
ζωή in Johannine Gospel and Its Implications for Gender Relation in African Christianity

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ABSTRACT: *This paper focuses on ζωή in the Johannine Gospel and its implications for gender relations in African Christianity. The Gospel of John is outstanding among the four New Testament gospels. Its emphasis differs significantly from those of the Synoptic Gospels. The perception of life is a recurrent issue in every human community. It is existential that attracts the interests of every gender in society. The sensitivity of gender issues, especially inequality, is a global concern. Differences between people based on gender are known as gender inequality, and it has been characterized differently in various researches. Gender inequality is an accumulation of various interrelated social issues. The researcher argues that God's life in people is inclusive and encompasses. This implies that life is inclusive and that God owns it. Gender inequality must not be allowed to disrupt the African church's unity and God's purpose for her. The researcher used the historical-grammatical method to analyze John 5:24; 10:10 and 1 John 5:12. The findings reveal that the Johannine perspective of life is genderless, for, in Christ, there is no Greek or Gentile, no male or female. Again, it presents eschatological dimensions of life, which differ from the Synoptic, and are not mainly to a specific gender. Therefore, the life Christ gives is for all, whether great or small and male or female, and none should be hindered from hearing and receiving the gospel of first importance (1Cor.15:3-4).*

KEYWORDS: african christianity, gender issues, johannine gospel, ζωή

INTRODUCTION

The concept of "Zoe" is central to the Johannine Gospel, and has important implications for gender relations in African Christianity. The term "Zoe" refers to the divine life or eternal life that is offered to believers through their relationship with Jesus Christ. In the Johannine Gospel, this life is often contrasted with the concept of "bios," which refers to physical life or the natural life that all human beings possess.

Scholars have noted that the emphasis on “Zoe” in the Johannine Gospel has significant implications for gender relations, particularly in the context of African Christianity. This is because the concept of “Zoe” offers a vision of human flourishing and abundant life that is not limited by gender, social status, or other human categories. Instead, “Zoe” emphasizes the equal worth and dignity of all human beings, regardless of their gender or other identities.

In this paper, I will explore the concept of “Zoe” in the Johannine Gospel and its implications for gender relations in African Christianity. Specifically, I will examine how the concept of “Zoe” challenges traditional gender roles and hierarchies in African societies, and how it offers a vision of equality and empowerment for women and other marginalized groups. To support my argument, I will draw on a range of scholarly sources, including biblical commentaries, theological works, and anthropological studies of African societies. I will also engage with contemporary debates within African Christianity about gender, including discussions around women's ordination, gender-based violence, and the role of women in church leadership.

Concept of Zoe In Johannine Gospel

The term “Zoe” appears 36 times in the Johannine Gospel, and it is used to describe the eternal life that is offered to believers through their relationship with Jesus Christ (John 1:4; 3:15-16; 5:24, 26, 39-40; 6:27, 33, 35, 40, 47, 53-54, 63, 68; 8:12; 10:10, 28; 11:25-26; 12:25, 50; 14:6; 17:2-3; 20:31). This life is often contrasted with the concept of “bios,” which refers to physical life or the natural life that all human beings possess (John 12:25).

Scholars have noted that the emphasis on “Zoe” in the Johannine Gospel has significant theological implications. For example, Raymond E. Brown argues that “Zoe” represents “the divine life that comes from the Father through Jesus Christ.”¹ This life is not merely a continuation of earthly existence, but a new and transformed way of being that is characterized by intimate communion with God.² The concept of “Zoe” also has important ethical implications. In the Johannine Gospel, Jesus emphasizes that the abundant life he offers is available to all people, regardless of their social status, gender, or other human categories (John 4:13-14; 6:35, 51; 7:37-38; 10:10). This vision of abundant life challenges traditional hierarchies and exclusions, and emphasizes the equal worth and dignity of all human beings.³

¹Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*. Anchor Bible Series.9 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966.), 46.

²Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*. Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 4. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 55-56.

³Klaus Wengst, *Theology of the New Testament*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 186-187.

