

# Gender balance: A new lens for reading and studying the Bible, Part 2



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This article continues an investigation of the new concept *gender balance* in the Bible. It features New Testament examples and follows the format of the preceding article that highlighted Old Testament examples. Ten entries compare specific New Testament men and women whose stories share similarities in themes, experiences, insights, comments, or divine giftings. The last two entries investigate gender balance in more depth.

**Contribution:** This article is the second of a two-part series in gender balance and together with Part 1 (which focused on the Old Testament) present a survey of a new approach to reading and studying the Bible. The new lens, gender balance, applies to both the Old and New Testament: If there is a theme, text, emotion or story about a man, look for one about a woman, and vice versa. This lens generates new perspectives for teaching, preaching, studying, and writing about the Bible. It is clear from the Bible that gender balance provides input on contemporary worldwide issues. It can assist individuals, communities, churches and nations in areas such as the following: negotiation of power between colonisers and the colonised, and discussion of traditional areas of patriarchal control. Gender balance honours both men and women.

**Keywords:** Gender balance; literary methodology; canonical approach; Old Testament; New Testament.

## Introduction

This New Testament article continues an investigation of the concept gender balance in the Bible. It follows the format of the preceding Old Testament article and contains 10 examples that highlight passages about men and women (cf. Baily 2008:59).

Gender balance is a lens through which to read and study the Bible. Reading the Bible through it generates new perspectives for biblical teaching, preaching and writing. For example, if there is a story about a woman, look for a similar one about a man, and vice versa. If a woman expresses an emotion like joy, look for a similar expression by a man. If a woman illustrates a theme, find a male counterpart. Make notes on a passage using standard literary tools like setting, conflict, plot, dialogue, tone, characters and point of view. Think how those notes complement a story featuring another gender. Incorporate your findings in your lecturing, teaching, writing and preaching (cf. Branch 2020).

## Gender balance: Zechariah and Elizabeth; Mary and Joseph; Simeon and Anna: Birth narratives of John and Jesus (Lk1:1–2:28)

This sextet of covenant believers provides a transition from the old covenant to the new covenant. Zechariah and Elizabeth, an elderly couple, have a miracle child, John (Lk 1:1–45, 57–80; Branch 2013b). Mary, a virgin, conceived a holy child, the Son of God, through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, and Joseph, her betrothed, believed her (Lk 1:26–38; Mt 1:18–25; Branch 2013a). Simeon and Anna, two devout, elderly Jews, arrived independently at Mary's purification and blessed the young family (Lk 2:22–38; Branch 2023a [rev.]). Their song and joy point to God 'as the patron of the weak and poor' (DeSilva 2000:769).

This sextet, evenly balanced gender-wise, sets the tone for Luke's Gospel. Zechariah and Elizabeth are more closely analysed in the section: *Gender balance: Ministers: Phoebe, Jesus, Paul, Tychicus, Epaphras, Timothy, Angels, Peter's mother-in-law*.

The six participate in a cosmic drama. They have only partial knowledge that these exceptional babies are the Messiah's herald and the Messiah (cf. Culpepper 1995:17; Branch 2013a; 2013b).

The birth narratives broadly sketch God's plan at work through the babies, John and Jesus, and contain national, regal, and eternal contexts (cf. Bock 2012:100–101).

The six seem to be chosen for their upright characters (cf. Green 1997:69). The equal pairing of genders emphasises their necessary yet different roles. Playing significant parts in God's magnificent, unfolding action drama, the sextet lived what became theology.

As a narrative technique, Luke frequently pairs male and female characters (Culpepper 1995:72) like Simeon and Anna (Lk 2:21–38). Some 40 days after Jesus' birth, the time came for Mary's purification and Jesus' presentation. The child's devout parents went to Jerusalem to fulfil their duties (Culpepper 1995:69; Lk 2:22). Luke records a common and probably chaotic temple scene – but one with delightful twists and input from two remarkable bystanders. The onlookers' function was '[t]o discern the Messiah in the babe carried to the temple by a humble and unprepossessing couple' (Kroeger 2002:567).

The two elderly strangers, seemingly arriving independently, unexpectedly joined the holy family during the circumcision ritual. Simeon evidently asked to hold the baby Jesus and then thanked the Sovereign Lord for showing him his salvation – this child. Calling himself the Lord's servant, Simeon joyfully praised God. His prophecy pointed to this baby as 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (Lk 2:32; Brown 2020:60). It is easy to imagine his reverence as he cradled the one revealed as 'the consolation of Israel' (Craddock 1990:30). No wonder he sang! No wonder his words became the beloved *Nunc Dimittis*!

Luke describes Anna in detail as a member of the tribe of Asher, the daughter of Phanuel, a prophetess, a widow after seven years of marriage, a woman of great age, and one who now 'never left the Temple' and spent her days fasting and praying (Lk 2:36–37). She must have been a living legend in Jerusalem (Branch 2023a). Evidently, she mingled freely among those doing temple business. She apparently was the exception to temple protocol in which men dominated 'the real business of temple life and public worship' (cf. Dowsett 2002:520).

Anna continues a list of outstanding covenant women including Miriam in Exodus 15:20–21, Deborah in Judges 4–5, Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1–10, Huldah in 2 Kings 22:14–20, Judith in Judith 16:1–17, and Mary in Luke 1:46–55 (cf. Maccini 2002:560).

Although Anna, the New Testament's only named prophetess, did not prophesy, she engaged in powerful evangelism (Branch 2023a). Luke summarises her selective outreach: she spoke about this child 'to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem' (Lk 2:38).

Simeon and Anna, two timely onlookers, blessed Mary, the baby Jesus, and Joseph. Then they spoke to a larger audience – those who looked 'forward to the redemption of Jerusalem' (Lk 2:38). Their input was focused but different, balanced yet complementary, singularly profound, and together so important that Luke recorded it.

