

Running head: VOICES FOR THE VOICELESS

VOICES FOR THE VOICELESS

Multicultural Research Project

Janell M. Rardon

Liberty University

Abstract

The 21st century epitomizes the length, height, breadth, and depth of progress. Yet, a vast population of women around the world live under a tyrannical, foreboding cloud of spiritual, emotional, and physical oppression, specifically women trapped in sexual exploitation, due to their ethnicity and social class. It seems that time has stood still, begging answers to why slavery still exists in a free and modern world. In an effort to find answers, this paper delves into the annals of Biblical history, tracing both the Old and New Testament accounts of God and Jesus' ministry toward women, in hopes of unlocking the pattern, releasing the truth, and establishing principles for enabling women today to serve as a voice for the thousands of voiceless women still bound in oppression.

Voices for the Voiceless

In a day and age of considerable accomplishment, astounding telecommunication, and abounding progress, a deeply disturbing, dark-natured beast of oppression lurks. Slavery, a supposed creature of the past, continues to hold a vast population of women around the world under a tyrannical, foreboding grip of spiritual, emotional, and physical oppression, specifically women trapped in sexual exploitation, due to impoverished conditions, gender inequality or social class. It seems that time has stood still, begging answers to why slavery still exists in a free and modern world. Authors Jensen and Otoo-Oyortey (as quoted in Parrott and Cummings, 2006, p. 4) note, “Millions consider violence against women normative because it is so deeply embedded within history and culture.” Yet, within the annals of Biblical history, both the Old and the New Testament lay the recorded historical accounts of God’s design for woman and Jesus’ ministry toward women. Here, hope unfolds through the unlocking of ministerial patterns, the releasing of truth, and the establishing of principles that enable women today to serve as a voice for the thousands of voiceless women still bound in oppression.

Oppression, derived from the Hebrew, *lachats*, means “to squeeze, press” (www.blueletterbible.com). Since before time began, the heavy hand of oppression, which is rooted in pride, can be traced waging an arm wrestling match with the mighty hand of Truth. As recorded in Isaiah 14:12 (New International Version), Lucifer, the bright shining star of heavenly cherubs, pressed to be bigger and better than God. No longer satisfied with his station in heaven, he desired for himself and his legion of cherubs more. More power. More might. More position. It is recorded that he says “in his heart” (Isaiah 14:13-14):

I will ascend to heaven;

I will raise my throne above the stars of God.

I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,
on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.

I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;

I will make myself like the Most High.

At the core of this initial declaration of emancipation from the one true God is a desire for supremacy, power and ultimately, control. The writing prophet, Ezekiel, records a veiled reference to Satan in Ezekiel 28: 11-15 (King James Version), granting more information and insight as to how and why Lucifer, or Satan, fell privy to the sin of pride:

Thus saith the Lord GOD; Thou sealest up the sum, full of wisdom,
and perfect in beauty. Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God;
every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, topaz, and the diamond,
the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle,
and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in
the day that thou wast created. Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth;
and I have set thee so: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God;
thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire.
Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created,
till iniquity was found in thee (King James Version).

Iniquity, or 'evel in its Hebrew translation, refers to "injustice"

(www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?strongs=H5766). Is it perhaps, here at

this juncture, that the seeds of injustice (in the context of this research) expressed in oppression, entered the fabric of our universe? Clearly, Ezekiel affirms Satan's presence in the Garden of Eden, where it is recorded he first tempted God's first two children, specifically targeting and addressing first, the woman (Genesis 3:1-7). Here in the Garden of Eden, a place of creative perfection, several questions arise:

- Isn't it interesting, even perplexing, that Satan, disguised as a beguiling, bewitching serpent, coaxes the woman to forego obeying the directives of his previous Sovereign, God the Almighty, knowing full well the ramifications of such disobedience and self-will?
- Is it at this particular moment, in the history of mankind, that an inroad to controlling and oppressing centuries of vulnerable women enters the realm of life in this world? A battle of wills ensues.
- Can we surmise that at this same particular moment, Elohim, God the Creator, isn't taken by surprise and therefore sets into motion a stream of mighty men and women who, throughout centuries to come, will blaze with courage and tenacity to defeat this oppressive beast? To become a voice for the voiceless? To restore pride and dignity to the oppressed?