The term “Zoe” is not used in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), so it does not have the same emphasis or significance as it does in the Johannine Gospel. However, the synoptic Gospels do emphasize the theme of eternal life and its availability to believers. In the synoptic Gospels, eternal life is often described as a reward for those who follow Jesus and his teachings. For example, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, “If you want to enter life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17), and in Mark's Gospel, he says, ‘Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it’ (Mark 8:35). Similarly, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus promises eternal life to those who follow him: “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away... I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish (Luke 6:37-38; 10:25-28; 18:18-30).

Allison noted that the emphasis on eternal life in the synoptic Gospels reflects the influence of Jewish apocalyptic thought, which emphasized the hope of a future resurrection and a new age of eternal life.⁴ The theme of eternal life also reflects the broader concern in the synoptic Gospels with salvation and the kingdom of God. The term “Zoe” is not used in the synoptic Gospels, the theme of eternal life and its availability to believers is emphasized in these Gospels. Eternal life is often described as a reward for those who follow Jesus and his teachings, reflecting the influence of Jewish apocalyptic thought and the broader concern with salvation and the kingdom of God. In summary, the concept of “Zoe” in the Johannine Gospel refers to the eternal life that is offered to believers through their relationship with Jesus Christ. This life is characterized by intimate communion with God and is available to all people, regardless of their social status, gender, or other human categories. The emphasis on “Zoe” challenges traditional hierarchies and exclusions, and emphasizes the equal worth and dignity of all human beings.

Gender Issues in Africa Society

The sensitivity of gender issues, especially inequality, is a global concern. Differences between people based on gender are known as gender inequality, and it has been characterized differently in various research. Gender inequality is an accumulation of various interrelated social issues. These could include disproportions in birth rate, mortality, and access to essential services like higher education and professional inequality in some professional training, professional inequality in some professions, unequal ownership of property, and unequal division of labour within the households. Additionally, there are gender disparities in the workforce, such as the pay difference between men and women and the unfair treatment of women in higher positions of responsibility

⁴Dale C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 289-290.

and postings.⁵ This indicates that women's health, education, and other cultural variables like mobility influence most African women's engagement in the workforce. Women's mobility is restricted, particularly in some African communities where young girls and women are frequently expected to take care of home chores.

In contrast, males are expected to provide for the family financially.⁶ Some religions are also notorious for their gender disparity. Some organizations prevent women from occupying particular roles, such as leading pastors of the local congregations, ordination to full-time ministry, or becoming denominational leaders. God's life in people is inclusive and encompasses nature. This implies that life is inclusive and that God owns it. Gender inequality must not be allowed to disrupt the African church's unity and God's purpose for her.

In contrast to gender concerns in education, Florence Ebam Etta observes that gender issues in politics, the law, and social movements have a more extended and well-known history. The United Nations established the principle of equality in its charter in 1945, and the commission on the respect of women was established in 1946 with the mission of developing policies and initiatives to raise the level of women in politics, economics, social-cultural, and education. 1975 was proclaimed to be the international year for women by the United Nations 29 years later. Following a convention in Mexico City, due to the criticism of gender-blind development planning, the UN began to take a more direct and proactive approach to women's issues.⁷ This suggests that African women contribute significantly to the continent's economy. Compared to women in other parts of the world, they are more economically active as farmers and business owners. Many barriers prevent African women from realizing their full potential as leaders in public life, the boardroom, or expanding their businesses.

According to Amanda Gouws, the political discourse has been dominated by the interests and aspirations of African men, and women's contributions to African political, cultural, and intellectual institutions have been ignored or disregarded.⁸ She claims that African women's advancement in the modern economy is closely related to their traditional roles as daughters,

⁵ Rashmi Umesh Arora, "Gender Inequality, Economic Development, and Globalization: A State Level Analysis of India" *The Journal of Developing Areas*, Vol. 46, no. 1(Spring, 2012): 148 (Biblo. 147-164) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23215428> accessed October 21, 2022.

⁶ Arora, 148.