## Gender balance: Extravagant gifts: The wise men (Mt 2:1–12) and the widow (Lk 21:1–4)

The theological concept of generosity to the Lord provides a way of linking an unnamed group of men (possibly three) and an unnamed woman to two gospels. Although their stories appear in different books, they offer an *inclusio* of generosity for the early and late events of Jesus' life. The *inclusio* contains an interesting twist: the men seem to be believers in the God of Israel but not covenant-born; the woman is covenant-born. Both genders give generously.

Here is the first story: wise men from the East (traditionally a group of three called magi) brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the newly-born king of the Jews in Bethlehem. Guided supernaturally, they crossed the biblical stage once, made a lasting impression, exited quickly, and retained their anonymity. These Gentiles probably hailed from Persia (Bailey 2008:51–52). A straightforward reading shows they 'found the Christ by way of a star' (Davis 2003) and worshipped.

The wise men possibly saw the star 'as early as 7 BC and arrived in Judea in 5/4 BC' (Porter 2000:202). They showed this trait: when one recognises the Christ as a divine Savior, a desire awakens to honour him by rendering 'to him priceless offerings' (Erdman 1948:29). Indeed, their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were not symbolic but real, princely and precious (Erdman 1948:29).

The gifts' timing was propitious. After the travellers turned homeward, Herod ordered the slaughter of Bethlehem's toddler males. However, the holy family already had fled; an angel had warned Joseph in a dream to take the family to Egypt. The gifts' placement in the Lukan text indicates that it quite likely financed the family's flight to Egypt and their stay there.

The Bible records another extraordinary story about generosity some 30 years later. Mere days before his crucifixion, Jesus observed temple congregants as they gave offerings. He focused on one – a woman described as a widow. She tossed in two mites, perhaps worth a quarter of a cent (Miller 1966:145), mere pennies compared to the wealthy who made a big show of their big offerings. Yet Jesus commended the widow's gift as greater than theirs. Why? Because she gave out of her poverty. Additionally, the text's tone indicates Jesus belittled the extravagant contributions from the noisy wealthy (cf. Bailey 2008:195). In heaven's ledgers, the quiet, needy widow gave more than the boisterous, show-off rich.

The two stories illustrate that sacrifice and generosity and honour represent flip sides of a coin when given to the Lord. The widow, without fanfare, 'put in all she had to live on' (Lk 21:4), but Jesus saw her action and commended her. Much earlier, the wise men had searched for the king of the Jews, found him, and joyfully knelt, rendering him worship

and offering him treasures of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Mt 2:10–12).

MacDonald (2009:8–11), reflecting on the generosity-sacrifice link, notes that people come to know God (the most generous of givers!), see Jesus' self-sacrifice, and respond in love. These two 'extravagances' of the wise men and widow form another *inclusio* of Gentile and Jew and man and woman in the gospel narrative.

Miller (1966:145), commenting on the widow's gift, makes this prescient observation: Jesus measures a gift not by what is given but by what is left. The gift's generosity is evaluated by what remains with the giver and not what the giver gives.

Furthermore, the widow's gift, seen in its textual setting, may indicate defiance – it may be an immediate response to an unjust but legal action. The scribes may have 'devoured' her house (a strong verb used in some translations like the NIV) (Lk 20:45–47; 21:1–4), but she controls her remaining two coins and chooses to give them to the Lord (cf. Culpepper 1995:396).

Usually in a literary work, the unnamed would be classified as minor characters (Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:13). The anonymous wise men and widow presents exceptions. Their actions show them as major characters. Their generosity, at the beginning and end of Jesus' life, boldly present a godly way of living values. All of them are major characters.

## Gender balance: Jesus kept appointments: The Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4) and Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1–10)

These two accounts, what I dub 'destination intentionality', form another *inclusio* in Jesus' three-year ministry. The concept of social ostracism illustrates gender balance and links the Samaritan woman and Zacchaeus. Textually, they (along with Jesus) show initiative, and in that sense, are heroes (cf. Fokkelman 1999:82).

Jesus' noontime encounter with the Samaritan woman occurred early in his ministry; the Zacchaeus meeting happened about a week before the crucifixion. Language clues indicate divine, even urgent appointments. John writes that Jesus '*had to go through Samaria*' (Jn 4:4), and Jesus told Zacchaeus, '*I must stay at your house today*' (Lk 19:5; Branch 2022a) [*author's own emphasis*]. The verb *must stay* 'can be used as a divine imperative' (Culpepper 1995:357–358).

The encounters stress salvation. Both brought significant changes in the lives of the Samaritan woman and her neighbours, and to Zacchaeus, his household, and the Jericho townsfolk.

O'Day (1995:565) notes that the Greek word for 'had to' most often is associated with God's plan (as in Jn 3:14, 30; 9:4). Furthermore, because the shortest route from Judea to Galilee passed through Samaria, the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well seems to be both a divinely-planned event and a geographical practicality (cf. O'Day 1995:565). However, Wyckoff (2005) notes the Johannine text possibly emphasises theological and cultural aspects rather than geography.

The Samaritan woman quickly accepted the salvation Jesus offered (himself as living water) in contrast to Nicodemus (Jn 3) whose conversation with Jesus seemingly left him with much to ponder. The woman's encounter ended with many Samaritans believing in Jesus (Jn 4:39). Her enthusiastic introduction of Jesus to her neighbours and their subsequent belief in him led to 'the success of the Samaritan mission' (O'Day 1995:570). It must have encouraged Jesus.

The Zacchaeus 'destination appointment' is more complex. Granted, a casual reading of this chief tax collector's public declaration of restoration may indicate his excessive pilfering and acknowledge a sly wink at his Roman bosses. Yet, Van der Bergh (2014:5–6), based on his study on the writings of the church father Chrysostom, posits that the perplexing dialogue between Zacchaeus and Jesus could illustrate something else, namely how money, 'which was once used in an unjust way can now restore a person's relationship with God'.

