mind, Tran (2023) proposes that the New Testament is a foundational text for Christian theology. In consideration of this indication, recognising the experiences of women in the New Testament allows for a more inclusive exploration of intersectionality. Taking into account factors such as culture, socio-economic status and ethnicity alongside gender broadens the narrative, reflecting the multiplicity of women's experiences. Nonetheless, it is prudent to observe the phenomenon that this article problematises. This is presented in the following section.

Problematising the phenomenon of interest

The examination of women's challenges and triumphs in the New Testament through the lens of liberation theology unmask a critical gap in comprehending the intricate experiences of women in biblical narratives. The major problem lies in the historical subjugation of these narratives within traditional theological interpretations, obstructing a comprehensive exploration of the intersection between gender, power and liberation. Many religious narratives were constructed and assembled in patriarchal societies, where men played dominant roles in political, social and religious spheres (Trible 1973; Wood 2019). Consequently, interpretations of these narratives were conducted from a male-centric viewpoint, minimising the inclusion and significance of women's experiences (Wood 2019:1). Similarly, the cultural prejudices of interpreters and religious leaders influenced the way they approached and understood theological concepts. In societies where women were traditionally assigned subordinate roles, religious interpretations inadvertently buttressed these cultural principles, subjugating women's perspectives (Aadland 2023:47). This denotes that the exploration of women's challenges and victories in the New Testament through the lens of liberation theology underscores a crucial challenge in the domain of scholarship. In fact, I contend that historically, women have been underrepresented in religious leadership and scholarship, leading to a lack of female perspectives in the interpretation and exposition of religious narratives. This absence of female voices contributed to the ostracism of women's and young girls' narratives in traditional expositions. That is the reason House-Niamke (2022) adds that cultural prejudices and assumptions about gender roles, and capabilities could influence how religious narratives are interpreted and presented. These prejudices may potentially lead to the undervaluing or misrepresentation of women's narratives in the New Testament.

As previously outlined, traditional theological interpretations have continually marginalised or downplayed the narratives

of women, limiting a holistic understanding of their struggles and victories within the Christian tradition (Shemesh 2016). This oversight perpetuated gender-based imbalances and neglected valuable perspectives on liberation. In a nutshell, the problem in this article is twofold; that is, a lack of comprehensive critique of women's experiences in biblical narratives and the resulting impact on contemporary theological scholarly dialogues. For this reason, addressing this gap is essential for advancing a more inclusive and unprejudiced theological framework that mirrors the variegated experiences of women in the New Testament. Beyond this pursuit, this article aims to address this gap, bringing attention to the transformative narratives of women in the New Testament and their implications for contemporary theological discourse and the pursuit of gender justice within Christian traditions. With this problem statement in mind, it is imperative to appreciate the fact that there are scholarly debates that exist in the body of knowledge concerning this phenomenon of interest, hence the review of literature in the following section. It is also crucial to bear in mind that the conceptual framework that is applied to the discussions herein is also integrated in the very same section.

Literature review and conceptual framework

The exploration of women's experiences in the New Testament within the framework of liberation theology has garnered increasing attention from scholars seeking to unearth the nuanced intersections of gender, power and liberation. Numerous scholarly discourses such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's groundbreaking work *In Memory of Her* (1983) have challenged traditional readings, emphasising the agency of women in biblical narratives. Scholars like Lamola (2018), and Lusk and Corbett (2021) have contributed significantly to the liberation theology, buttressing dialogues on social justice and feminist perspectives within Christianity. Nevertheless, despite these strides, there remains a notable gap in comprehensive analyses that address the unique challenges and victories of women in the New Testament through the specific lens of liberation theology. Given this reality, theological scholars, including Calloway (2020) and Bowman (2023), have engaged with feminist hermeneutics to illuminate the often sidelined narratives of biblical women. The application of liberation theology to these narratives provides a framework for understanding how women negotiated collective norms and power structures. In addition to this, Kilner (2010) has advanced the theological discourse by underscoring the liberating dimensions of God's image, fostering a more inclusive understanding of spirituality that intersects with women's struggles for liberation. By exploring the theological concept of God's image in a liberating context, Kilner (2010) and Smith et al. (2022) contribute to the progressing dialogue about gender, theology and equality. This kind of theological exploration challenges traditional interpretations and encourages a more comprehensive understanding of spiritual attributes and their implications for the lives of both men and women. Adding to this