⁷ Florence Ebam Etta, "Gender Issues in Contemporary African Education" *In Africa Development? Afrique et Developpment*, Vol. 19, no. 4 (1994): 57 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24486868> accessed October 21, 2022; also R. W. Connell, "Change among the Gatekeepers: Men, Masculinities, and Gender Equality in the Global Arena" *In The University of Chicago Press*, Vol 30. No. 3 (Spring 2005):1801-1825; <https://www.jstor.com/stable/10.1086/427525> accessed October 21, 2022.

⁸ Amanda Gouws, "Gender and The State of Political Science in Africa" *In Gender and Politics* published by Verlag Barbara Budrich; 63; <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctvddzq1d.7> accessed October 21, 2022.

sisters, wives, mothers, and mothers-in-law.⁹This reinforces preexisting expectations and restricts women's advancement while men are considered fundamental political subjects.¹⁰ She also emphasizes that, aside from gender-neutral hiring practices, women's admittance into the academy is hampered by their sexual and reproductive health obligations, making it difficult for them to compete with men. Since the economy depends on them, women perform unpaid and unseen institutional maintenance work.¹¹ This means that women desired to be valued and treated with respect and dignity. They equally have God's breath in them, which must not be underrated by the male gender. Historical-grammatical context of the Johannine gospel is discussed in the next section.

ζωή In The Johannine Gospel Compare To The Synoptic Gospels

The Greek perspective of life is worth mentioning before looking at how it is used in the Gospels, particularly the Johannine. ζωή denotes in Greek the physical vitality of organic beings, animals, men, and also plants.¹² Life is thus understood not just as a thing, but as vitality, as the nature of manner that characterizes all living creatures.¹³ The word "life" in our English translations of the Bible happens to be one of the "complex concepts with varied shades of meaning, rendering several Hebrew and Greek terms"¹⁴ There are three different words used in the Gospels to convey different aspects of the concept of life: bios, ψυχή and ζωή.¹⁵ G. F. Shirbroun maintains that "Bios refers to daily life anyone's resources for living. Psyche signifies the self-conscious individual self, which a personal pronoun can translate. Zoe usually denotes life as a gift from God, and it is often modified by the adjective "eternal" (aniōnios)"¹⁶ This research underscores that the word ζωή occurs sixteen times in the Synoptic Gospels except for Luke 12:15 and 16:25, where life is referred to in general.¹⁷

ζωή in the New Testament is used of life as a principle, life in the absolute sense, life as God has it, that which the Father has in Himself, and which He gave to the Incarnate Son to have in Himself

⁹ Gouws, 63.

¹⁰ Gouws, 63.

¹¹ Gouws, 64.

¹² Gerhard von Rad, George Bertram, and Rudolf Bultmann, "ζάω, ζωή, ζῶον, ζωογονέω, -ποιέω, ἀναζάω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. II, ed., Gerhard Kittel, trans., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 832.

¹³ Rad, Bertram, and Bultmann, "ζάω, ζωή, ζῶον, ζωογονέω, -ποιέω, ἀναζάω," 832.

¹⁴ T. Alton Bryant, ed., *The New Compact Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967), 324.

¹⁵ G. F. Shirbroun, "Life," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds., Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 469.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Shirbroun, 469.

(John 5:26), and which the Son manifested in the world (1 John 1:2).¹⁸ However, man lost this life because of the Fall (Gen. 3; Eph. 4:18). Narrowing down to the Synoptic Gospels “It is a life that will be entered or inherited at the end of the present age (Matt. 7:14; 19:16-17, 29; Mark 10:30) and which every disciple of Christ should deal radically with sin in their hearts to avoid missing it and being cast into the hell [lake] of fire (Matt. 18:8-9).”¹⁹ Everyone born of God in Christ is given life that will last.