Yes, restitution clearly is part of the law that Zacchaeus observes, but I would add a personal and practical possibility for Zacchaeus' public declaration: he wanted fellowship. He wanted restoration of himself and his family to the Jericho covenant community. If so, his public confession and subsequent action clearly demonstrated Proverbs 28:13: 'No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy'.

Jesus honoured Zacchaeus by inviting himself (and his entourage!) to Zacchaeus' home. It publicly flaunted and affirmed the Pharisees' objection that he associated with sinners and tax collectors (cf. Johnson 2010:205). Jesus' reputation and presence led Zacchaeus to declare a public vow to repay all whom he had defrauded 'and by implication to take care not to defraud anyone in the future' (Culpepper 1995:358).

Jesus saw the visit as an appointment 'to seek out and to save the lost' (Lk 19:10). It fulfilled his earlier statement, namely to call sinners to repentance (Lk 5:32). The sweetness of the Jericho visit must have encouraged Jesus as he walked up to Jerusalem – and to death (Branch 2022a).

## Gender balance: Daughter of Abraham and son of Abraham (Lk 13:10–17; 19:1–10)

This gender balance entry gives a good example of diction in two selected passages and compares Scripture with Scripture (cf. Coetsee & Goede 2022:22, 24, 25).

Jesus' word choice – daughter of Abraham and son of Abraham – carried great meaning. His specific diction climaxed both passages (cf. Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:35). It reminded the crowds that the exclusion of other human beings – because of a disfiguring illness or for working in a despised profession – was unacceptable. Both stories broadly reflect two themes in both the Old and New Testament: God's engagement with rebellious, hurting humanity (cf. Ryken & Longman 1993:35), and God's action of seeking those who lacked the ability to find him (cf. Stern 2006:127).

Both the double-bent, unnamed woman and the named chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, were covenant-born Jews. Their stories show that God's covenant holds throughout life's choices and afflictions. The covenant extends equally to men and women – to an unnamed woman (beset by horrible disfiguration) and a likely turncoat (stung by social exclusion). Their interaction with Jesus restored them to communal life (cf. Warren 2021:109).

Consider the pain-filled life of the misshapen woman. She could not gaze upward at the stars, kiss her husband easily, make eye contact readily, lift her face to the rain or sunshine, or enjoy life naturally (cf. Phelps 2001). The synagogue leader reprimanded Jesus for healing her on a sabbath. Jesus, however, considered it a most appropriate release day. His interpretation won. A rejoicing crowd silenced and shamed his opponents. Jesus honoured the woman – now straight after 18 years of suffering – by calling her a daughter of Abraham.

The wonderfully healed woman is a beloved fixture in Luke's Gospel. Schussler Fiorenza (1998) argues:

[T]hat women in the past have not just been marginalized and victimized; they also have been historical agents who have produced, shaped, and sustained social life in general and early Christian socio-religious relations in particular. (p. xvi)

This woman, now healed and able to stand upright, can certainly tell a story.

Dowsett (2002:520) observes that women hearing Jesus 'must have been riveted by the sense of acceptance and inclusion they felt, the dignity bestowed, the courtesy extended'. Surely the double-bent woman would agree.

Jesus accorded Zacchaeus a similar honour. This probable Roman collaborator and thief suffered no physical infirmity, for he certainly could run, climb a sycamore fig tree, and hide behind its leaves (Lk 19:3-4; Branch 2022a). Yet he suffered internal guilt from embezzling too many taxes and experiencing his neighbours' rejection. Upon being summoned down the sycamore by Jesus and hearing Jesus invite himself to his house, Zacchaeus offered an amazing, seemingly immediate confession.

He promised to give half his wealth to the poor, and if he had defrauded anyone, to pay it back fourfold. Jesus joyfully declared to the stunned crowd, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham' (Lk 19:8-9).

The story of Zacchaeus has entranced readers and hearers for millennia (Branch 2022a). Seeing its humour, Buechner (1993:126) smilingly dubs it 'the Gospel in sycamore' and wryly remarks on 'the lunacy of God'.

Verse 5 of 'A Place at the Table' addresses the named and unnamed, both Zacchaeus and the double-bent woman (Murray 2001):

'For everyone born, a place at the table,  
To live without fear, and simply to be.  
To work, to speak out, to witness and worship,  
For everyone born, the right to be free'. (p. 617)

## Gender balance: Designation of Jesus as Messiah: Martha (Jn 11:27) and Peter (Mt 16:16; Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20)

Martha's confession of faith (in John's Gospel) ranks alongside Peter's (triplicated in the Synoptics). Their individual recognitions of Jesus as Messiah – a foundational statement of faith (Branch 2021; 2023b) – provide an important example of gender balance. Each confession contains dialogue and dialogue moves a plot line forward (Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:44). Without doubt, each statement represents a high point in each gospel. Jesus, the stories' main character, listens to beloved followers and draws forth their amazing declarations (cf. Bonazza & Roy 1968:4).

Peter stated, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God' (Mt 16:16). Peter's declaration carries the idea that 'the God of Israel has life in himself and gives life to humans' (Viljoen 2021:25). Jesus recognises that Peter's statement is not idle speculation or from flesh and blood (Mt 16:17); it is from 'divine disclosure' (Hare 1993:189).

Martha stated, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world'. Boring and Craddock (2004:326) call it the goal of John's Gospel. O'Day (1995:689) mentions that the third apposite, 'the one coming into the world', could be a third title. I agree.

The two declarations are revolutionary. Both companions of Jesus recognised that 'faith in Jesus is faith in God' (Boring & Craddock 2004:326). Jesus deserves it, for he carries the lineage of the Son of David, was born in Bethlehem, and the Spirit of God descended upon him at his baptism (Mt 1:1; 2:5; 3:16; Barber 2013:937–938).

