


# A Reading of Luke 10:38-42 as a Covenant Renewal Discourse: Implication for Women in Ghana



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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have divided opinions concerning the role of women in the covenant community of Israel. While some argue that women are placed in a secondary position, others looked at the covenant directives as ambiguous with regard to women. However, covenant renewal creates the opportunity to modify and innovate existing covenants to respond to the new needs of covenant receivers. Using the discourse theory of Paul Ricoeur, the author argues that Luke 10:38-42 is a covenant renewal discourse. The discourse aims at redefining women's roles in the covenant community. The study concludes that women have new roles that empower them to make meaningful contributions to society.

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## INTRODUCTION

One peculiar characteristic of the gospel of Luke is the author's special interest in issues concerning the genders. Luke is very fond of pairing two similar stories in which the main character in one is a male and the other a female: Annunciation to Zechariah (1:5-23) and Mary (1:26-38), The hymn of Mary (1:46-56) and Zechariah (1:67-79) The Prophet Simeon (2:25-35) and the prophetess Anna (2:36-38).<sup>1</sup> The Author of Luke took pains to record that both men and women contributed to salvation history. He particularly demonstrated that Jesus in diverse ways paid special attention to women and added value to their lives. One of his innovative stories peculiar to him is that of Martha and Mary (10:38-42). Scholars have approached this text from various angles suggesting that the text discusses contemplative overactive life, or leadership, discipleship and hospitality. This study argues that among the exegetical issues in this text is the presence of some elements of the covenant worthy of examination. It, therefore, reads the text as a covenant discourse, which aims at redefining the roles of women to add value to their lives.

In order to do this, it examined covenant discourse using the discourse theory of Paul Ricoeur. An exegetical analysis of the text was conducted and teased out covenant renewal issues and their relevance to the Ghanaian context.

## Concept and Structure of Discourse

Ricoeur describes "discourse" as a communication between two people or groups of people about something.

<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Maly, "Women and the Gospel of Luke" *Sage Journal* (n.d) 101. Retrieved from: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/014610798001000302> on 04/01/2021.

He maintains that discourse uses language to communicate human experience and acquires its structure.<sup>2</sup> However, in discourse, words are not understood in isolation, but only in relation to the context of the statements in which they occur.<sup>3</sup> A discourse, therefore, is understood in the context of the speaker and the audience who both know what is going on; otherwise, there is the tendency for misunderstanding.<sup>4</sup>

Ricoeur describes discourse in pairs as an event and meaning. He stretches this further by stating that while the event is a temporary phenomenon, the meaning attached to the event is rather stable, universal and is not bound by time. A discourse may exist in oral or written form. Ricoeur observes that in oral discourse, the speaker and the audience share the same dialogical context and so the audience may have the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarifications from the speaker in the dialogue to make acquisition of meaning easier.<sup>5</sup> A written discourse, on the other hand, is distanced from its author to become an autonomous text with the capacity to generate multiple grammatical meanings. A reader then may generate meaning that may not have been anticipated by the original author. In this way, the meaning of discourse may be translated, interpreted, added to or subtracted from or may be transformed into something new by readers who may not know the original author, the context and the original audience of the discourse.<sup>6</sup> A discourse therefore may be contextualized in the new context of readers. The question is when does a discourse become covenantal?

### Covenant discourse

Covenant comes from the Greek word *diathēkē*, which is a translation of the Hebrew word *berith*. Beckwith and Beacham agree that *berith* denotes a 'bond', a 'pact', a 'treaty' or an 'accord' all indicating some kind of agreement between people or between a deity and a man. They both confirm that a covenant agreement involves promises and obligations in the relationship that the two parties establish.<sup>7</sup> The agreement may be solemnly sealed with an oath and or a symbolic ceremony. Busenitz notes that *berith* connotes the idea of sharing a meal with the aim of entering into an obligatory alliance with another.<sup>8</sup> Nowell clarifies that covenant in the Ancient Near East was sealed with a blood rite and a ritual meal both activities signified sharing of life and they are ways of integrating one into a family.<sup>9</sup> Mendenhall and Herion observe that *berith* is an important biblical metaphor that describes the relationship between God and His people, Israel.<sup>10</sup> They note that biblical covenants were so much influenced by ancient Suzerain and Promissory covenants in modified forms. These two forms of covenant summarize the various degrees of agreement in the ancient near east that are present in the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup> They outlined the basic elements of these covenants as follows:

Covenant giver (usually the king and in the case of the bible, God).

- The receiver
- The text that spelt out the terms of the covenant, and
- The actual sealing of the covenant with a meal and /or with blood.
- There may also be witnesses as well as blessings and curses.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, (Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 4-13; *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, Trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 77.