Mere supposition, but seemingly validated in the annals of Biblical history. Certainly it was not God's design to oppress the woman he so carefully crafted for his beloved Adam. In contrast, he offered both Adam and Eve complete freedom to enjoy His created world, as evidenced in Genesis 2:18-25, which records the creation of both man and woman, concluding in verse 25, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." One flesh signifying complete

physical, spiritual, and emotional unity. This expression of the divine order of God—man, then woman (the helpmeet)—designed to fully depict unity. Duality, not dominance.

It isn't until Eve succumbs to the temptation of the Oppressor that God speaks his directive, "Because you have done this:

I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing;

with pain you will give birth to children.

Your desire will be for your husband,

and he will rule over you (Genesis 3:16).

God's directive to Eve is not a curse, but a necessary correction. Biblical feminists rile at this suggested "male dominance" or "patriarchal system." Dr. Julie Kelso, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Bond University writes, "For many contemporary feminists, the Bible evokes a backward thinking, patriarchally defined body of literature and a social, political and economic ideological framework that has historically been used to maintain and perpetuate the oppression of women" (Kelso, 2007, p. 4). Philosopher Jerome Gellman adds, "The story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, chs. 2-3, has historically been taken to endorse male normativity, especially in sexuality. There have been some exceptions, in medieval times in particular, which had little impact over time. Adam is the normative sexual being to whom Eve is subordinate. This, in turn, has helped shape gender attitudes for the Western religious tradition" (2006, p. 320). Christian apologist and writer, G. K. Chesterton responds to this viewpoint:

The Fall is a view of life. It is not only the only enlightening, but the only encouraging view of life. It holds, as against the only real alternative

philosophies, those of the Buddhist or the Pessimist or the Promethean, that we have misused a good world, and not merely been entrapped in a bad one. It refers evil back to the wrong use of the will, and thus declares that it can eventually be righted by the right use of the will (Collins, 2010, p. 158).

Chesterton points to the reality of the serpent's tempting of Eve. He goes in for the kill with the woman, not the man. Knowingly, the tempter comes when Adam is absent from the scene. In Judeo-Christian tradition, Adam serves as Eve's "covering" or "protector." Does he somehow smell the scent of emotional vulnerability and therefore seize this moment to slither in and pierce the Divine order set in place by God himself? (Genesis 2:24).

Vulnerable, derived from the Latin root, *vulnerare*, means to wound. Dictionary.com defines this state of vulnerability as leaving someone "exposed or open to emotional or physical danger or harm; easily persuadable or liable to give in to temptation" (www.dictionary.com). C. John Collins adds, "One of the major effects of that corruption was social: Adam against Eve, Cain against Abel, Lamech the bigamist against everyone. One effect of redemption is to heal these ancient breaches, and one purpose of the Mosaic Law was to make possible a just social system in one people, as an invitation for the rest of the peoples to come to know the one true God" (Deut. 4:5-8) (2010, p. 156-157).

By far one of the most devastating ancient breaches is the exploitation of vulnerable women, specifically concerning those trapped in the perils of sexual slavery due to impoverishment, gender inequality, or social class.

In her book review of Parrot & Cummings *Sexual Enslavement of Girls and Women*

Worldwide (2008), Clinical Psychologist, Nancy M. Sidun, cites vulnerability as a core issue in the exploitation of women and girls worldwide:

Sexual slavery in its varying manifestations is driven by social, cultural, political and economic factors. Women are forced to seek a better life or escape a tortuous one due to lack of economic resources, illiteracy, cultural expectations, family obligations, war and civil strife, and domestic abuse. All these elements make women more vulnerable to exploitation. Sexual slavery involving girls and women is growing and will continue to increase unless there is a universal paradigm shift that addresses the gender inequities that justify sexual slavery (p. 497).

The women of the Republic of Malawi, a landlocked country in Southeast Africa, live in a state of vulnerability and are therefore intimately acquainted with the great pain of impoverishment and economic strife. Malawi's rising population currently stands at 13 million (White, 2010, p. 80). Seodi White, in her recent article, "Extreme poverty and its impact on women's vulnerability to HIV transmission: a rights issue," explains the plight of Malawi women:

Malawi has two lineage patterns, patrilineal and matrilineal. In both societies, the position the women assume is inferior to males as decisions are primarily made by men. The distribution of poverty levels across the regions in the country also reflect the nature and character of patrilineality and matrilineal societies. For example, the southern region of Malawi, which is mainly matrilineal, is also the poorest in the country. And according to recent estimates, the current status of poverty shows that 52.4% of the population lives below the poverty line. This translates into about

6.3 million Malawians who are poor with food insecurity and chronic malnutrition being one of the most important indicators that characterize the vulnerability of the poor. And among the poor themselves, the female-headed households are normally worse off” (2010. p. 80).

