

## A fresh look at the position of women in the Bible<sup>1</sup>

By Leen La Rivière<sup>2</sup>

Because of the fall the harmony which was intended was lost: between God and man, between man and nature, and between man and woman. Misuse, manipulation, struggle for power came about (Gen. 3:16), instead of equality (Gen. 1 :26). Not the divine fashion of a serving-rule, but that of brute force took over; not the exercise of spiritual authority but that of authoritarian rule. The idea was that men and women, however different, would live with equal dignity, and together they would rule and care for the creation (Gen 1 :26-28, 2:15). Sometimes people claim that the Bible is precisely the book that oppresses women and opposes emancipation. **Nothing is farther from the truth.** Through the whole of Biblical history, God has called women to occupy every office, in spite of the fall:

- **Leadership of the people of Israel out of slavery into freedom:** Miriam was one of the leaders along with Moses and Aaron (Ex. 15:20, 1 Cron. 6:3; she was also a leader, otherwise she would not be included in this list; Micah 6:4 recognizes her leadership).
  - After occupying the promised land, the tribes were led by **Judges**: one of them was a woman, namely, Deborah (Judges 4, 5).
  - **Royal highness:** Esther was queen and saved her people through her actions (the book of Esther in the Old Testament).
  - **Doing business:** the woman in the book of Proverbs was no dolled-up broad but a hard working women successful in her business (Prov. 31 :10-31).
  - **Romance:** in the Song of Songs, the tantalizing beauty of a woman is sung about and the equal role of man and women in the play of love is portrayed (i.e. the Song of Songs in the Old Testament).
  - **Care:** there is talk of being like 'a mother of Israel' (Judges 5:7, 11 Sam 20:1 g), the apex of care and commitment. - Israel was a beautiful virgin (cf. Hosea) but she behaved like a cheap whore.
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- **Surrender:** Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the great example of surrender (Luke 1 :28-38, 49). In her day, being pregnant out of wedlock was the biggest scandal imaginable. All generations will honour her.
  - **Prophet:** Being a prophet was the highest possible spiritual office, the closest to God. Miriam was a prophetess (Ex. 15:36). Ann was a prophetess (Luke 2:36). The daughters of Phillip were also prophetesses (Acts 21:9). They spoke as such and gave instruction.

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Deborah was a prophetess (Judges **4:4**), as was Huldah (1 Chron. 34:22) and Anna (Luke 2:36).

- **Travelling Evangelists:** Aquila and Priscilla were a married couple who traveled around building up the churches (Acts 18:2, 18, 26, 1 Cor. 16:19, 11 Tim. 4:19). The fact that Aquila's name was mentioned indicates that she had a definite job (She is sometimes even names first).

- **Leaders:** There were also women who led services; so it would appear from the end of a few of Paul's letters: 'Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house' (Col. 4:15); 'Claudia and all the brothers greet you' (11 Tim. 2:21. The listing of men's names with a woman's name included in it indicates that this woman also had a position of service.) 'The elder to the chosen lady' (11 John) is addressed to a woman. References to 'my little children' in the letter should be understood as referring to members of the congregation rather than to her own children.

. - **Following Jesus:** In the cultures of the time of Jesus (and now a days too, actually) it was considered extremely improper for women to follow after or travel around with men. Jesus made no objections. He gave women true value. 'There was a whole group of women who followed Jesus' (Luke 8:1-3, 23:27, 49, Matt. 27:55, Mark 15:40-41).

- **Leadership Team** (New Testament): Paul at least once took a woman with him on one of his missionary journeys, it would appear from one remark. He also says that other apostles did so at times (1 Cor. 9:1-5).

- **Respect and Worth:** In various places Jesus departed completely from cultural conceptions and traditions:

1. He spoke (at first alone) with a Samaritan(!) woman (John 4:4-42). a. Jews did not have commerce with Samaritans. b. You did not speak alone with a woman. The way in which Jesus addressed her was particularly respectful.

2. He honoured the faith of a heathen woman. A Jewish rabbi did not have dealings with heathens (Matt. 15:21-28.)

3. The woman who was caught in adultery was not condemned by Jesus (John 8:2-11). (Why didn't they bring the man with them too? The fact that he was not brought along demonstrates, in my view, that it was a set-up whereby a man, a situation, or a weakness of the women was used at the orders of the Pharisees). Jesus appeared to be very understanding of human weakness. Only, go and sin no more. He restored the woman's own worth.

4. Prostitutes and tax collectors (the outcasts of the culture) were real people for Him (Matt. 21 :31, 11:19, Luke 15:1, Matt. 9:10, Luke 7:37-50); he associated with them, celebrated with them; he even ate and drank with them (thereby violating the cultic rules).

5. On the cross He asked His disciple John to take care of his mother Mary (John 19:26-27). After Jesus was gone, as a widow, she could die of hunger if there were no children to take care of their mother.