<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*; J. Draper, "Jesus's 'Covenantal Discourse' on the Plain (Luke 6:12-7:17) as Oral Performance: Pointers to 'Q' as Multiple Oral Performance", *Oral Performance, Popular Traditions, and Hidden Transcript in Q* edited by Richard A. Horsley (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 77-78.

<sup>4</sup> Draper, Jesus' Covenantal Discourse, 47-48.

<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 9-11.

<sup>7</sup> Roger T. Beckwith, "The Unity and Diversity of God's Covenant", *Tyndale Bulletin* 38, 1987, 93-118; R. Beacham, "Ancient Near Eastern Covenants", *Journal of Ministry and Theology* Vol. 15 (1), 2011, 111-128.

<sup>8</sup> Irvin A. Busenitz, "Introduction to the Biblical Covenants: The Noahic Covenant and The Priestly Covenant", *The Master's Seminary Journal* 10/2, 1999 fall, 173-189. Retrieved from <https://www.tms.edu/m/tmsj10m.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> I. Nowell, In Downey, M. (ed.). "The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality" (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), Electronic ed.

<sup>10</sup> George E. Mendenhall, & Gary A. Herion, "Covenant" D.N. Freedman (Ed.), "The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary" (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Electronic edition.

<sup>11</sup> J.A. Thompson, *The Ancient Near Eastern Treaties And the Old Testament*. (London: The Tyndale Press, 1964), Electronic edition. Retrieved from [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/treaties\\_thompson.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/treaties_thompson.pdf)

Many scholars maintain that the Abrahamic covenant was modeled on the promissory oath that established a relationship by which a Father obliges himself to protect the interest of a son or a faithful servant. This is seen in God who took an oath to make the Abrahamic covenant work (15:17-18).<sup>12</sup> They also suggest that the Sinai covenant on the other hand was modeled on the suzerain treaty that established a relationship by which a servant was under obligation to obey all the stipulations of a master or suffered serious consequences in default.<sup>13</sup> This is seen in the place of importance given to the law in the Sinai covenant. The exilic experience, for example, was interpreted as a punishment from God for Israel's disobedience to the commandment of God. However, Mendenhall and Herion argue further that the exilic experience did not indefinitely abrogate the relationship between God and Israel. There have been opportunities for covenant renewals to refocus the attention of Israel on their commitment to the covenant spearheaded by covenant mediators.

Covenant mediators are usually agents and spokesperson of God who receive special revelation to determine the nature, the parameters of every covenant, or covenant renewal moment to meet the contemporary needs of God's people. Abraham was the covenant mediator between God and his descendants and he received revelation as to what needs to be done and the conditions in the covenant. Moses was the Mediator in the Mosaic covenant and the one who received the law and its interpretation that must be followed in the covenant. Josiah, Malachi, and Nehemiah were covenant renewal mediators (2Kgs. 22-23; Mal. 2:4,8,10,14; Neh. 9:36-10:1 respectively) at different historical moments in the life of the people. They determined what was to be emphasized in a renewal. What was conspicuous in the covenant renewal of Josiah (2Kgs. 22-23) was the public verbal agreement by the community to obey the stipulations of the covenant. Similarly, in the covenant renewal in Malachi, during the second temple era, importance was given to worship and the social responsibility of the covenant community. Furthermore, what triggered renewal in Nehemiah 9-10 was the legal document discovered in the temple that made them aware of certain moral obligations they needed to be observed. There was no ritual celebration. These are indications that covenant renewal may be carried out to respond to the particular need of a covenant community in a particular contextual situation.<sup>14</sup> These renewals give opportunity to covenant partners to renew their commitment to the covenant and remain faithful to their obligations. It is also an opportunity for new members to be enlightened about the covenant and be included in its rights and obligations. Once established, a covenant may become annual or an occasional celebration according to what was indicated in the text.

In the New Testament, Jesus is both the victim and mediator of the New covenant in which the faith of the people was emphasized rather than the law. Jesus also brought new dimensions into the covenant by bringing in new members who were previously not part of the covenant family, like gentiles and those considered to be outside the confines of Judaism (Mt. 8:5-13, Mk.7:24-30; Jn. 4:1-42)). Thus, the presence of Christ brings to fulfillment part of the covenant promise with regard to gentiles and others outside the law (Lk. 19:1-10).

Hence, a discourse may be said to be covenantal if it discusses the actual or historical events of the covenant. Draper describes covenant discourse as a term that has been used in the same way as a sermon. A sermon is a speech or a lecture that may be given by a clergyman or any religious personality on any topic, but especially with a biblical, theological, or moral character.<sup>15</sup> A covenantal discourse then maybe a sermon, an exhortation, instruction, or a lecture from one person to another, which may be biblical, theological, or moral in nature. The aim of a sermon may be to encourage, challenge, critique or reflect on a situation to be better positioned to confront it. Thus, William Strong considers Galatians. 4:21-31 as covenant discourse. Similarly, Smit suggests that covenant discourses played a role in creating closer corporation and unity in the covenant community of South Africa during the apartheid era.<sup>16</sup> However, the question now is, what was the place of women in the covenant community of Israel?