Each statement reveals distinct character traits (Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:44). A person crossing the biblical stage serves God with God-given gifts (cf. Galante & Hance 2020:12–13). Martha is honest and courageous. Peter is blunt, intuitive, and well-deserving of prominence among the disciples.

Barclay (1975a:II:133–134,138) notes that Peter's declaration took place in Caesarea Philippi, an area replete with relics of



Syrian Baal worship; nonetheless, it teaches that one's discovery of Jesus as Messiah 'must be a *personal* discovery' [Barclay's emphasis]. Martha certainly would agree.

Whereas Martha's faith declaration comes in the context of grief and bewilderment, there is perhaps a combination of humour, honour, and maybe even a light-hearted tone associated with Peter's. For instance, Peter and Jesus exchange titles: Son of God and Rock (cf. Meier 1990:178; Mt 16:16, 18). They seem to banter back and forth in a manly fashion. After Peter's declaration, the emphasis on Jerusalem becomes more pronounced (Harrington 1991:118). The Pharisees regarded the raising to life of Lazarus (like the earlier gift of sight to the man born blind in Jn 9) without joy; indeed, they plotted the deaths of Jesus and Lazarus (Jn 11:45–57; 12:9–11).

## Gender balance: The dead revived: Lazarus (Jn 11) and Tabitha (Ac 9:36–42)

The theme of death links the accounts of Lazarus, known as the one Jesus loved (Jn 11:3), and Tabitha, and the only named woman disciple of Jesus (Ac 9:36; cf. Branch 2022b). The narrative tool called surprise punctuates both stories.

Jesus restored life to Lazarus, his beloved friend, who was dead and entombed for four days. The apostle Peter knelt beside Tabitha's bed, praying that she, who also was dead for days, be restored to life. Throughout both accounts, neither recipient speaks.

Tabitha's restoration to life quickly became known 'throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord' (Ac 9:42). Similarly, Lazarus' restoration caused many to believe (Jn 11:4, 45). Together they illustrate gender balance in the amazing miracles of restoration to life. In both accounts, the glory goes to God, and both stories stress the initiative and participation of others.

Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, sent for Jesus, telling him of his friend's illness. They exhibited a robust, bold faith, an eagerness to bring Jesus their grief, and a willingness – in their pain – to discuss life, death and faith (O'Day 1992:299).

The chronological order of the miracle of the raising of Lazarus proves interesting. It adds to proof that Jesus is the Messiah. At the tomb, Jesus tells Martha he is the resurrection and the life; grieving, bold Martha declares she believes he is the Messiah. Jesus soon loudly summons Lazarus, and he comes forth (Jn 11:25, 27, 43).

Summarising the miracle and calling Jesus the Revealer, Bultmann (1955:II:44–45) writes that Jesus and the raising of Lazarus to life 'are not subject to the laws of natural life'.

Perhaps remembering the restoration of Lazarus, the Joppa believers simply refused to let Tabitha stay dead (Branch

2022b). This greatly beloved woman, the New Testament's only named woman disciple (Witherington III 1992:2:225; cf. Collinson 2002:571), had a significant ministry to widows. Using the term *mathetria*, Acts 9:36 is the New Testament's only reference to a female disciple (Bock 2007:377). Tabitha had also been dead for several days. Her body was washed and placed in an upper room. Perhaps the room had a skylight (cf. eds. Packer & Tenney 1980:488). When a body was kept for three days before burial, it showed the belief that after three days the soul departed (Jn 11:17; Bock 2007:378).

Tabitha's name, which means gazelle, may have indicated grace in face and form. Described as a woman full of faith and almsgiving (Ac 9:36), she not only carried on the Jewish emphasis of giving to the poor, but also seems to have been both 'wealthy and generous' (Bock 2007:377). Hearing of Peter's proximity, the Joppa believers sent for him. The community put 'feet to its faith' (Branch 2022b).

The stories show the expansion of the kingdom of God as bringing life. In contrast, Rome's military occupation and brutal world dominance brought death (cf. Kochenash 2018:13). The raising to life of Lazarus and Tabitha shows that God answers the prayers of Jesus and the apostle Peter. The miracles bring amazement and awe to bystanders and spread the good news of the gospel. Truly, these stories thrill hearts because they combine faith, words and actions (cf. Bonazzo & Roy 1968:3).

## Gender balance: Jesus' last prophetic words: To the wailing women and the dying thief (Lk 23:26–31, 39–43)

The setting of a story not only includes its place or places, but also encompasses 'the physical, emotional, economic, political, social, and psychological environment' of the characters (Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:31). Thus, the settings of Jesus' last hours are very important. The recorded events leading to his death smack of eyewitness details and give 'a sense of being present' (cf. Longman 1993:77). The following two encounters emphasise his exchanges with both genders.

Just before his death, Jesus balanced genders with prophetic words. Jesus responded with love to a group of women and to a dying thief. On the way to Golgotha, Jesus stopped, perhaps tired from carrying his cross. He addressed the wailing, unnamed women following him. On the cross, he answered a request from a thief dying alongside.

The crowd following Jesus to Golgotha seemed to be common folk who had listened to him daily in the temple, and significantly, women who wept over what had happened to him (Craddock 1990:271). The women loudly grieved his death decree. Perhaps they had waited overnight outside Pilate's palace. They courageously defied both Rome and their murder-bent, religious leaders by their

loud, open protest. Without a doubt, they were not paid mourners.

Spurgeon (1959:167), a well-known 19th century preacher and excellent writer, commends the women who loudly wept, for ‘they saw the innocent one about to die’. Their expression of grief – spontaneous and courageous – ‘showed some tenderness of heart’ (Spurgeon 1959:168). Calling them Daughters of Jerusalem, Jesus urged them to mourn more for themselves and their children than for him. He prophesied the day was coming when they would wish they never had had children and would beseech the mountains to fall on them (Lk 23:28–30).