ζωή appears thirty-six times, wherein eleven of the occurrences are the object of the verb “to have” (echō) in the context of a promise to believers in Christ (John 3:15-16, 36; 5:24, 40; 6:40, 47, 53; 10:10; 20:31).²⁰ Unlike in the Synoptic Gospels where ζωή is futuristic, the fourth evangelist has both a present and future reality of ζωή in view because of “fair” (John 5:24).²¹ Indeed “Life of this sort [in the gospel of John] is not merely everlasting, stretching into eternity, but on a new level or dimension, which we can start enjoying here and now.”²² This life makes humans conscious. It separates them from other creations thanks to God's word of light or revelation.²³ Just as it is thus difficult to separate “light” and “life” in this gospel, so it is with “life” and “word”, for they are “intimately connected, of course, not as if the “word” is merely a source of life for, in reality, it is life itself.”²⁴ Another truth in the Johannine Gospel is that Jesus Himself is the life, and every true life traces its source to Him and upholds Him as the giver, sustaining life.²⁵

To this end, it is evident that ζωή occurs about fifty-two times in the entire Gospels, sixteen and thirty-six in the Synoptic Gospels and Johannine Gospel, respectively. The usage in the Synoptic Gospels has an eschatological side. At the same time, that of the Johannine Gospel is not just future-oriented; it is present in nature (John 5:24). Shirbroun expatiates that the “Synoptic Gospels contain a strictly futuristic eschatology which is, however, in keeping with Jewish beliefs current in early Judaism. Johannine eschatology builds on that found in the Synoptics by asserting that the future hope is now present”²⁶ to give the believers assurance of faith or salvation. This is attested by the redactor's inclusion of Johannine passages like John 5:28 and 6:54, where resurrection is the future, to note that John had both the eschatological and realized eschatological viewpoints, with the latter building on the former that is emphasized in the Synoptics.²⁷ C. H. Dodd supports

¹⁸ W. E. Vine, “An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words,” in *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Word*, eds., Merrill F. Unger and William White (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 367.

¹⁹ Shirbroun, 469.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² A. E. Cundall, “John” in *Explaining the Gospel* (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1981), 270.

²³ Shirbroun, 469.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 470.

²⁷ Ibid.

this view²⁸ in his book, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*. Another concern is ζωή in some selected Johannine Passages.

ζωή in Some Selected Johannine Passages

This section aims to study some passages that may clarify the concept of life in the Johannine gospels. The following texts are considered: John 5:24, John 10:10 and 1 John 5:12.

ζωή in John 5:24

The first text of the Johannine Gospel to be considered is John 5:24 “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” In this text, from observation, the first “life” is rendered in the present and the second in the future. Thus, Shirbroun says, “Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has (present tense) eternal life, and he does not come into judgment but has passed (perfect tense) out of death into eternal life”²⁹ Marvin R. Vincent maintains that “the present tense states the general principle for all and the life John speaks of here is the ideal of perfect life”³⁰ This indicates that the life emphasizes applicable to all the genders. Therefore, the emphasis is that the believer has eternal life as a present possession, guaranteeing eternal life with God.³¹ Quoting P.T. Forsyth, Barton and his friends, “We begin living the eternal life here, with its endless selfless energy, vaster than we feel, and surer than we know”³² John has also noted in his other epistles that “He who has the Son has life and he that does not have the Son of God has not life” (1 John 5:12). John paints a picture of the eschatological dimension of eternity in the present life, and underlines that our response to Jesus determines our eternal state. Those who have yielded to the Word of Christ now shall be judged unto rewards of eternal life since God “has rescued them from the dominion of darkness and brought us into His kingdom of His Son” (Col. 1:13 NIV). Therefore, one can agree with Craig S. Keener that “Eternal life, the life of the world to come, was supposed to be available only when the dead would be raised; but Jesus provides new life already for those who trust in Him.”³³ This suggests that Jesus is the source of life for all genders in every generation. ζωή in John 10:10 is the next point discussed below.

ζωή in John 10:10

The second text of consideration is John 10:10 “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10 NIV). Here Jesus Christ

²⁸ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), 197., cited in Shirbroun, 470.

²⁹ Shirbroun, 470.

³⁰ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889), 137.

