

The woman of Shunem 2 Ki 4:8–37 and Reformed Church in Zimbabwe women: Towards a recognition of oft-forgotten heroes

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Abstract

Historically, women have remained subjects of subordination by their male counterparts despite their critical social role. While they have continuously been entangled in the web of patriarchy, some of them, however, have been able to use their agency to re-assert themselves and influence how the world should positively think about women. This article interrogated the innovative ways in which the woman of Shunem and the Zvishavane women of faith of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ), have been at the forefront, proactively exercising their agency to confront the death-dealing and life-diminishing forces confronting them. Countering their portrayal as persons who simply did what was expected of them as women, this article recognised and celebrated their indispensable contributions towards the welfare of their communities. Grounded on narrative analysis, this article engaged the woman of Shunem's narrative and re-read it from her vantage point. Using a hermeneutic of identification, the narrative was put side by side with that of the RCZ women of faith. The overarching framework underpinning the study was that of the feminist liberating-seeking framework. In the pursuit of this framework, cultural and religious powers that influence the exploitation of women are acknowledged and effort is made to transform the society from the oppressive system of patriarchy so as to liberate women in particular. A re-reading of the woman of Shunem's narrative showed that she was a woman of great character. Despite the couple being childless, she never allowed community expectations to put pressure on her as she expressed contentment with her situation. Her greatness also is reflected through her hospitality, self-abnegation and determination. While what she did, is to some extent comparable to what RCZ women have done and still do today, she admittedly was a step ahead. As such, her tenacity can be used as a leverage to influence the majority of women still caught up in the web of patriarchy in this contemporary world. The long-standing perception of women as capable only of doing what is expected of them, needs to be challenged and biblical passages reinterpreted to ensure the liberation of everyone, especially women due to their vulnerability.

Key Words: Shunammite woman, RCZ women, Hebrew culture, ANE society, women agency, healthcare, patriarchy.