Shortly thereafter, impaled between two thieves, Jesus heard and silently endured their derision. One thief finally rebuked the other. His tone changed as he watched Jesus accept death. Converted and humbled, he besought Jesus ‘to remember me when you come into your kingdom’. Jesus prophesied to that man that ‘today you will be with me in Paradise’ (Lk 23:42–43). Jesus’ prophetic words contrast the wonderful concept of salvation with the earlier word of *save* used in mockery by the authorities and unrepentant thief (Lk 23:35, 39; Craddock 1990:274).

Jesus’ statements to the women and the dying thief (and his other final words on the cross) show he experienced death with courage, resoluteness, and self-control (Johnson 2010:206). One thief recognised the truthfulness of the placard above Jesus’ head – King of the Jews. Somehow the kingdom of God would come. It belonged to this man suspended next to him (Boring & Craddock 2004:276). This thief’s life, based on this encounter with Jesus, ended with dignity and integrity (cf. Myers 2007:187).

## Gender balance: Similar ecclesiastical characteristics: Overseer and widow (Tm 1 3:1–7; 5:3–16)

This survey entry shows similarities in the vocabulary associated with the early church offices of men and women.

The New Testament’s ecclesiastical structure consisted of bishops or overseers, deacons, and widows (Gundry 2003:442). Johnson (2010:393) notes that, because Paul provides a list of qualifications for widows, as he does for other offices, there may have been an order of widows in the early church (cf. Table 1).

Barclay (1975b:111–114), however, is more emphatic: there was indeed an order of widows. Like all church leadership positions, a recipient must reflect well both within the church and to the outside public (cf. Table 1). A widow receiving church assistance must not be a gadabout or gossip or prone to laziness. Her lifestyle, and those of other leaders, must give no opportunity for criticism from the outside populace (Barclay 1975b:115).

**TABLE 1:** A list of qualities for overseers and widow(s) according to 1 Timothy 3 and 5.

Paul’s Categories	Overseer: 1 Timothy 3:1–7	Widow and widows: 1 Timothy 5:3–16
Character traits	Above reproach; husband of one wife; temperate; self-controlled; respectable; hospitable; able to teach (v. 2). Not given to drunkenness; not violent but gentle; not quarrelsome; not a lover of money.	She places her trust in God and prays night and day (v. 5). For a widow to be placed on a list that the church helps and recognises, she must be over 60 years old, and known for good deeds. She has raised children, been hospitable, washed the saints’ feet, helped those in trouble. She must devote herself to good deeds (vv. 9–10).
Family	Able to manage his own family well; his children obey him with proper respect (v. 4).	If a widow has children or grandchildren, these family members should care for her (v. 4). Likewise, other believing men and women in the community should care for widows so that the church is not burdened (v. 16).
Personal history	Not a recent convert. Must have a good reputation in the community (v. 7).	A widow who lives for pleasure is not considered a widow in need (v. 6). Young widows should remarry, have children, care for families and not become busy-bodies (vv. 11–15).
Special directives	Overseeing is a noble task.	Honour those widows who are truly in need (v.3).

Gender balance recognises the gender-neutral command to all to submit one to another out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21). Gender balance avoids self-serving agendas, seeking power and dominance (Coleman 2022:187), and manipulation.

Korean Protestant churches today honour older women who have served the church and its members well for decades, said Dr Julius Kim, president of Global Coalition. Known as Gwon-sa, the membership, once the honour is bestowed, is lifelong and ‘recognizes women in a public and official way’, he said in a speech at the annual world missions conference at Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee. Kim (2023) told me in a private conversant that Gwon-sa reflects 1 Timothy 5’s order of widows and added proudly, ‘My mother is a Gwon-sa’.

## Gender balance: Ministers: Phoebe, Jesus, Paul, Tychicus, Epaphras, Timothy, Angels, Peter’s mother-in-law

This survey now gives a more thorough examination of gender balance in its last two entries. This entry investigates the contemporary question of whether women were ministers in the early church. Consider the evidence that diction (word choice) gives.

Table 2 shows the translations of *diakonos* as *servant* for Phoebe and *minister* for all the others, even Peter’s mother-in-law (Branch 2019). The discrepancy reflects imbalance. It also can reflect a cultural bias on the part of translators toward women (cf. Punt 2014 for an excellent discussion of bias in translation).

**TABLE 2:** Translations of *diakonos*: [servant] for Phoebe and [minister] for all the others.

Person	Bible chapter and verse referring to <i>diakonos</i> [servant] and [minister]	Scripture (KJV)
Phoebe or Phebe	Romans 16:1–2	I commend unto you Phebe, our sister, which is a <i>servant</i> of the church which is at Cenchrea ...
Jesus	Matthew 20:28	... even as the Son of man came not to be <i>ministered</i> unto, but to <i>minister</i> , and to give his life a ransom for man.
Paul	Ephesians 3:7	I was made a <i>minister</i> , according to the gift of the grace of God.
Tychicus	Ephesians 6:21	But that ye also may know my affairs, and how I do, Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful <i>minister</i> in the Lord, shall make known to you all things ...
Epaphras	Colossians 1:23	... as ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellow servant, who is for you a faithful <i>minister</i> of Christ ...
Paul	Colossians 1:23	... whereof I Paul am made a <i>minister</i> ... I Paul am made a <i>minister</i> ...
Timothy	1 Timothy 4:6	If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good <i>minister</i> of Jesus Christ ...
Timothy	1 Thessalonians 3:2	... our brother and <i>minister</i> of God ...
All are ministers	1 Peter 4:10	As every man hath received the gift, even so <i>minister</i> the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.
Angels	Hebrews 1:14	Are they not all <i>ministering</i> spirits, sent forth to <i>minister</i> for them who shall be heirs of salvation?
Peter's mother-in-law	Mark 1:30–31	Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she <i>ministered</i> unto them.