discourse, Purzycki et al. (2022) suggest that theological perspectives that stress liberation recurrently draw on the idea that God's image is not confined to a narrow set of characteristics but includes a broader comprehension of human dignity, agency and freedom. This can particularly be pertinent in addressing issues of gender isonomy, as it encourages a recognition of the inherent worth and potential for liberation in all individuals, irrespective of gender.

While some scholarly discourses, like Benjamens' (2009) exocentric theology, highlight the transformative potential of women's narratives and voices, others, such as those by Tomlinson (2007), interrogate the patriarchal elements interwoven in biblical texts. These divergent perspectives collectively contribute to a more intricate comprehension of the challenges women face and the victories they achieve within the New Testament. Despite these scholarly dialogues, the existing literature or body of knowledge underscores the necessity for further research to bridge outstanding tasks in scholarship, particularly regarding the application of liberation theology to unmask the agency, resilience and transformative potential of women in the New Testament. In a nutshell, existing literature mirrors a growing recognition of the importance of exploring women's challenges and victories in the New Testament through the lens of liberation theology. While notable strides have been made, there is a clear call for more focused and comprehensive scrutiny to amplify human understanding of the intersectionality of gender, power and liberation within biblical narratives. In addition to this, I must stress that downplaying women and young girls in scholarly biblical and theological debates contribute to the prolongation of gender-based violence (GBV) in contemporary contexts by advancing patriarchal perceptions and norms that prioritise male hegemony and control. This is based on the reality that when women's and young girls' voices and experiences are repressed or silenced in religious texts, it could validate skewed power dynamic forces and degrade the significance of addressing challenges such as domestic violence, harassment and discrimination. For this reason, challenging the repression of women and young girls in biblical texts and theology is essential for promoting gender equality and combating GBV by regulating a more inclusive and deferential exposition of religious texts that uplift the dignity and worth of all individuals.

In parallel to this, it must be underlined herein that liberation theology, as a lens, interprets religious dogmas through the prism of social justice, emphasising the ingenious power of faith in the liberation of trivialised and oppressed communities (Cone 1977, 1985; Wood 2019). It pursues to bridge the gap between theology and the socio-political realities of the marginalised, advocating for societal transformation and addressing challenges of poverty, imbalance and systemic injustice (Lamola 2018:74). According to Boff, Rivera and King (1980), liberation theology is a conceptual framework that emerged in the 20th century, particularly in Latin America, underscoring the Christian duty to address social, economic and political injustices. It advocates for the liberation of

oppressed and sidelined communities from poverty, exploitation and various forms of systemic oppression, viewing social activism and engagement as fundamental to the Christian faith. Liberation theology seeks to bring about transformative change by empowering the poor and advocating for justice, equity and dignity for all people, particularly those on the margins of society. Over and above this, liberation theology draws inspiration from biblical narratives of liberation and justice, interpreting them as mandates for social transformation and solidarity with the sidelined (Sobrinho 1986). It often critiques existing power structures, including economic systems, political regimes and religious institutions, while promoting the empowerment and agency of oppressed communities in constructing their own liberation.

Ultimately, this conceptual framework encourages a critical examination of religious texts, urging believers to actively engage in concerted efforts that promote liberation and empower those who have historically been disenfranchised. In the same vein, liberation theology emphasises the importance of praxis, or the integration of theory and action, encouraging Christians to engage in concrete efforts to challenge oppression and promote social change. Additionally, it recognises the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression, including poverty, racism, sexism and colonialism, and seeks to address these intersecting injustices through holistic and inclusive approaches to liberation. With this reviewed literature in mind and conceptual framework, it is perceptive that this article makes its scholarly contribution by discussing the struggles and victories of women in the New Testament, hence the following section.