What does this mean for the Malawi woman? She faces the stark reality of providing for her children, no matter the cost of her selfhood. In fact, many women feel as if they have no value at all (p. 82). White adds, “Poverty is a major influence that often drives women to opt for economic survival, rather than the protection of their sexual and reproductive health rights. Poverty places women in a situation where they engage in sexual activities which they would otherwise avoid if they had had more income or any income at all” (2010, p. 81-82). Therefore, widowed or unmarried (2010, p. 82) Malawi women, in an agriculture-based society, are forced to work as tea pluckers, where in turn for low production they are forced to have sexual relations with male supervisors in order to keep their jobs. This oppression diminishing their sense of self.

Other Malawi women, living in the rural areas, have the responsibility for “fetching fuel wood for domestic purposes and they frequent the forest reserves on a regular basis. Women who sneak into the forests without passes or permits are sexually abused by the guards if caught” (p. 83). And Malawi women living near Lake Malawi, near the male-dominated fishing industry, are known to trade sex for fish in order to feed their households (p. 83).

The story of the Malawi women is not an isolated story. The effects of the global economic crisis reach to the four corners of the globe; perpetuating an ever increasing state of vulnerability for women, particularly the widowed, unmarried, and impoverished.

Researcher Zoe Elena Horn writes of the damages done to “the informal economy” (2010, p. 263), defined by the International Labour Organization (2002) as, “All economic units that are not recognized or regulated by the state, and all economically active persons who do not receive social protection through their work” (p. 263). Horn states:

Despite their strategies to balance budgets, some workers resorted to borrowing from neighborhood storekeepers, or local moneylenders. Some waste-pickers borrowed from scrap-shop owners, while home-based workers in Thailand reported borrowing from moneylenders to pay the debts piling up from other moneylenders. In these informal credit markets, workers were being charged upwards of 30 percent a month in interest. These interest payments increase financial pressure on informal workers, and reduce their earnings over the long-term. As a result, women’s economic, physical and emotional burdens are being compounded during the crisis, and the relative socio-economic vulnerability of poor working women and their families is worsening (p.270-272, 273).

Senior Editor of Harvard International Review, Richard Re, affirms this global dilemma:

The world’s vast disparities in wealth, education, and opportunity make this kind of slavery possible. Desperation and hope leave all too vulnerable those people most determined to escape inhumane conditions. This tactic is usually used to target girls and young women. Impoverished families in rural areas recognize a greater economic value in their male children and are often motivated by

patriarchal cultural mores. When well-dressed men come offering a small monetary down payment (in one documented case, less than US\$25) to transport girls away from home to work as maids or waitresses or in other possible occupations, these families often jump at the opportunity. In reality, these men are slavers who take their willing cargo to the city to be 'broken in' for their life of involuntary prostitution. The girls are sometimes beaten, raped, starved, or tortured until they submit to their keepers' demands. In Mumbai, some 90,000-sex slaves work in the city's red light district. Some 20,000 Burmese girls are believed to be held in Thai brothels (2002, p. 32-33).

Global economic decline in the Soviet Union, known currently as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, also struck to the heart of women and children, as the economic collapse forced closings of many factories in which the women were employed. Thus, "many rural women migrated to urban areas in search of employment opportunities" (Orlova, 2005, p. 157), only to find themselves falsely informed and trapped in the sex trade. Orlova concludes, "Although many trafficked Russian women possess significant levels of education, work experience, and professional qualifications, they still fall prey to traffickers because of economic desperation" (p. 165).

In light of such harsh realities that are often difficult to comprehend, many national governments, world-relief organizations, NGO's (nongovernmental organization), Christian Mission Organizations, and NPO's (nonprofit organizations) are raising their voices for the voiceless and rallying resources to provide relief in the form of education, community development, safe houses, rehabilitative services, life development courses,

and employment all in an effort to revitalize and restore victims and their families. Step Ahead, a Christian-based integrated community development organization, based in Thailand, has spent the last twenty-five years empowering the Thai people, specifically those living in Bangkok's largest slum, Klong Toey, by making micro loans a viable option and alternative to the oppressive money lenders. In doing so, families become self-sustaining and less vulnerable to exploitation in the sex trade, which literally is in their backyard. In 2004, after the devastating Asian Tsunami of December 26, Step Ahead launched four child development centers in an effort to educate Thai children. Typically, Thai children receive only a sixth grade education, but with these efforts being put forth, the face of Thailand's future will be changed. No longer bound by illiteracy and impoverished communities, families can actually thrive in their ability to be self-sustaining entities. Epidemiologists Chris Beyrer and Julie Stachowiak note:

As Thai women and their families have become increasingly aware of the dangers of sex work, the number of Thai women willing to work in the sex industry has sharply declined. This has driven traffickers further afield—into tribal areas, and to Burma and Laos, to find women and girls (and parents) ignorant of the dangers of sex work. This is true for male sex workers in Thailand as well—an increasing share of gay bar and brothel workers are Burmese and tribal youths (2003, p. 109).

Step Ahead has recently partnered with Night Light International, CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network) Siam, as well as industry leaders, UNESCO, Thai church leaders, and the Thai government, inaugurating the “Stay in School Campaign”—targeting Issan, a very poor area located in Northeast Thailand. Through community programs, families

will learn how to generate income, become self-sustaining, and most importantly, see local churches and ministry leaders rolling up their sleeves and actively pursuing the cessation of century-old strongholds of oppression.

“This action will be a direct hit on the root of sexual exploitation,” notes John H. Quinley, Founder of Step Ahead Integrated Community Development Foundation.

“Large percentages of young girls and women come from Northeast Thailand, due to the abject poverty of their communities. By offering education, training, micro loans, life skill classes, family counseling, and community development—generational curses will be broken and the strong root of oppression dealt with” (J. Quinley, personal communication, July 30, 2010).

It is this pattern of exemplary human service and action that will actually uproot the tendrils of centuries of oppression and bring true and lasting change. The efforts of these diverse organizations establishes a pattern for overcoming the oppressive, heavy hand of Satan, whose original intent to distort God’s divine order and subjugate the distinct and God-designed role of woman. Their unity aligns with the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which, as stated in this excerpt, honors the value of women:

Recognizing that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men” (1993, p. 2).

Herein lies the original mandate of Genesis 2:24-25: that man and woman would be one. It seems God desires that one not be “dominating over” or “discriminating against” the other. Mutual dependence. Mutual strength. Within this biblical text, it is never assumed or apparent that Elohim, Creator God, purposes to oppress his womanly creature or have her dominated, suppressed, discriminated, or muted. Quite the contrary.

Reformed minister and lecturer, Dr. Elijah M. Baloyi urges, “The duty to improve women’s position in society is not the responsibility of a few people alone, but of everyone. According to the researcher, the church has not done enough pastorally in this regard” (2010, p. 1). In his original research, “A Re-Reading of John 8:1-11 from a Pastoral Liberative Perspective of South African Women,” he delves into the patriarchal rule of men in the Jewish community of Jesus’ day. He observes:

Cultural and traditional laws, rules and regulations were shaped by men alone, for the benefit of masculine seniority at the expense of women.

It is worrying that the Jewish community, from which Christianity originated, promoted the oppression of women. This might have been the reason why some cultures that received Christianity also accepted the culture of seeing women as secondary human beings” (2010, p. 1).

John 8: 1-11 exemplifies the great value Jesus placed on women, particularly vulnerable women. Here is the story of a woman who had been caught in adultery. Not falsely accused, no, actually caught in the act. According to Jewish law, she deserved stoning. Fierce and fuming Jewish leaders are eager to implement the law. John 8:6 offers a subtle hint at the true interior of their motive. It states, “They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.” The word trap meaning, “an ambush,

scheme, or trick intended to catch somebody unawares and put that person at a disadvantage or in somebody else's power" (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/trap>).

Once again, the slithering serpent comes to oppress, yet Jesus, who clearly aligns with his Father's purpose to redeem and restore women to their original design, resists them and simply kneels down and writes in the sand. When the questioning doesn't relent, he refutes, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). In response to his outlandish statement and approach, the men leave, one by one, leaving Jesus standing alongside the vulnerable woman. His charge, "Go now and leave your life of sin," releases an unction that enables this woman to experience complete freedom. Jesus' actions must have left that crowd of men stunned, angered, and most certainly, perplexed.