6. Mothers and children were welcome to be with him (Matt. 19:13-15, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 18:15-17).



7. Legal position. You can't just dump your wife; Jesus said pointed things about just sending away or divorcing wives (Matt. 19:3-10). He referred back to how it was in the beginning: men and women were equal!

8. Serving: In marriage, you are not simply the boss: as a husband you love your wife and as a wife you love your husband (I Cor. 7:1-5) Note- a wife has authority over her husband's body!! The so-called strong husband should take good care of his wife, (I Pet. 3:7; husbands must honour their wives. They are delicate vessels and fellow inheritors of grace, just like men.) (Eph. 5:25, 28- 33, Col. 3:19.) The husband should be like a priest for the family (he shouldn't play the pope, but act with spiritual insight, bringing reconciliation, overcoming contradictions, sacrificing himself and thus being an example and not a dictator). To be a priest is also to be a spiritual umbrella under which others can develop themselves.

- **In Christ** there is neither male nor female! (Gal. 3:26-28; notice, women too are sons of God, and hence, in everything heirs of Christ.) In other words, through faith and the message of the kingdom, everything is returned to the original creation design. The gospel is hence also the message of the equal worth and dignity of man and woman.

- **Legal protection:** In ancient culture women did not count. It is all the more remarkable then that in the books of the law of Moses, women received a clear legal position. A woman could have ownership of things; she could inherit things and continue the good family name; she could not simply be sent away by a mean husband. When there were rumors of adultery, the question had to be looked into seriously. If an unmarried young woman was taken by a guy, then he had to stick with her. In respect to these laws too, women enjoyed much protection which stood in stark contrast to the cultures of the day (Ex. 21-23, Lev. 18, Lev. 20, Num. 5, Num. 6, Num. 27:1-11, 36:1-13) which were full of abuses, incest, temple prostitution, female sacrifices, fertility rites, child sacrifice, etc. etc. The Ten Commandments also provide protection for women (Ex. 20:1-17, Deut. 21 :1 0-1 4, 22:13-30, 24:1 -5.) - The prostitute who hid the spies that came from Israel received a place in Israel and even became one of Jesus' forebears (Joshua. 2:1, 6:25, Matt. 1 :5).

- **The book of Ruth:** A wonderful ideal. This foreign woman is also one of the ancestors of Jesus (Ruth 4:13-17, Matt. 1 :5). - The gospel of the kingdom is just as much for women as for men. Read about how many have been wonderfully saved, e.g. Mary Magdalen (Luke 8:1- 3).

- **Both** men and women believed the gospel (cf. Acts 8:12). - The New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-2), the greatest work of art of all times, is compared with a gloriously dressed bride. If a woman were an inferior creature, the New Jerusalem would not be compared with such a fantastic bride.

In Acts, we frequently read about women who came together to serve God (Acts 16:13, 17:4, 12), and of groups of women who were honoured by God. In this too, their position of equal worth is apparent. Through the salvation of Jesus, everything is returned to the original creation order: so that man and women together will rule and protect, and

hence exercise their authority. Both are of equal worth and thereby as man and women both are unique, complementing one another! I myself can only observe that if we take the intention of the Bible seriously and put it into practice in our lives there would no longer be any feminist or emancipation problems. Women in office or in leadership positions, a problem? You **cannot**, in my opinion, base this on the Bible.

### **Who is Leen La Rivière?**

Born in 1946. Married with Ria (1968), 3 sons, 4 grandchildren. He is of French origine (Huguenot), but native Dutch. He studied education and theology (1963-1968). In 2021 he did the master Religion and Society at the Utrecht University. Founder of the ministry Continental Sound (1970; [www.continentalsound.org](http://www.continentalsound.org)); Founded the publishing House Continental Music 1975; [www.continentalsound.org](http://www.continentalsound.org)); founder of Christian Artists Europe (1980; [www.christianartists.org](http://www.christianartists.org)); founder of Continental Ministries Europe (1985; [www.continentalministries.org](http://www.continentalministries.org)); founder of the national Christian trade union for arts and culture (1989; CNV-Kunstenbond); founder of the international Christian artists network (1995; [www.christianartists-network.org](http://www.christianartists-network.org)); founder of the Christian artists academy (2000; [www.christianartists-academy.org](http://www.christianartists-academy.org)); founder and lector of the masterclass cultural leadership (2015; [www.masterclassculturalleadership.org](http://www.masterclassculturalleadership.org)). Leen wrote 29 books. Several books were translated in other languages, the most translated one is Biblical view on creativity and art (14 translations; 2023 in Croatian, 2024 in Mongolian even). Chief editor of the Christian Culture magazine Sjofer (Dutch, released every quarter since 1974). He has been key-note speaker at conferences around Europe, South Africa, Australia) and preached in many churches and meetings. He produced over 100 CD's of Continentals, Young Continentals, Continental Kids and other Christian Artists.