Results and discussions

Mary's annunciation and submission (Lk 1:26–38)

Liberation theology, as a conceptual framework, provides a powerful lens through which to scrutinise and understand the narrative of Mary, particularly her struggle with the unexpected and miraculous pregnancy as well as the subsequent victory in accepting and submitting to God's objective. This theological perspective emphasises the liberation of marginalised and oppressed individuals, intertwining spiritual belief systems with social justice and activism.

Mary's struggle begins with the communal ethics of her time, where an unexpected pregnancy could bring humiliation and condemnation. One would recall that in the socio-cultural context of 1st-century Judea, premarital pregnancies were generally considered taboo (Broude 1975). The honour and reputation of individuals, especially women and young girls, were closely tied to adherence to communal ethical codes and moral expectations. On account of this fact, any deviation from these ethical codes, such as an unexpected pregnancy, could lead to social stigma and castigation. In the context of the liberation theology, Mary could be regarded as

representing the marginalised and oppressed in society, facing the challenges of an unplanned pregnancy in a male-orientated and judgemental community. Her predicament aligns with the experiences of those who bear the weight of communal expectations and norms that restrict personal agency, particularly for women. It must further be accepted that in contemporary or modern contexts, the perception of unexpected pregnancy as a humiliation could vary significantly depending on ethnological, social and individual factors (Mkhwanazi 2010). In some contexts, particularly those with conservative perceptions towards sexuality and reproductive health, unexpected pregnancy may be regarded as disparaging or stigmatising, especially for unmarried individuals or those who face social pressure to conform to certain expectations regarding family planning.

Despite this, this struggle takes on a profound meaning when viewed through the lens of liberation theology. It foregrounds the necessity for liberation from oppressive structures, challenging the societal expectations that seek to control and dictate the lives of individuals. In view of this fact, Mary's unforeseen pregnancy becomes a symbol of opposition against the social and cultural ethical codes that suppress autonomy and perpetuate prejudice. By the same token, Mary's situation is complicated and compounded by the reality that she was betrothed to Joseph at the time of the Annunciation. Betrothal in ancient Jewish culture was a formal arrangement preceding marriage and any suspicion of infidelity or unconventional circumstances during this period could result in public humiliation and judgement (Haimov-Kochman et al. 2010). In addition to this, the Gospel of Matthew provides additional insight into the social challenges Mary faced. For example, when Joseph learns about Mary's pregnancy, he initially considers divorcing her quietly, indicating the potential social repercussions of an unexpected pregnancy. This biblical narrative mirrors the concern for avoiding public scandal and preserving social standing. Bearing this in mind and with special reference to contemporary contexts, I contend that despite advancements in attitudes towards sexuality and reproductive health, there can still be lingering stigma and judgement towards individuals who experience unexpected pregnancies, especially if they are unmarried or perceived to have deviated from societal ethical codes. Consequently, unexpected pregnancies could have profound social and economic consequences for individuals and families, including limited access to healthcare, educational opportunities and employment prospects. Stigma and discrimination may exacerbate these challenges, leading to increased vulnerability and marginalisation.

In contrast to this, the angel's announcement to Mary in the Gospel of Luke, while emphasising God's favour, does not negate the potential challenges she may face within her community. The angel's assurance, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God' in Luke 1:30, implies that Mary might have been fearful and alarmed by the societal consequences of her pregnancy. In view of this, the

fact that the angel Gabriel addresses Mary as the 'favoured one' and announces the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit underscores the unique and extraordinary nature of Mary's pregnancy. This uniqueness is an acknowledgement of the potential social difficulties she could encounter because of the unconventional circumstances of her conception. Nevertheless, Mary's narrative does not end with this struggle. It transforms into triumph or victory through her acceptance and submission to God's objective. Having said that, liberation theology recognises the transformative power of faith and commitment to a higher purpose in the face of adversity. Mary's decision to embrace her role as the mother of Jesus signifies an act of liberation, not only for herself but for humanity.