<sup>12</sup> Mendenhall, & Herion, *Covenant*, electronic edition.

<sup>13</sup> Mendenhall, & Herion. *Covenant*, electronic edition; M.D. Guinan, Mosaic Covenant. In D.N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary vol.4*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 905-909.

<sup>14</sup> Mendenhall, & Herion, *Covenant*.

<sup>15</sup> Draper, *Jesus' Covenantal Discourse*, 74.

<sup>16</sup> Dirk J. Smit, "Covenant and Ethics? Comments from a South African Perspective." *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 16 (1996): 265-82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23559719>.

## Women and Covenant

Sohn wonders whether God's covenant with Israel considered women. She is of the view that the sign of the covenant with Abraham for example was circumcision that involved only males. She however argued that since the covenant promises included fruitfulness by which Abraham was to become the father of nations (Gen 17:5-6) and Abraham could not procreate by himself, the covenant involved his female partner Sarah as well as future female daughters with whom the promise would be fulfilled. She continued that Sarah's name was changed from Sarai to Sarah since she too was to become the mother of nations (Gen 17:16) and God's promise was fulfilled when Sarah gave birth to Isaac.<sup>17</sup>

Heger suggests that most covenant directives are addressed in masculine mode, although women are sometimes included or presumed in the Hebrew grammatical gender. There are other times that scripture is specific in its address to males and females (Lev 10:14, Num 18:19). He particularly suggests that the precept addressed in the Sinai code was specifically addressed to men. He based his argument on the premise that while Israel was preparing to meet God on the mountain, the people were admonished not to approach women. This prohibition may be due to the possibility of being contaminated by menstrual blood (Ex 19:10, 14, 23).<sup>18</sup> He is of the view that only men were consecrating themselves to meet God, women were not involved.

Jerry Gladson<sup>19</sup> holds the position that the role of the woman in the covenant community was equivocal. He argues that sometimes a woman was considered a member of the covenant community although she does not have any external sign indicating such. He cited a certain portion of law that indicates that she held positions equal to the man (Ex. 21:22-31; Lev. 11; 19:3, 20; 20:10-18; Deut. 5:16). Women joined processions (2Sam 6:19), contributed to Tabernacle worship (Ex. 35:22-29), and participated in festive liturgies like Passover, Pentecost, Feast of Tabernacles (Ex 12:3, Deut. 16:14; Ps. 68: 25). They could go to pilgrimages to holy places (1Sam 1:3-5, 24-28; 2:1-11, 19-20; 2Kgs. 4:23), serve in temple choral group (2Chr. 35:25; Ezr. 2:65; Neh. 7:67). Although some women performed important leadership functions, very little is known of the nature, characteristics of their office (Miriam: Ex 15:20; Deborah: Judges 4: 4; Huldah 2Kgs 22:12-20; Isaiah's wife: Is. 8:3; Noadiah: Neh. 6:10-14; and false Prophetesses Eze. 13). Some wise women were respected and consulted on important issues. These women may have exercised advisory leadership roles (2Sam. 14:2ff; 20:16-22; Jud. 4:14), but they are perhaps not considered important to be recorded.

Gladson on the other hand confirmed that women played secondary roles in religion in Israel due to their periodic menstrual uncleanness (Lev. 12). He suggested that this purity code may have accounted for the lack of ceremonial priestesses and Israel's despise for temple prostitutes in Canaanite religious activities. Furthermore, Gladson argues that family history was traced through the male and only Israelite man had the right to divorce and not the woman (Deut 24:1-4) are an indication of the important role of the man than the woman. These are indications that throughout the Old Testament the role of the woman in the covenant community is quite ambiguous. Apart from her primary role as wife and mother, all other responsibilities generally appear to be secondary to the role of the man. The woman was always less educated and entered into marriage younger than the man. These have led scholars to conclude that the woman is subordinated to the man in the covenant community. It is against this background that studying Luke 10:38-42 becomes relevant and timely for the contemporary woman.

One may conclude that while Abrahamic covenant is believed to be influenced by promissory oath, Mosaic covenant is believed to be patterned after a suzerain covenant. While one stresses the welfare of a son, the other stresses the wishes of a master. Covenant discourses accompanied periodic renewal of covenant terms to meet different needs of the people of God at various historical moments. Covenant renewal has been carried out by covenant mediators to include new dimensions in the existing covenant. However, the position

<sup>17</sup> R. H. Sohn, "Does Abraham's Covenant Include Jewish Daughters? How Women figure into the Male-oriented Covenant that begins with Abraham and Circumcision" in *My Jewish Learning* 2002-2020.