In the book of Matthew, Jesus clearly defines his mission to redefine the role of the women within the community. Professor Jean Weaver unfolds this paradigm shift, as seen, this time, through the eyes of Matthew. She writes of his gospel:

Matthew also identifies women in terms of ethnicity, social status, and daily activities. However beneath all the apparent normalcy and routine of these women's world lies a profound vulnerability that pervades and shapes their life experiences in crucial, challenging, and sometimes-brutal ways. Much of this vulnerability relates to women's status within a male-dominated society and patriarchal family structures. Matthew's narrative paints a compelling and realistic lower-level portrait of women and their secondary, often endangered, status within the patriarchal society and the Roman-occupied world of first-century Palestine" (p. 392-393).

On yet another occasion, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman (John 4:1-38). Tired from

a long day's journey, Jesus stops his journey and sits by Jacob's well in the town of Sychar, in the region of Samaria. After his disciples leave to go find food, Jesus engages the Samaritan woman in an interesting conversation about living water. He proceeds to tell this woman all about her life. Surprised by this, she sees he is a prophet. John 4:27 shows the surprise of the disciples as they return and see Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman. Once again, Jesus has spent time with a vulnerable woman in an effort to bring restoration and freedom. Once again, his outlandish methodology leaves his own disciples perplexed. The Samaritan woman was not physically impoverished or trapped in sexual slavery, but she was considered an outcast by her society. For this reason, Jesus summons her to drink of the living water that will bring true change.

Bible Researcher John Kohlenberger III sheds insight into Jesus's countercultural way of ministry and offers established principles for becoming a voice for the voiceless. He writes:

Throughout his ministry, Jesus acted in ways that were shocking to those steeped in their culture of hierarchy. In a culture characterized by social status and power, Jesus ushered in a brand new definition of authority, and his acceptance of women was nothing short of radical. Therefore, in our search for insights into being change agents for biblical equality, we cannot begin anywhere but with our Lord and Savior. Interestingly, every woman Jesus encountered in the Gospels—no matter her ethnicity or socioeconomic class—was raised in her spiritual and physical state as well as in her social status” (2009, p. 5).

How then, as 21st century Christians, do we follow Christ's example and be “agents for biblical equality” (p. 5) in our communities and in the world—breaking centuries of

cultural oppression and ushering women into newfound freedom in Christ? How can we extend a hand of mercy to the women of Malawki, who suffer amid tealeaves, forest preserves, and fishing villages? Or the women of The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, who suffer amid masquerades of sound employment? Or the women of Northern Issan (Thailand), who suffer at the hands of well-dressed chameleons who steal their childhood?

Would it be possible to lay aside differences of gender, social class, cultures, and even denominations in order to experience the radical love that Jesus embodied in order to effectively organize and administer programs that will actually sustain the global ambassadors working tirelessly to end oppression against women? Perhaps the directive of John 17:15-23, expressed in Jesus' final prayer on earth, can serve as our mantra and give us the courage to be voices for the voiceless:

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

References

- Blue Letter Bible. "The Major Prophet Ezekiel 28 - (KJV - King James Version)." Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2011. 8 Jul 2011.
<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Bible.cfm?b=Eze&c=28&t=KJV>
- Collins, C. (2010). Adam and eve as historical people, and why it matters [Electronic version]. *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, 62(3), 147-165.
- Gellman, J. (2006). Gender and sexuality in the garden of eden. *Theology & Sexuality*, 12(3), 319-336. doi:10.1177/1355835806065391
- Kelso, J. (2007). Why should feminists read the Bible? [Electronic version] *Hecate: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Women's Liberation*, 33(2), 4-11.
- Kohlenberger, J. (2009, September 1). Destined to cause the falling and rising of many: Jesus' radical treatment of women. *Mutuality*, 4-6.
- Martin, G. (n.d.). Bury your head in the sand. In *The Phrase Finder*. Retrieved July 5, 2011, from <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/80800.html>
- Orlova, A. V. (2005). Trafficking of women and children for exploitation in the commercial sex trade: The case of the Russian Federation. *Georgetown Journal of Gender & The Law*, 6(2), 157-178.
- perception. (n.d.). In *Business Dictionary*. Retrieved July 2, 2011, from <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/perception.html>
- Re, R. (2002). A persisting evil: The global problem of slavery. *Harvard International Review*, 32-35. Retrieved July 7, 2011
- Rothenberg, P. S. (2010). *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Worth Publishers.

trap. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Retrieved July 07, 2011, from Dictionary.com

website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/trap>

vulnerable. (n.d.). *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*.

Retrieved July 08, 2011, from Dictionary.com website:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/vulnerable>

Wyle, S. (2004). *Revisiting America: Reading in race, culture, and conflict*. Upper

Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.