In other words, in the context of liberation theology, Mary's acceptance becomes a powerful statement of faith and defiance against subjugative forces. By aligning herself with God's plan, she becomes a symbol of liberation, dismantling societal constraints and expectations. Her victory lies in her propensity to transcend the limitations imposed by her society, embracing a supernatural calling that contributes to the liberation and salvation of humanity. Beyond this view, Mary's role as the mother of Jesus, a central figure in Christianity, biblical dialogues and theology, holds profound implications for liberation theology. Jesus himself is recurrently regarded as a liberator, challenging oppressive systems and advocating for justice and fairness. In view of this fact, Mary's victory in accepting her role as Jesus' mother corroborates with the broader narrative of liberation, where individuals play transformative roles in the liberation of others. In a nutshell, applying liberation theology to Mary's narrative illuminates the profound struggle she faced and the triumph she achieved through her acceptance of God's plan. This perspective not only amplifies human understanding of Mary's significance but also underscores the broader themes of liberation, faith and resistance profoundly embedded in her story.

In the same vein, I argue that Mary's response to the angel's message, as recounted in the Gospel of Luke, is marked by faith and obedience. In other words, despite the potential social challenges and personal uncertainties associated with her unexpected pregnancy, Mary expresses her submission to God with the words, 'Let it be to me according to your word' (Lk 1:38). This submission underlines her trust in God's objective and her readiness to fulfil the role assigned to her. As a matter of fact, Mary's acceptance and the subsequent birth of Jesus align with various prophecies in the Old Testament, reinforcing the idea that her role is part of a supernatural plan unfolding over centuries. Ultimately, the attainment of these prophecies, such as the virgin birth foretold in Isaiah 7:14, adds a layer of significance to Mary's obedience and underscores her participation in a larger, preordained narrative. It is on account of this that I further contend that Mary's willingness to bear and raise Jesus positions her as a key figure in the unfolding of God's redemptive plan. That is the reason Mueller (2023) proclaims

that in Christian traditional structures, Mary is venerated for her compliance to serve as a vessel for the Incarnation, embodying a humble and obedient attitude towards God's will. It is for this reason I proposed earlier that her triumph lies not only in the gratification of a supernatural plan but also in her exemplary response to it. Conclusively, Mary's significance extends beyond the narrative of the Nativity. Throughout Christian history, she has been revered as the Mother of Jesus and honoured in various traditions. Her credence and role as the mother of Jesus make her a central figure in Christian devotion, with feasts, prayers and Marian doctrines (re)producing the enduring impact of her victory in accepting God's plan.

The woman at the well (Jn 4:1–42)

Liberation theology further provides a profound perspective through which to critique the narrative of the Samaritan woman, whose life unfolds as a dynamic interplay of struggle and triumph. The Samaritan woman's existence is marked by social stigma and isolation, deeply entrenched in her multiple marriages and unconventional living arrangements. Her experiences resonate with the marginalised and oppressed, forming a poignant backdrop for liberation theology's exploration of societal injustices. In the context of struggle, the Samaritan woman's life represents the systemic disparities and social hierarchies prevalent in her community. Her multiple marriages and non-normative living situations expose her to judgement, ostracism and a pervasive sense of exclusion. In this regard, the institution of marriage, a central pillar of social conformity, becomes a source of condemnation for her. The multiple marriages are not only a reflection of her personal history but also a lens through which society casts judgement. Her non-normative living arrangements further intensify the scrutiny she faces, compounding the layers of ostracism and exclusion. In contrast to this view, I argue that marriage in contemporary contexts should not be used as the sole measure of human existence owing to the reality that it overlooks the diverse experiences, contributions and identities of individuals beyond their marital status. This is based on the premise that human contentment and worth extend far beyond romantic partnerships, encompassing personal growth, achievements, relationships and contributions to society that are not contingent upon marital status. Therefore, judging the totality of human existence based solely on marriage perpetuates narrow and exclusionary norms, undermining the inherent value and dignity of individuals who may choose different paths or prioritise other dimensions of their lives.