Retrieved from <https://www.myjewishlearning.com> 28/7/2020.

<sup>18</sup> P. Heger, "Women's Obligation to Fulfil Biblical Precepts" *Women in the Bible, Qumran and Early Rabbinic Literature: Their Status and Role* (Published by Brill, 2014), 131-176. Retrieved from <http://www.jstoe.com/stable/10.1163/j.cttlw76vnm.8> on 29/7/2020.

<sup>19</sup> J. A. Gladson. *The Role of Women in the Old Testament outside the Pentateuch* (General Conference committee of Seventh Day Adventist for Biblical Research Institute, 1976), 6-10. Retrieved from <https://www.adventistarchives.org/the-role-of-women-in-the-> 22/12/2020.

of women appears second in the covenant community hence, the importance in considering Jesus' encounter with the two sisters in Luke 10:38-42.

## Section Two: The Text Luke 10:38-42

The passage under study falls under the larger pericope of Chapters 9:51-19:27. This section falls within the central portion of the gospel sometimes referred to as the 'Travel Narratives'. This lengthy section describes the events that took place as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem with his disciples. Within this larger pericope were subdivisions into smaller sections of which 9:51-42 is the first of the sections. This section is further divided into 5 subunits (9:51-62; 10:1-20; 10:21-21; 10:25-37 and 10:38-42) and the Story of Mary and Martha is the last in the section. The theme of hospitality links it to the preceding text.<sup>20</sup> This story might have come from the special "L" source since it is peculiar to Luke. The incident seems to reflect a post-resurrection event and also seems to be part of the journey instructions previously given to the disciples (10:1-17). Following Ricoeur's structural division of text so that the part is understood in terms of the whole and vice versa, the author will divide the passage into three parts: Introduction (verse 38), the Body (verses 39-41), Closing (verse 42). The discussion will follow this order. It is also important to note that authorial intention is good but does not form an essential part of meaning generation in the analysis of the text. This article is working with Ricoeurs' theory that an autonomous text may generate meaning not anticipated by the original author.

### Introduction (verse 38)

The passage begins with *en de tō poreuestai autous* (Now as they travel or during their journey). The conjunction *de* (now) serves as a transition from the previous incident to this one and signaled the beginning of a new topic. Added to the verb infinitive together highlights progression in the journey of Jesus and his companions. It is not clear how many people were travelling with Jesus by the use of *autous*, whether the seventy disciples just mentioned (10:17-20) were with him or only the twelve were with him. It is told that Jesus *autos eisēlthen eis Kōmēn tina* (he entered a village). The use of the pronoun *autos* suggests that Jesus alone entered a village leaving his companions behind. Luke does not mention the name of the village and created uncertainty about the said village. The author of the gospel of John, however, supplies the information that the home of Mary and Martha is located in Bethany (Jn. 11:1, 12:1-3), which gives some hints that the information may be known to the Johannine tradition as well. A woman named Martha *hypedexato auton* from *hypodechomai* which means to welcome/receive/entertain Jesus as a guest and this takes place in her house. This connotes elements of Jewish hospitality in which the host was usually a male head of the family. The host might occasionally, be a woman of means like a widow hosted Elija and Elisha (1kgs. 17: 10; 2kg. 4:8-10 respectively). In the New Testament, women provided for Jesus (Lk. 8;2-3), and in the early Church, women hosted the churches in their homes and provided for travelling missionaries (Act 16:13 -15).<sup>21</sup> It is not surprising that Jesus' friends welcomed him to their home (Lk. 10: 38, Jn. 12:1-3). The name "Martha" appeared only here in the synoptic gospels. It is a common name that is related to the Aramaic word "Master" (Mistress).<sup>22</sup> It is not sure if this name is symbolic of the role of Martha as head of the family in welcoming Jesus. Martha is also a common female name. She may be a widow. By this welcome, the initial Jewish hospitality is well carried out and other details will become clearer as the narrative progresses. This opening section helps to introduce a new incident that took place in Jesus' journey and supplies progression in his movement, although his geography does not provide a clear direction to the reader.<sup>23</sup> The author's focus was probably more theological. The section puts the reader in an expectant mood to get ready for the unfolding dialogue in the next section.

<sup>20</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 433.

<sup>21</sup> John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary* vol. 35B: Luke 9:21-18:34. R. P. Martin ed. (Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1993), Electronic edition.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Luke*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (Edinburg: T&T Clark Limited, 1989), 290.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XIV: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Vol.28A (New York:Anchor Books, 1985), 891.