Source: Based on Branch, R.G., 2019, 'Female leadership as demonstrated by Phoebe: An interpretation of Paul's words introducing Phoebe to the saints in Rome', *In die Skriflig* 53(4), a2443. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v53i4.2443>

KJV, King James version.

Some scholars say Phoebe might have assisted her husband in ministry and had a recognised office in which she counselled women (cf. Zell 2014:104–105). Those views reflect error, for Paul clearly acclaimed her publicly (Rm 16:1–2). Phoebe did the following:

- Led and presided over the church at Cenchreae.
- Generously gave financial resources.
- Carried Paul's letter to Rome.
- Delivered it to Roman churches in advance of Paul's arrival.
- Received Paul's honour as his colleague and his sister in the Lord (Branch 2019).

Punt (2014:4) comments that Phoebe's description (sister, minister, deacon or servant, and benefactor or helper) in Romans 16:1–2, defines a role in terms of the words 'used also for male counterparts and trusted co-workers such as Timothy'. Being a minister requires training. Paul advised Timothy to train his soul for God in order to be a good minister. He used the example of an athlete in a gymnasium (Tm 1 4:6–10; Barclay 1975b:96–97).

Strong views about women's roles in ministry prevail. Culver (1989:111, 207) advises against rejecting the tradition that men have held the offices of pastor, elder, and bishop or

overseer for 75 generations or more. Mickelsen (1989:181) counters that Jesus teaches a 'leadership of servanthood and self-giving' to both genders.

Perhaps there can be agreement on the following: The New Testament church carried out Jesus' command to love. That command ran against the prevailing concept in the Roman world, namely to rule over others by strength (Beyer 1971:81, 84).

Consider this pertinent, needed historical explanation. The church office of deacon came centuries after Paul's writing. It does not apply to Romans 16:1–2. The term gradually came to designate an administrative office of practical service (Beyer 1971:90).

Paul maintained excellent relationships with men and women, as Romans 16:3–16 shows. He mentored fellow ministers such as Timothy. In an epistle, Paul skillfully contrasts false teaching and teachers with good ministry. Evidently false doctrine and false ministers represented two early church problems. Paul shows that a faithful minister is 'the antidote to false teaching' (Boring & Craddock 2004:663). A good minister promotes and practices sound doctrine (Oden 1989:80). A good minister withstands false teaching by sound teaching and personal piety (Erdman 1945:53). False doctrine included forbidding marriage for certain people and abstaining from certain foods (Tm 1 4:3). These practices do not achieve a higher holiness (Erdman 1945:53).

When comparing parts of Scripture, it is often worthwhile to consider the literary tool of silence. We have extant letters from Paul to Timothy, Titus and Philemon as well as letters to churches in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus and Philippi. It is worthwhile to consider the absence of a letter from Paul to Phoebe in Cenchrea.

Phoebe graces the biblical stage only in Romans 16:1–2. Significantly, Phoebe is not rebuked nor advised nor mentored by Paul. There is no letter to Cenchrea, her church a few kilometres from Corinth. The way Paul introduces her indicates her status as a beloved colleague and her relationship in Christ as his beloved sister (cf. Branch 2019).

Much information about Simon's mother-in-law is given in the verb translated *to wait upon* in the New International Version (NIV), *to serve them* in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and *ministered unto them* in the King James Version (KJV). The latter is the more accurate translation. It conveys a busy woman in charge of her household, mindful of guests, welcoming to strangers, and instantly, fully healed. Her illness had left her lying prostrate in bed and burning with fever (Erdman 1945:37). Jesus met her after having just cast out a demon during a synagogue meeting (Mk 1:21–28). Her feverish condition aroused Jesus' sympathy, and his touch of power and strength 'evidently awakened or developed faith in the sufferer' (Erdman 1945:37). Mark records her as Jesus' first physical healing (Williamson

1983:54). Barclay (1956:30) writes that her 'recovered health' led to her 'renewed service'. Boring and Craddock (2004:111) put it differently: She is set free 'to minister to and with Jesus'.

News spread quickly. Many in Capernaum congregated outside her home and sought healing. Jesus healed many who had various diseases, and he drove out many demons (Mk 1:32–34). Evangelism occurred. Truly, Peter's unnamed mother-in-law represents 'a right response' to Jesus (Williamson 1983:55). I offer an additional observation. Her knowledge that she was instantly healed (and her healing's obvious confirmation by her energy and ability to resume her hospitality duties) bolstered the faith of others, notably that of her son-in-law, Peter. He later became the first disciple to proclaim Jesus as Messiah.

Verse 2 of 'A Place at the Table' mentions aspects of gender relationships (Murray 2001):

'For woman and man, a place at the table,  
Revising the roles, deciding the share,  
With wisdom and grace, dividing the power,  
For woman and man, a system that's fair'. (p. 617)

## Gender balance: Prophecy runs in the family of Elizabeth (Lk 1:39–45) and Zechariah (Lk 1:67–79)

In today's vernacular, Zechariah and Elizabeth are a New Testament power couple (cf. Branch 2021), for both prophesied. Literary terms in this section will be in italics.

Luke 1 begins with a *problem*. A priestly couple described as righteous, living blamelessly, 'and getting on in years' is childless. The wife, Elizabeth, termed barren, is blamed. Her husband, Zechariah, describes himself as an old man (v. 18). They see themselves as past childbearing and child-siring ages (cf. Branch 2013b:2–3).

Luke 1 resembles two other texts. Firstly, Job 1:1 introduces Job as a blameless and upright man who feared God and shunned evil. The Lord repeats the narrator's introduction (Job 1:1, 8). Secondly, Genesis 11:29–30 introduces Abram and Sarai with a similar problem: Sarai's barrenness. It is resolved – many chapters and adventures later – with Isaac's birth (Gn 21).