³¹ Bruce B. Barton et al, *John*, Life Application Bible Commentary, ed., Grant Osborne (Wheaton, Illinois: The Livingstone Corporation, 1993), 110.

³² Ibid.

³³ Keener, 276.

contracts His life, offering humanity the devil's activities. In this contrast, the rendition of the activities of the two persons (Satan and Jesus) is present. Another emphasis worthy of note is that while the devil is just coming now to attack believers, Jesus Christ says, "I have come", which could be rendered as "I came" By this, it is in a perfect tense³⁴ to say the criminal acts of the devil come after the life of eternity is offered to the believer with an eschatological dimension, looking at the last part of the verse. This is to say, "It will find its perfection and the full reality of blessedness with God in the life to come as in Romans 2:7 and 2 Cor. 5:4)" Andreas J. Köstenberger corroborates that "Jesus' promise of abundant life, which begins already in the here and now, brings to mind Old Testament prophecies about abundant blessings" (For example, Ezek. 34:12-15, 25-31; ESV Study Bible: 2043).

ζωή in 1 John 5:12

The apostle in this text yet affirms that he always has eternity in mind when he uses ζωή, according to Thomas F. Johnson.³⁵ Johnson notes that God speaks here, given one's relationship with God and whether one has or is bereft of eternal life.³⁶ Johnson further asserts that the same point is equally made in antithetical terms in John 3:36,³⁷ the passage in which George R. Beasley-Murray concurs with Johnson that life is eternal in the Son, and the believer possesses that life when he is united to him by faith.³⁸ Stephen S. Smalley also has the same view; he says that ζώην in this passage refers to the eternal life that God has given us as a supreme gift in Christ.³⁹ Smalley further states that this eternal life is qualitative, not quantitative, the highest kind of moral and spiritual life that God enables believers to share in a relationship with Jesus Christ irrespective of time.⁴⁰ It is, therefore, evident that in the manner in which John uses the word "life" (ζωήν) in this passage, he is laying more emphasis eschatologically.

From these studies of John 5:24, 10:10 and 1 John 5:12, it is observably true that John builds on the eschatological and Jewish understanding of life. John has a present perspective of life, although he is very conscious of the eschatological dimension of life in the Synoptics. To this end, it may be concluded that John has a "tension between the "already" and the "not yet"⁴¹

³⁴ Vincent, 190.

³⁵ Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2 & 3 John*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series, eds., W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993), 130-131.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 36, eds., David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and Ralph P. Martins (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publishers, 1987), 54.

³⁹ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 51, eds., David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and Ralph P. Martins (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publishers, 1984), 287-288.

⁴⁰ Barker, and Martins, 287.

⁴¹ Allan Anderson, "The Prosperity Message in the Eschatology of Some New Charismatic Churches," available at https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA02569507_340, accessed on October 3, 2022.

perspective of eschatology which a former Jazz musician and rock band manager, John Wimber, coined.⁴² Implications are discussed in the next section.

Implications of Ζωή for Gender Relations In African

Christianity

a. Gender Roles and Hierarchies African Societies

The concept of “Zoe” as found in the Johannine Gospel challenges traditional gender roles and hierarchies in African societies by emphasizing the equal worth and dignity of all human beings. This theological and ethical vision has implications for gender relations in Africa, where traditional gender roles and hierarchies have been deeply entrenched. Adeyemo emphasizes that eternal life is available to all people, regardless of their social status, gender, or other human categories. This vision challenges traditional patriarchal structures that have relegated women to subordinate positions in society.⁴³ Moreover, the emphasis on “Zoe” as a divine life that comes from God challenges the notion that human beings can establish their own worth or value based on their gender, race, or other factors.

Furthermore, the emphasis on “Zoe” as a transformed way of being challenges traditional gender roles that have been defined by cultural norms and expectations. The Johannine Gospel envisions a new and transformed way of life that is not based on these traditional roles and expectations but is characterized by intimate communion with God.⁴⁴ In African Christianity, the concept of “Zoe” has been used by Mbiti to challenge traditional gender roles and hierarchies. For example, some African theologians have emphasized the equal worth and dignity of men and women in light of the vision of “Zoe” found in the Johannine Gospel.⁴⁵ Others have used the concept of “Zoe” to

⁴² Douglas R. Erickson, “The Kingdom of God and the Holy Spirit: Eschatology and Pneumatology in the Vineyard Movement,” A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School, Marquette University, 2015, i.