### The Body of the Work (39-41)

Verse 39 begins with the fact that Martha had a sister called Mary, a name that may also be a symbolic representation of excellence.<sup>24</sup> Although the sisters had a brother Lazarus (Jn. 11:1-3), his name is not mentioned in this story, a possible indication that the author wanted to concentrate on the two women. There is nothing that links this Mary to Mary Magdalene. Mary *parakathestheisa*, an aorist participle passive of *parakatheszomai* (sit beside) *podas* (foot of the Lord) and *ēkouen* (listened) to him. To sit at the feet of a master or a teacher was the traditional role of a disciple, an apprentice to the professor. Here, Mary assumes the position of a student to a Jewish Rabi similar to postures in 2Kings 4:38, Luke 8:35, Acts 22:3.<sup>25</sup> The word *ēkouen* may be translated as ‘she kept listening’ which indicates regular and consistent efforts to learn. Very significant is the idea that Jesus speaks the word of God as he did in (5:1, 8: 21, 11:28) that a student or disciple hears/ listens as well as learns as in (10:16).<sup>26</sup> It is heartwarming to hear Jesus encouraging a woman to learn at his feet. This is not very common in the Jewish setting and these are some of the things that make Jesus an innovative rabbi. While one sister was busy preparing food, the other was graciously engaging the guest and putting the two together provides perfect hospitality. The two sisters opened themselves up to God/messenger and his message. With the coming of Jesus, God had visited the two sisters (19:1-10, 41-44).

However, Martha was *periespato* a word that means to be drawn about in different directions<sup>27</sup> or becomes distracted by much *diakonian* - referring to domestic affairs with regard to meals. This gives the indication that the multiple responsibilities are becoming cumbersome for Martha. A kind of hospitality envisaged in (10:7-8; cf. also 7:36-50, 14:1-14, 24:13-35). The situation of Martha is similar to what happened in the early Christian community where there was tension between spreading the word of God and serving at the table which led to the appointment of the seven deacons (Acts 6:1-6).<sup>28</sup> She *epistasa* a word that comes from *ephistēmi* (approach / stand by) the Lord to ask *ou melei* (are you not concerned/ don't you mind/care) that my sister has left me *kateleipen* from *kataleipō* (alone) to minister or serve. Kindly tell her to *synantilabētai* from *synantilambanomai* (help or come to the aid of). The request creates tension and suspense in the unfolding dialogue. The natural expectation is for Jesus to ask Mary to help her sister but this did not take place. The time of the crisis was the moment of change and twist of the story. Verse 41 begins with Jesus calling Martha twice. The repetition of the name of Martha is a gentle and affective invitation (22:31, Acts 9:4). Jesus perceived Martha to be very *merimnas* and *thorybazē* (be anxious and troubled) *peri polla* (about many things). This is a strong expression, which implies a divided and distracted mind. Perhaps, Jesus was disappointed when he saw Martha in this state. This is a state of the mind that believers must avoid especially about things of this world that had temporal, human, and natural value (8:14; 12:11; 21:34) where the root word *merimn* is used. After all, he was able to feed five thousand with only five loaves and two fishes (9:10-17), and he instructed his disciples to eat whatever is set before them and not to bother to carry extra tonic (10:1-17). A disciple who is tempted to concentrate on domestic affairs and worldly impressions is of less value (12:13-14). One who experiences the word of God should be peaceful, composed, recollected rather than distracted and worried. Knowing that God is in control calms the fears and anxieties of His faithful ones. We will learn from the last verse the response of Jesus to this situation.

### Closing section (42)

The verse begins with *oligōn de estin chreia he henos* (One thing is necessary) as against *peri polla* (many things) that Martha is worried about. For Mary has *exelexato* (chosen/selected) *tēn agathēn merida* (better/beneficial portion/part of). It is not clear here what Mary has selected. Mary may have taken a simple portion of the meal (Gen. 4:34; 1Sam. 1:4-5, 9:23; Neh. 8:10,12; Est. 9:19,22) or the best portion of the meal. Scholars take the saying of Jesus as a metaphor and explain that Mary has chosen to listen to the word of God and receiving the word of God is equally satisfying (4:4, Jn. 4:32). The word portion is used to refer to one's

<sup>24</sup> Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary* vol. 35B.

<sup>25</sup> Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary* vol. 35B.

<sup>26</sup> Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary* vol. 35B.

<sup>27</sup> Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 291.