By the same token, judgement, as a consequence of her life choices (The Woman at the Well), becomes an instrument wielded by the community to enforce conformity to established ethos. The societal gaze, marked by condemnation and exclusion, configures her identity and restricts her access to social acceptance. The Samaritan woman, therefore, becomes a symbol of those who exist on the fringes of acceptability, grappling with the weight of collective expectations that perpetuate systemic disparities. In parallel

to this, ostracism becomes a lived reality for the Samaritan woman, illustrating the consequences of deviating from established principles. The community's exclusionary practices, inveterated in ethnological and religious belief systems, amplify her sense of isolation. The communal well, a central hub for social interaction, becomes a site of alienation for her, as others distance themselves from someone perceived as socially tainted. In the process, her struggle to find integration in this communal space highlights the dazzling consequences of societal hierarchies that subjugate individuals based on their perceived deviations from societal ethical codes. In consideration of this view, I contend that this biblical piece of evidence underscores how individuals who are perceived as socially tainted or stigmatised can potentially experience exclusion within communal spaces. In contemporary society, this can manifest in various forms such as ostracism, cyberbullying or exclusion from social groups. As a result of these challenges, enduring alienation and rejection could have significant adverse effects on an individual's mental health and security. For example, sensibilities of solitude, depression and anxiety may be exacerbated when someone is excluded from a central social hub like the communal well.

This being said, the intersectionality of the Samaritan woman's struggles, including gender dynamic forces and collective ethical codes, mirrors the broader matrix of oppression that liberation theology seeks to address. For this reason, I contend that her narrative becomes a microcosm of the struggles faced by individuals pushed to the margins, inviting a theological reflection on the transformative power of supernatural encounters. This denotes that the victory in the Samaritan woman's narrative ensues through her encounter with Jesus at the well. With this in mind, liberation theology stresses the transformative potential of such encounters, where supernatural intervention disrupts oppressive structures and empowers the oppressed. By the same token, Jesus engages her in a dialogue that transcends societal ethos, acknowledging her as a person of worth and offering her the 'living water' of spiritual liberation. As a direct consequence of this, this encounter becomes a catalyst for her spiritual transformation and liberation from the social shackles that bound her. In simple language, the transformative encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman stands out as a powerful testament to the subversive nature of divine engagement in the face of societal norms. In contrast to the prevailing ethos of judgement and exclusion, Jesus initiates a dialogue that goes beyond societal boundaries, recognising the Samaritan woman as a person of inherent worth. Similarly, this departure from societal expectations is emblematic of the liberating dimensions of the divine encounter.

In addition to this, Jesus' acknowledgement of the Samaritan woman's worth goes beyond mere favourable reception; it contests the very foundations of the societal ethos that sought to subjugate her. This means that by engaging in conversation with her, especially considering the cultural and religious norms of the time, Jesus agitates the established order and

affirms her as a valued individual deserving of honour. This act of recognition becomes a radical departure from the prevalent social dynamics, introducing an alternative narrative that underlines the intrinsic dignity of every person. The metaphorical offering of 'living water' further underscores the transformative nature of this encounter. This suggests that beyond the physical act of drawing water from the well, Jesus extends an invitation to spiritual liberation, symbolising a profound shift in the Samaritan woman's life. To spell it out, this living water becomes a metaphorical symbol of the transformative power of divine grace and liberation, offering a way out of the societal shackles that bound her. In the face of societal judgement and exclusion, Jesus offers an alternative narrative – one of liberation, acceptance, and spiritual renewal. This transformative experience becomes a turning point in her life, redirecting her identity away from societal labels and towards a profound understanding of her intrinsic value in the eyes of the spiritual kingdom.