The *theme* of a long-awaited child and his importance recurs throughout Scripture. Luke 1 actually doubles it, for Zechariah and Elizabeth's son and Mary's son are the Messiah's herald and the Messiah respectively (Lk 1:17, 32).

Luke 1's *plot* shows the slow unfolding of the Lord's plans through the announcements of an angel to covenant believers, Zechariah and Mary. The time is about 4 BC, Augustus reigns in Rome and Herod the Great in Jerusalem (v. 5). The three settings involve:

- The angel, Gabriel, to Zechariah, the priest in the Jerusalem temple.

- Elizabeth some six months later in her home in the Judean countryside to Mary her kinswoman and visitor.
- Zechariah some three-plus months afterward at a gathering spot in their town for celebrations such as a naming and circumcision.

Gabriel's visit to Mary (Lk 1:26–28), the Annunciation, is not specifically covered in this entry (cf. Branch 2013a and 2013b for a detailed analysis).

The *characters* are Zechariah, a priest of the division of Abijah, serving by lot in the temple in what was probably the evening sacrifice; an angel, identified as Gabriel, who stands in the Lord's presence; Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, now pregnant with John; and Mary, Elizabeth's young, visiting kinswoman, now pregnant with Jesus, Son of the Most High (vv. 5, 8, 11, 13, 26–38, 41–45).

Luke 1 contains the element of *surprise*. This literary tool jolts both reader and Zechariah. An angel interrupts Zechariah's priestly duties and announces that his prayer has been heard. Elizabeth will bear him a son and he is to name him John. Many will rejoice at his birth and he will be great in the eyes of the Lord (vv. 11–14).

*Conflict* often comes via *dialogue*. Instead of responding with joy and gladness, Zechariah questions the angel: 'How can I be sure?' (v. 18).

The angel, quite offended because of Zechariah's unbelief, introduces himself as Gabriel. He not only stands in the presence of the God, but also has been sent to proclaim good news to Zechariah (v. 19). The right to pronounce punishment comes with rank. Because Zechariah did not believe the angel's words, Gabriel decrees he will be mute until the promise is fulfilled (v. 20). That means probably nine months of silence – a long time out in today's vernacular.

Lukan commentaries do not dwell on the miracle of muteness. However, the text invites other literary tools, namely *pause* and *imagination*. During Elizabeth's pregnancy, Zechariah had no choice but to listen. He could not talk with her, fellow priests, or villagers. Perhaps he could grunt. He surely could gesticulate and write on a tablet (Lk 1:63). Perhaps he thought about his decades-long *patterns* of social interaction, and perhaps he listened intently to Elizabeth and saw her in new ways (Branch 2013a:4, 7).

Luke 1 emphasises prophecy as another *theme*. Prophecies come from Gabriel to Zechariah (that he and his wife Elizabeth will have a son); from Elizabeth, pregnant with John, to Mary, her young kinswoman (confirming that Mary carried the Messiah); and from Zechariah to his young son and well-wishers who gathered at the son's circumcision and naming ritual (that this baby will be a prophet of the Lord, go before him, and prepare his way).

Elizabeth's prophecy recognises the honour of Mary's visit to her home and that Mary is 'the mother of my Lord' (vv. 41–43).



The meeting is really one of four attendees: the two women and the sons they carry (Branch 2013b:5–6n). The prophetic word acknowledges that Mary, the younger, outranks Elizabeth, the elder.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are what is called *round characters* (Lostracco & Wilkerson 2008:13), because they grow and change. In his encounter with Gabriel, Zechariah acted petulantly. He showed himself for what he was: an old grump (Branch 2009:37).

The punishment of muteness evidently did him good for when the time ended, he prophesied eloquently over his son (Branch 2013a; 2013b). His first words show a changed attitude, a man filled with joy, hope, a man mellowed and humbled by the angel's rebuke.

Perhaps one of the most delightful insights of reading the Bible through the lens of gender balance for me was seeing the growth in the marriage of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The genders are equal: the Holy Spirit fills each partner. Each prophesies in old age (Lk 1:41, 67). Each rejoices in serving the Lord and participating in God's redemption plan. Each prophecy is essential to the birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah. Neither Zechariah nor Elizabeth competes with each other. Each hears from and serves the Lord. Each obeys the Holy Spirit's prompting. Paul writes that prophecy should strengthen, encourage and comfort (1 Cor 14:3). Elizabeth's words and Zechariah's later ones certainly do that (cf. Table 3).

**TABLE 3:** Insights on Elizabeth and Zechariah from Luke 1.

Categories compiled from Luke 1	Elizabeth and others	Zechariah and others
Personal history	A Levite married to a Levite. Both she and Zechariah were righteous before the Lord; living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations (Lk 1:5–7).	A priest of the order of Abijah (Lk 1:5) – self-described as an old man (v. 18), a man of prayer, as was his wife (v. 13).
Prophetic words	To Mary: Elizabeth delivered her prophetic word before Mary was able to tell her elderly relative she was pregnant. Elizabeth confirmed to Mary what the angel had told her. The baby, John in utero, also expressed great joy by leaping. Elizabeth confirmed that Mary was blessed, because she had believed that there would be a fulfilment of what the Lord had said (Lk 1:39–45).	To his baby son, John, and to those listening at the circumcision of John: Zechariah's mouth was opened, after being closed for nine-plus months, and he prophesied. He blessed the Lord for looking favourably on his people and for raising up a mighty savior. He praised God for God's mercy. God enables his people to serve him in holiness and righteousness. With great tenderness, Zechariah prophesied that his son would be a prophet of the Most High and prepare the way for him. Light will break upon those who sit in darkness and guide people's feet in the way of peace (Lk 1:67–79).
Difficulties faced	Barrenness. The stigma of childlessness (Lk 1:7).	Unbelief. Stubbornness. The pattern of talking too much and so much (probably over decades) that it had to be dealt with. His punishment for unbelief was muteness until the Lord's prophetic word had been accomplished (Lk 1:19–20).