<sup>28</sup> A. R. Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections, The New Interpreter's Bible Vol.9*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 232.

share of the inheritance (Job 20:29, 27:13; Eccl. 2:10, 2:22; Wis. 2:9; Sir.14: 9, Is. 17:14, Jer.13: 25). God is the portion of the Psalmist (Ps. 72:26-28). Jesus is contrasting one thing (the word of God, His teaching, knowledge as a better option to many things (too much domestic service). Plummer argues that Jesus' encounter with the two sisters is inserted here to further answer the lawyer's question (Lk. 10:25-26) on how to inherit the kingdom and Jesus is perhaps responding that mere benevolence is not enough and that a conscious effort to commune with God is essential.<sup>29</sup> What is more innovative is that a Rabbi gave the instruction to women. By the definition of Draper,<sup>30</sup> the author takes the exhortation of Jesus as a kind of a sermon that redefines the role of women. Jesus is not saying that domestic service is not good. He is saying that the one who chooses to acquire knowledge takes a better option because the knowledge is *ouk aphairethēsetai autēs* (cannot be taken away from her). This is very important given the social situation of women in the Jewish context. This makes Jesus' relationship with women a unique one and unprecedented in the Jewish community of His day. This event partly characterizes Luke as a universal as well as women's gospel.<sup>31</sup> This is the reason why this article is looking at the text as a covenant renewal discourse. Jesus is both the mediator and the covenant giver. He is acting like Abraham, Moses, Josiah, Malachi, or Nehemiah to renew the covenant of Israel to meet the new social needs of God's people. Women are the receivers, whose position in the covenant community is being firmed up. The words of Jesus form the exhortation or the text of the covenant. The effect of the renewal is the opportunity given to women to add value to their life by learning. The next section attempts to contextualize the text in the Ghanaian context.

### Section III: The Ghanaian Context

Ghana is blessed with a rich diversity of ethnic groups, each with its own unique culture and way of life. The Akan form the majority of the population and are about 49% and occupy about a third of the total land area of Ghana. They are located in the Central, Ashanti, Western, Brong Ahafo, and parts of the Eastern Region and in the southern part of the Ivory Coast.<sup>32</sup> There are generally two types of families in this area – the nuclear and the extended family. The nuclear family is made up of a mother, father and their children or adopted children. A more common type of family in the villages is the extended one, which may comprise two or more nuclear families.

Most Akan communities are also matrilineal in inheritance. This means that a child belongs to the clan of his/her mother and acquires property through the maternal uncle who was considered the most important figure in the extended family system. The oldest maternal uncle is the head of the family and he sees to it that the family property is inherited in an orderly fashion and is properly utilized. He also protects the rights and properties of the family members and ensures that children in the family are educated. Through mother-child relations, a child may enter into a relationship with grandparents as well as aunts, uncles and cousins.<sup>33</sup> These relationships are nourished and maintained through constant visits and economic support. It is however important to note that due to the changing trend of certain cultural perceptions, there is increasing acknowledgement by fathers of their responsibilities to bring up and educate their children as against that of the matrilineal uncle in modern Akan societies.

Although men usually assume a higher status and are traditionally the heads of the families, Mothers manage the household, care for children in addition to working for income. Gradually, gender role patterns are changing with many women gradually getting involved in decision-making processes. Yet, there is still a lot to be done as far as women's involvement in decision-making is concerned since few women have as yet achieved positions even in the lowest ranks of the governmental agencies at any level.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 290.

<sup>30</sup> Draper, *Jesus' Covenantal Discourse*, 74.

<sup>31</sup> R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer, and R.E. Murphy, eds. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1991), 706.

<sup>32</sup> K. Nkansa-Kyeremateng, *The Akans of Ghana: Their custom, History and Institutions*, (Accra: Optimum design & Publishing Service, 2004), 26-27.

<sup>33</sup> Leonard Bloom and Joseph G. Ottong, *Changing Africa*, (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1997), 87-91.

<sup>34</sup> W.R. Bascom and M. J. Herskovits eds. *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*. 6<sup>th</sup> imp. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 197.

## Covenant in Ghana

The most common form of covenant is marriage. There are three main types of marriages in Ghana namely; traditional or customary law marriage under which eighty percent of marriages in Ghana exist, civil or Ordinance, and religious marriages.<sup>35</sup> Dery claims that the customary law marriages are potentially polygamous implying that a man may marry more than one wife but the woman can marry only one man. Muslim marriage is also polygamous where a man may marry as many as four wives if he has the means to take care of them. Ordinance marriage is monogamous where both men and women are entitled to one partner. Christian marriages are assimilated under ordinance marriage.<sup>36</sup> There are generally two types of wedding: court and Christian weddings, both of which are performed after the traditional marriage rites. Dery disagrees with this practice and considers customary law marriage as complete in itself. The court wedding may be performed by any couple, 18 years and above, with sound minds and without any cohesion, in front of a registrar. The Christian wedding involves all elements in a civil wedding, and in addition ensures that there are no canonical impediments to the marriage, and this takes place in the church and before a priest.<sup>37</sup> If any of the prospective couple is just between eighteen (18) and twenty-one (21) years, the marriage should be consented to by parents in Ghana.<sup>38</sup> How do Ghanaians perceive marriage as a covenant?