What is further important is to appreciate the fact that her defeat extends beyond personal liberation; she becomes a messenger of the Gospel, a role typically reserved for societal elites. In many societies of that time, women, especially those with a tarnished social reputation like the Samaritan woman, were excluded from formal religious and societal leadership roles (Smith et al. 2022). On account of this, the act of becoming a messenger of the Gospel connotes a radical departure from these social ethical codes. It denounces the conventional understanding of who is deemed worthy to carry and proclaim spiritual messages. This means that by entrusting her with this role, Jesus elevates the Samaritan woman to a position of spiritual influence and leadership, dismantling encumbrances that restricted such opportunities based on communal judgements. In this instance, her role as a messenger of the Gospel underscores the inclusive nature of supernatural grace and denounces or contests the hierarchical structures of her society. In choosing her as a bearer of the Good News, Jesus not only validates her personal transformation but also sanctions her to participate actively in the dissemination of spiritual truths. This act serves as a powerful statement against mainstream societal prejudices, demonstrating that spiritual discernment and the capacity to proclaim divine messages are not exclusive privileges reserved for a select few. Therefore, the liberation theology highlights the subversive nature of this enablement, contesting established power structures. This suggests that by offering her testimony and inviting others to encounter Jesus, she becomes an agent of change, transformation and liberation within her community. Her actions exemplify the liberating dimensions of faith, where the downtrodden become instruments of (re)construction.

The Samaritan woman's pivotal role in bringing others to orthodoxy further challenges traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Liberation theology, with its commitment to justice and equality, explicates her ascendancy as a communal victory over dictatorial norms. Her narrative encourages a re-evaluation of societal prejudices and an

embrace of the marginalised as bearers of divine revelation. In essence, the Samaritan woman's narrative, when examined through the lens of liberation theology, uncovers a profound interplay of struggle and triumph. Her story becomes a theological locus for reflecting on the ingenious power of encounters with the divine, the subversion of societal norms and the potential for marginalised individuals to become agents of liberation within their communities. Over and above this, the Samaritan woman's narrative within the context of struggle serves as a formidable commentary on the systemic imbalances and social hierarchies popularised in her community. Her story evokes a critical appraisal of how societal norms, when rigidly imposed, contribute to the subjugation and exclusion of individuals who do not conform to established expectations. It lays the groundwork for broader theological reflections on compassion, empathy and the transformative power of encounters that challenge societal prejudices.

The healing of the Bent-Over Woman (Lk 13:10–17)

Liberation theology, as a conceptual framework for interpreting religious narratives, provides a lens to investigate and understand the interface between struggle and victory in the context of subjugated individuals. Applying this conceptual framework to the story of the woman bent over for 18 years, as recounted in the Gospels, uncovers layers of significance that go beyond the immediate physical healing. In view of this, liberation theology stresses the transformative power of supernatural intervention, especially when it confronts and challenges oppressive social structures. The woman's prolonged physical affliction serves as a metaphor for broader social and systemic challenges faced by denigrated groups, particularly women and young girls, in the collective context of the time. With a particular focus on this narrative, the disabling spirit not only represented a personal struggle but also symbolised the weight of societal expectations, norms and prejudices that oppressed her. In other words, by linking the woman's affliction to communal expectations, norms and prejudices, this biblical narrative underlines the oppressive forces that configure and constrain the lives of subjugated groups. Having said that, this metaphor suggests that the woman's physical affliction is not merely a result of personal catastrophe but is intricately connected to the social structures that marginalise certain groups. The weight of communal expectations and prejudices becomes a burden that she, and others like her, must bear. It emphasises the interconnectedness of personal and societal struggles, drawing attention to the broader issues of disparity and discrimination faced by sidelined communities. For this reason, I contend that in the lens of liberation theology, her condition becomes emblematic of the broader struggles experienced by those on the margins.

