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Bible not sexist: Researcher says

New research into Biblical women shows that most receive positive or matter-of-fact coverage with words such as "blessed", "righteous" and "beautiful" referring to 60 of the Bible's 175 female characters.

"Some people have the impression the Bible is very negative about women," says David Ashford, the Bible Society's Media and Development Officer, according to a Times Online report.

Ashford's research, based on analysing the words used to describe Biblical females, found "there are four times as many saints as there are sinners," and that "individual women are often described in the Bible in glowing terms."

"Wisdom is described as a female attribute in many texts. And some scholars believe that the Song of Deborah, which was probably composed by a woman, is one of the oldest pieces of literature within the Bible (Judges 5)." Jesus, he adds, had a liberated attitude to women, unusual for his era: "John 4.27, for example, shows that Jesus broke social conventions that discouraged conversations with women. Similarly, the gospel of Luke has long been referred to as the 'gospel of women' for its strong positive portrayal of women in the life of Jesus."

"Only 13 women are described negatively with terms such as 'nagging, intimidating lustful or provocative'" asserts Ashford, whose list of Bible heroines includes Sarah, Ruth and Mary, while Jezebel, Delilah fall into the villain camp.

As for the rest, those women who fall somewhere in between "the sinner" and "the saint" are described in "neutral" matter-of-fact terms - mother of, sister of, neighbour of.

Some receive both positive and negative descriptions, for example Miriam in the Old Testament who in Exodus is described as "Prophetess" but by the book of Numbers is marked down as a sinner for questioning, along with Aaron, the authority of Moses.

"Of course, there are texts about women in the Bible that can present a problem, but Christians have different views about how to understand them," Ashford concludes.

So is the problem that the portrayal of Biblical females has been misinterpreted, The Times Online asks. The renowned feminist Bible scholar Dr Phyllis Tribble says that Eve is the classic example of a misunderstood female in Scripture.

"Contrary to tradition, she is not created as the assistant or subordinate of the man. In fact, most often the Hebrew word 'ezer' (which means 'helper') connotes superiority, thereby posing a rather different problem about this woman," Tribble argues in an essay in *Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies*.

She continues: "...The accompanying phrase 'fit for' or 'corresponding to' ('a helper corresponding to') tempers the connotation of superiority to specify the mutuality of woman and man. Further, when the serpent talks with the woman (Gen. 3:1-5), he uses plural verb forms, making her the spokesperson for the human couple - hardly the pattern of a patriarchal culture. She discusses theology intelligently..."

Women march on Rome

Meanwhile, in Rome, Catholic women seeking to be priests marched close to the Vatican on Wednesday, denouncing the exclusion of women from ordination as sexist and unjust, The International Herald Tribune reports.

The small group of women representing Catholic organisations from around the world crossed the Tiber River close to St Peter's Square, some draped in a purple cloth and wearing signs with the names of prominent women in the early days of the Catholic Church.

"Ordain Women! Ordain Women!" the woman chanted.

Aisha Taylor, the executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference in the United States, said the women wanted to call attention to the issue during the Bible Synod, a meeting of 253 bishops under way in Rome.

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