Marriage in Ghana is considered a sacred union by which families, clans and even tribes are bound together. Through the relationship between a man and a woman in marriage, the families of both the man and the woman become relatives. This is because the Akan believed that whatever happens in the family of the man or the woman affects the couple as well, who will go to offer their support.<sup>39</sup> If a family does not accept a man and woman in a relationship then the marriage is not recognized. Marriage is believed to be an example of parity or mutual covenant, which is sealed with the consent of the two partners and their respective families as well as with the sexual union of the couple.<sup>40</sup> The covenant elements in marriage in Ghana are

1. Dowry paid from the prospective groom and his family to the prospective bride and her family.
2. Consent of the two families and the prospective couple
3. Food and drinks shared by members of the two families
4. Sexual union to consummate the marriage.
5. In the case of a civil wedding, marriage documents are signed by the couple and their families as witnesses
6. In the case of religious weddings, the congregation, the minister, and God serve as witnesses and God doubly serves as the enforcer of covenant responsibilities.<sup>41</sup>

However, Ghanaian traditional marriage possesses some element of suzerain covenant. Nkansa Kyeremateng argues that since it is the man who looks for a wife and pays all expenses in the process, once the marriage is established, the woman becomes part of the wealth of the man. He continues that this idea of marriage encouraged polygamy where a man may decide to marry more than one wife against the consent of his first wife.<sup>42</sup> Again, a Royal marriage is a process in which a chief or king is allowed to marry more than one wife. He may marry the wives of his predecessor to take care of their children.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, the Akan attached procreation as a very important part of marriage. Women are expected to start giving birth shortly after marriage since children provide emotional support and contribute to the

<sup>35</sup> K. Osei, *A handbook of Asante Culture*, (Kumasi: O. Kwadwo Enterprise, Cita Press Ltd, 2002), 22-32; G. Dery, "Challenges in Catholic Marriage (The laws of Ghana in Perspective): The Role of the Priest" in *Ecce Sacerdos* vol.2 issue 5. (Accra: National Union of Ghana Catholic Diocesan Priests Association (NUGDPA), 2020), 9-10.

<sup>36</sup> Dery, *Challenges in Catholic Marriage*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> Osei, *A Handbook of Asante Culture*. 26-31.

<sup>38</sup> Dery, *Challenges in Catholic Marriage*...14.

<sup>39</sup> Osei *A handbook of Asante Culture*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Dery, *Challenges in Catholic Marriage*, 10-12.

<sup>41</sup> Osei. *A handbook of Asante Culture*, 27-32; Dery, *Challenges in Catholic Marriage*, 10-12.

<sup>42</sup> K. Nkansa-Kyeremateng, *The Akans of Ghana: their Customs, History and Institutions*, (Sebewie De Ventures, Kumasi 2004), 67.

<sup>43</sup> Nkansa-Kyeremateng, *The Akans of Ghana*, 69.



domestic economy by helping in subsistence activities.<sup>44</sup> Most of the time, the fertility problem is blamed on the woman, sometimes without justification. Infertile women suffer more psychological distress than men. They may be subjected to stigma, potential domestic violence, unstable marital relations and may even be divorced.<sup>45</sup> If a couple has fertility problems, the man will be encouraged to have children outside the marriage or marry another woman who will give birth for him. Hence, it is common for a man to have a relationship outside marriage that may result in children. This happens more in the rural areas and among the less educated couples than in the urban areas and educated couples. Interestingly, PNDC law 111 caters for children that come out of such relationships in case of property sharing.<sup>46</sup> Again in the rural certain, a married woman may continue to live in her maternal home when the man has more than one wife. Meals are prepared and carried to the husband living on his own or in his maternal home. In this situation, both the man and the woman will be under different authorities of their family heads and the woman is considered an outsider in her husband's house. She may not inherit anything in the event of death unless otherwise indicated in a will.

In some Akan communities, a young girl may be betrothed to an elderly man to seal the friendship or covenant relationship unknown to the prospective bride. This may end up in an early marriage that may prevent adequate preparation for the young girl.<sup>47</sup> Anafi and Awusabo-Asare confirm that girls marry as early as 14 years in Ghana, but more females marry early in the rural areas and among the less educated than in the urban areas and among the educated population.<sup>48</sup> Unicef Ghana confirms that many girls marry before the age of 18 which prevents the teenager to go to school to develop herself.<sup>49</sup>

On the contrary in the educated home, the bond, as well as responsibilities between husband and wife, is stronger since the wife is considered a partner. Even the arrangement to marry is initiated by the prospective couple and the family members get involved in an advanced stage. Again, most educated couples prepare a will to solve any issue of inheritance in the event of the death of a partner. Moreover, Most educated women do not get involved in early marriage since they need time to finish their education. Women in good employable occupations marry late, and they are located more in the cities than in the rural areas. Again most educated couples go beyond customary marriage to the ordinance or more equalitarian relationships than the uneducated. Educated couples are more able to handle their fertility problems amicably and any crises that may arise in their relationship.