More than this, the act of healing by Jesus on the Sabbath introduces a profound element of conquest within this narrative. Sabbath observance held significant cultural and religious importance in that context, and healing on

this day challenged established ethical codes (Vaida 2023). On the grounds of this, liberation theology encourages one to view this healing not merely as a miraculous event but as a deliberate act of compassion and justice. This denotes that by healing on the Sabbath, Jesus confronts the rigid and legalistic interpretations of religious legal frameworks that contributed to the woman's marginalisation. This is based on the premise that in many religious contexts, including the historical context of Jesus's teachings in the Christian tradition, there were instances where religious legal frameworks or interpretations of them led to the marginalisation or exclusion of certain individuals (Bowman 2023). Differently put, by healing on the Sabbath, a day traditionally reserved for rest and religious observance, Jesus challenges the prevailing principles and questions the priorities that rigid interpretations of religious legal frameworks may potentially impose. This act symbolises a shift towards a more compassionate and inclusive interpretation of religious dogmas. It suggests that the spirit of the law, which emphasises love, mercy and justice, should take precedence over strict adherence to the letter of the law. Considering this, this healing act could be seen as a critique of a system that has contributed to the repudiation of the woman with the prolonged physical affliction. It serves as a reminder that religious practices and legal frameworks should promote the welfare of individuals and the community rather than perpetuating social injustice. This act of healing becomes a symbol of resistance against oppressive structures, embodying the principles of mercy and justice that are central to liberation theology. Over and above this, the very act of Jesus addressing the woman in public challenges social norms that repudiated individuals with physical or perceived shortcomings. In a society where physical afflictions were associated with sin or supernatural punishment, Jesus' actions disrupt these prejudiced perspectives. Liberation theology, therefore, underscores the significance of this triumph by underscoring the subversive nature of Jesus' compassion, which not only heals the woman physically but also restores her nobility and challenges the dehumanising labels imposed by societal principles.

In the same vein, the woman's journey from struggle to victory serves as a microcosm of the broader liberative themes within the Christian narrative. Liberation theology posits that the supernatural power is inherently concerned with the liberation of the oppressed. In this textual evidence, Jesus' healing is not just a miraculous episode but a transformative intervention that dismantles the status quo. It sets a precedent for a theology that actively engages with the struggles of the sidelined, advocating for justice and mercy. This narrative invites contemporary readers and scholars to reflect on the intersections of faith and social justice. Liberation theology encourages believers to emulate Jesus' example by actively engaging in the dismantling of oppressive structures and promoting a more inclusive and compassionate society. The story of the bent-over woman, when viewed through the lens of liberation theology,

becomes a powerful testament to the transformative propensity of spiritual compassion in the face of systemic struggles. It challenges individuals to participate in the ongoing work of liberation, embodying the principles of justice and mercy in their interactions with the marginalised and oppressed. With these deliberations in mind, it is prudent that this article makes commentary on the women's struggles and victories in the contemporary contexts owing to the fact that the New Testament exists in the modern contexts. This is presented in the following section.

Contextualising women's struggles and victories in the contemporary contexts

In the contemporary contexts, exploring women's challenges and victories in the New Testament through the lens of liberation theology takes on profound relevance as societies grapple with challenges of gender isonomy, social justice and the dismantling of oppressive structures. Liberation theology, with its emphasis and significance on the divine as a force for liberation, offers a framework to meticulously investigate and address the intricacies of women's experiences as reflected in New Testament narratives. The narrative of the woman bent over for 18 years, as told in the New Testament, resonates with contemporary dialogues on the challenges faced by women. This narrative serves as a poignant metaphorical expression of the enduring struggles that women encounter, both individually and collectively. In a world where gender-based intolerance, violence and systemic imbalances persist, the bent-over woman becomes a symbol of the setbacks imposed by male-orientated norms and societal expectations. In any case, liberation theology calls for a *contextual reading* of religious texts, paying meticulous attention to the socio-political subtleties at play during the time they were written. In the contemporary contexts, this approach precipitates an investigation of how the New Testament narratives could inform human understanding of the challenges encountered by women and young girls today. The disabling spirit in the biblical story could be considered representative of the various forms of oppression that women continue to confront – whether in the form of GBV, economic disparities or restrictive cultural norms.