This faithful, honourable, elderly couple experienced decades of sadness caused by barrenness and then wonderful joy at being used so graciously by God (Branch 2013b:2–3). Although Luke 1's *point of view* is straightforward, the characters' responses roil from unbelief to amazement, to wonder, and finally to joy.

## Three scholarly insights

Rhoads (2004:1) begins his thoughtful commentary on Mark by stating, 'And *what* you observe depends a lot on what you *look for*' [Rhoads' *emphasis*]. Rhoads (2004:219) closes with this prescient observation: a continued commitment to struggle to read the text with integrity. Rhoads' *inclusio* point to gender balance, a way to read the Bible with integrity.

Robinson (2001:103), writing on exegetical preaching, reminds the one preparing a sermon to consider 'the audience's knowledge and experience'. A congregation contains men and women. However, most evangelical and mainline Protestant congregations in America are 55% women and 45% men (cf. Gender Composition n.d.).

Therefore, it would seem that the gender balance concept – if there is a story or passage about a man, look for a similar one about a woman – would aid in preaching preparation and include an entire congregation.

Van Rensburg (2002:746) writes that the project that he led on women in church and society contributed 'toward defining and promoting a new way of thinking about the identity of women and the differing and opposing stances on gender'. He (Van Rensburg 2002) allowed for upcoming years to assess the:

[E]xtent the project has contributed, first toward having women restored to full participation in all spheres of life in church and society, and second toward the development of a more holistic and gender-inclusive South African social and cultural infrastructure. (p. 746)

Gender balance in approaching the Bible is one way to have this 'more holistic and gender-inclusive' in South Africa and the world. Gender balance is obviously a recognised biblical principle. After all, it is in plain sight. It affirms the Bible's glorious, wide-armed, concluding invitation to all – Jew and Greek, slave and free, rich and poor, male and female – 'Come' (Rv 22:17a).

## New Testament topics for gender balance

The following are suggestions for additional New Testament topics regarding gender balance:

- The conversions of Saul and Lydia (Ac 9:1–9; 16:11–15).
- John's addressees in his letters: The Lady and her children (Jn 2) and Gaius (Jn 3).
- A biblical couple: Priscilla and Aquila (Ac 18–19; 26; Rm 16:3–5; 1 Cor 16:19; Tm 2 4:19).

- Opening and concluding ministries to Jesus: John the Baptist (Mt 3); the woman who anointed Jesus' head (Mk 14:3–9).
- Specific sins: The woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1–20); Paul's list of sins (1 Cor 6:9–11).
- Luke 15: Parables about the lost sheep, coin and sons.
- Evil in Revelation: The Nicolaitans and Jezebel (Rv 2:1–7, 12–17, 18–29).

## Conclusion: A gender balance lens

These two articles present a survey of a new approach to reading and studying the Bible. The new lens, gender balance, applies to both the Old and New Testament: if there is a theme, text, emotion or story about a man, look for one about a woman, and vice versa. This lens generates new perspectives for teaching, preaching, and writing about the Bible.

Although a preliminary study, this survey finds that gender balance runs throughout Scripture as a consistent, minor theme – much like a hymn's alto part.

In an essay honouring Brevard Childs, a canonical scholar, Gerstenberger (1988:31) notes that each generation must revisit what it considers canonised literature. This can lead to 'fresh encounters with the living God' and to finding 'articulation in new texts of faith'. Gender balance certainly revisits canonised literature.

This survey, an inaugural venture, is incomplete. While the two gender balance articles advocate and substantiate 'the full inspiration of the Bible and the full equality' of both women and men (cf. Kroeger & Evans 2002:xv), further research and practice are recommended. Consider the following suggestions:

- Teaching: classroom lectures that mention gender balance.
- Academics: including the principle of gender balance in syllabi.
- Preaching: sermons that acknowledge the gender balance concept and give examples.
- Exegesis: detailed articles that fully develop examples of a scholar's choice.

It is clear from the Bible that gender balance provides input on contemporary, worldwide issues. It can assist individuals, communities, churches and nations with the following:

- Negotiation of power between colonisers and the colonised.
- Discussion of traditional areas of patriarchal control.
- Re-evaluation of elite domination.
- Straight-talk in marriage about labour division, childcare, individual goals, sexual matters and money management (cf. Reid 2022:xxix–xxx).

Gender balance does the following:

- Recognises the importance of each person and acknowledges all depend on God (cf. Coleman 2022:186–187).
- Supplies reliable, necessary biblical support as a consistent 'alto voice'.

- Affirms 'God's vision of dignity, equality, and justice for all' (cf. Reid 2022:xxxv).
- Tempers any tendency toward patriarchy or matriarchy.
- Warns against blaming or praising one sex or person over another.
- Avoids absolute adverbs like *always*, *never*, and *only*.
- Shows that women and girls, men and boys, are wanted, included, and play parts in God's kingdom.
- Has as a foundation the prophetic word the Lord gave to Samuel, that God looks on the heart and not on outward appearance (1 Sm 16:7).
- Echoes Paul's insight in Galatians 3:28, that despite the visual and social distinctions of Jew/Greek, slave/free, and male/female, oneness in Christ joins all.
- Offers salve and counsel to those wounded by misogyny or misandry.
- Recognises the Creator shares his image with humankind (Gn 1:26–27).
- Defines humankind as male and female.
- Honours men and women.
- Spotlights women, who often are overlooked and overshadowed in church, society, and academics (cf. Schwab 2012:1303).
- Affirms gender balance as a conscious – hopefully automatic – lens for looking at the Bible.

Gender balance conforms to earlier Reformed patterns and faces the future with new ideas. The Reformation's motto, '*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*', proclaims that the Reformed church is always reforming according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. These articles, emphasising gender balance, proudly affirm this doctrine.

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