## Findings

Covenant establishes permanent relationships between partners, whether it is mutual, promissory, or Suzerain. Mediators use covenant discourses in covenant renewals to ensure that commitment to the relationships are renewed, new members are welcomed and new situations are incorporated to make the relationship more beneficial. Mediators may also bring innovations to existing covenants to meet the contemporary needs of covenant partners. The role of women in the covenant community of Israelites was not certain. With the coming of Christ as the mediator of the new covenant, the traditional roles of women are judged to be temporary in terms of their value effect. Women are exhorted to new roles to strive hard to study and engage in discourses as knowledge adds permanent values to their life and open up new possibilities for them. A

<sup>44</sup> J. Fledderjohann, *Women in Ghana pay a heavy Social Price for not having children* "The Conversation-Academic-Rigour Journalistic Flair", March 27<sup>th</sup> 2017, 4:20pm. Retrieved from [theconversation.com/women-in-ghana-pay-a-heavy-social...](http://theconversation.com/women-in-ghana-pay-a-heavy-social...) 22/12/2020, (cf. J. Mantey. *Infertility places pressure on Women in Ghana* "Voice of America Editorials" (Accessed 28 ] January, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Fledderjohann, *Women in Ghana pay a heavy Social Price*.

<sup>46</sup> E. Kutsoati and R. Morek (2012). *Family Ties, Inheritance Rights, and Successful Poverty Alleviation: Evidence from Ghana (Nber Working Paper 18080)*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, 2012 Retrieved from: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18080> on 24/12/2020.

<sup>47</sup> Nkansa-Kyerematen. *The Akans of Ghana*, 68; T. E. KYEI *Marriage and Divorce Among the Asante: A Study Undertaken in the Course of the Ashanti Social Survey* (Cambridge African Monographs 14, 1945) 56-62. Retrieved from: <https://www.african.cam.ac.uk/images/files/titles/marriage> on 24/12/2020.

<sup>48</sup> J. K. Anafi and K. Awusabo-Asare. *Experimental Research on Sexual Network in Some Selected areas of Ghana* "Health Transition Review" Vol.3 Supplementary Issue, 1993, 8. Retrieved from: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/156616553.pdf> on 24/12/2020.

<sup>49</sup> Ghana: *Unicef Data, Monitoring the Situation of Children and Women*, 2014. Retrieved from: <https://data.unicef.org/country/gha/> on 24/12/2020.

conjugal covenant is the most common covenant form in Ghana. There are two groups of women in Ghana: the educated and the uneducated, those living in the city and those in the rural area and they have different experiences in marriage. Although conjugal covenants appear to be mutual, they occasionally exhibit some characteristics of a suzerain treaty in Ghana. In this case, the man becomes the lord who pays the cost of the marriage with the woman as the vassal who must give birth otherwise she stands the risk of being maltreated or divorced. This is more manifest in the rural areas and among the less educated than in the urban areas where women are educated. Consequently, the exaltation to learn is in the interest of the Ghanaian woman. Learning and acquiring knowledge enable her to develop herself, get a better job, enter into a more egalitarian marriage relationship and be put in a better position to handle difficult situations in her marital and other social relationships. Covenant discourses may serve as incentives to arouse in partners the need for an innovative approach to life.

## CONCLUSION

Luke 10:38-42 is a covenant discourse, by which Jesus as a covenant mediator added new roles to women in the contemporary covenant community of Christians. Covenant discourses are motivating sermons that provoke positive actions in life to bring out the redemptive and practical effects of the covenant. The call to study and add value to life gives a better chance to women in the long run. It contributes to the higher growth and development of humanity. It empowers them to make meaningful contributions to society as a whole. In Ghana, women who go beyond their traditional customary roles are better equipped to realize their full humanity, contribute to their marital relationship and the society as a whole. They are also well-grounded to face challenges in life and meet their contemporary needs. Ministers, men of God, councilors and perhaps teachers may be considered covenant mediators capable of regularly motivating conjugal partners.

## RECOMMENDATION

The study recommends that all members of the Ghanaian society especially women in all sectors are to be motivated to go beyond their outlined customary duties and answer the call to study. Regular renewal of the conjugal covenant is important to take into consideration new context and better respond to new needs of modern society. Regular exultation to marriage partners is necessary to provoke innovations in existing conjugal relations.

## ABOUT AUTHOR

Alice Matilda Nsiah (Rev. Sr. Dr.) is a senior lecturer at the Department of Religion and Human Values, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Her research is centered on some controversial biblical passages on women in the New Testament. She reads these passages as covenant discourses, focusing more on some of the innovations that Jesus added to the life of women in the gospels. She enjoys reading biblical text with Ricoeurian theories, sometimes combining this with some African hermeneutic theories.

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