The success in the narrative, where Jesus heals the woman on the Sabbath, challenges contemporary issues related to religious traditions and gender roles. The Sabbath healing incident becomes a call to question rigid explications of religious practices that contribute to the oppression of women and young girls. In the current context, dialogues concerning women's roles in religious institutions, equal opportunities in leadership and the dismantling of religious doctrines that advance gender imbalance are pertinent subjects. Bearing this in mind, liberation theology encourages a re-evaluation of religious traditions to ensure they actively contribute to justice and inclusivity. The contemporary context also observes a growing cognisance of the

intersectionality of women's struggles. In view of this, liberation theology invites an examination of how race, class, sexual orientation and other factors intersect with gender to create unique challenges. Applying this lens to New Testament narratives allows for a multifaceted comprehension of the variegated experiences of women, promoting a more inclusive and intersectional approach to addressing their challenges. Over and above this, the narrative serves as a fountain of inspiration for contemporary efforts to empower women and young girls and denounce oppressive systems. In essence, liberation theology encourages believers to actively engage in social justice initiatives that address the root causes of women's and young girls' struggles. Whether through advocacy for equal pay, reproductive rights, or combating GBV, the liberative principles within the New Testament narratives could potentially inspire a commitment to transformative action. Ultimately, exploring women's challenges and victories in the New Testament through the lens of liberation theology presents a relevant and transformative perspective in the contemporary context. This means that by critically examining these narratives, individuals, and communities could find inspiration and guidance for addressing the complex and multifaceted issues encountered by women today, contributing to the progressing pursuit of gender fairness and justice.

Conclusion

In delving into the narratives of women in the New Testament through the lens of liberation theology, it becomes patent that these ancient stories continue to resonate with contemporary challenges for gender emancipation and justice. Given this reality, the exploration of women's challenges and victories in the New Testament offers an extraordinary opportunity to contemplate the enduring pertinence of these biblical narratives and their potential to evoke reconstitutive action in the present day. In contrast to this, liberation theology, with its emphasis on spirituality as a force for liberation, provides an affluent framework for interpreting these biblical voices in a way that transcends their historical and cultural contexts. The lens of liberation theology evokes an intricate understanding of the struggles endured by women, moving beyond individual tales to acknowledge various systemic and societal issues. It encourages an acknowledgement that the challenges encountered by women in the New Testament are not isolated incidents but conceptualisations of profoundly ingrained structures of oppression. As outlined earlier, the story of the woman bent over for 18 years serves as a consequential metaphor for the burdens carried by women today. It symbolises the weight of male-orientated ethical codes, gender-based discrimination and communal expectations that continue to shape and constrain women's lives. Liberation theology, therefore, calls for one to confront these layered systemic issues and actively work towards disassembling the oppressive fabrics that perpetuate inequality. Similarly, the healing performed by Jesus on the Sabbath becomes a beacon of conviction, challenging

contemporary interpretations of religious traditions that may contribute to the ostracisation of women and young girls. It urges a re-evaluation of religious doctrines and mores to ensure they align with the principles of justice and inclusivity.

In the contemporary terrain, the lens of the liberation theology invites one to consider the interconnectedness of women's struggles. This suggests that by acknowledging the intricate interplay of gender with race, class and other constituents, one gains a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges endured by diverse groups of women. This inclusive technique induces one to address the unique and interconnected dimensions of women's experiences, buttressing a more holistic pursuit of justice. Ultimately, the exploration of women's challenges and victories through the liberation theology serves as a cornerstone of inspiration for contemporary advocacy and activism. The liberative principles found in the New Testament narratives propel individuals and communities towards transformative action. Whether it is advocating for equal opportunities, dismantling oppressive structures or engaging in social justice initiatives, the stories of women in the New Testament offer a timeless call to action. In closing, the lens of liberation theology provides a dynamic and relevant composition for exploring women's challenges and victories in the New Testament. It challenges us to confront entrenched compositions of oppression, inspires a commitment to intersectional understanding and motivates transformative action in the ongoing pursuit of gender equality and justice. As we engage with these ancient narratives, we find both a mirror reflecting contemporary struggles and a roadmap guiding us towards a more liberated and just future for all.

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