⁴³Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed. *Africa Bible Commentary*. (Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 1198.

⁴⁴Klaus. Wengst, *Theology of the New Testament*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 186-187.

⁴⁵ John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*. (Nairobi, Kenya: Oxford University Press, 1986), 209.

challenge the cultural practice of female genital mutilation, which is seen as a violation of the dignity of women.⁴⁶

In summary, the concept of “Zoe” challenges traditional gender roles and hierarchies in African societies by emphasizing the equal worth and dignity of all human beings. This theological and ethical vision has implications for gender relations in Africa and has been used by African theologians to challenge patriarchal structures and practices.

b. Zoe and Women’s Ordination

The concept of “Zoe” in the Johannine Gospel has been used by some scholars to support the ordination of women in Christian ministry. The theological and ethical vision of “Zoe” emphasizes the equal worth and dignity of all human beings, which challenges traditional patriarchal structures and has implications for gender relations in Christian ministry. Proponents of women's ordination argue that the vision of “Zoe” in the Johannine Gospel emphasizes the spiritual equality of all believers, regardless of gender. They point to the example of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, who Jesus engaged in theological conversation with and who became a witness to her community. This example, along with other examples of women in leadership roles in the early Christian community, challenges traditional gender roles that have relegated women to subordinate positions in Christian ministry.⁴⁷

Moreover, the emphasis on “Zoe” as a divine life that comes from God challenges the notion that gender is a factor in determining one's worth or value. The Johannine Gospel portrays Jesus as breaking down social barriers and engaging with people from all walks of life, including women. This vision supports the idea that women should be able to participate fully in Christian ministry, including in leadership roles.⁴⁸ Opponents of women's ordination, however, argue that the traditional patriarchal structures of the early Christian community should be maintained, and that ordination is a role reserved for men only. They interpret certain passages of scripture as supporting this view, such as 1 Timothy 2:12-14, which states that women should not teach or have authority over men.

⁴⁶Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 63-64.

⁴⁷Dorothy A. Johnson, *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Genuine Discipleship of Equals*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 200-201.

⁴⁸Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 85-86.

In summary, the concept of “Zoe” in the Johannine Gospel has been used by some scholars to support the ordination of women in Christian ministry. Proponents argue that the vision of “Zoe” emphasizes the spiritual equality of all believers, regardless of gender, and challenges traditional patriarchal structures. Opponents, however, argue that the traditional patriarchal structures of the early Christian community should be maintained, and that ordination is a role reserved for men only.

c. Zoe as a Response to Gender Based Violence

The concept of “Zoe” in the Johannine Gospel can also be used to address and challenge gender-based violence. The theological and ethical vision of “Zoe” emphasizes the value and dignity of all human life, which includes a commitment to nonviolence and a rejection of oppression and abuse. In the Johannine Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as challenging patriarchal structures and engaging with women as equals, including the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) and Mary of Bethany (John 11).⁴⁹ These interactions challenge gender roles that have contributed to gender-based violence and oppression, and underscore the value and worth of all individuals, regardless of gender.

Moreover, the vision of “Zoe” emphasizes that all individuals possess divine life, which calls for a commitment to the flourishing of all human beings. This includes a responsibility to address and confront gender-based violence and other forms of oppression.⁵⁰ The Johannine Gospel calls for believers to follow Jesus' example and challenge the social and cultural norms that perpetuate violence and injustice. In African societies, gender-based violence remains a significant challenge, with cultural and religious norms often used to justify and perpetuate such violence.⁵¹ However, the vision of “Zoe” can provide a powerful theological and ethical framework for challenging these norms and promoting gender equality and nonviolence. By affirming the value and worth of all individuals, regardless of gender, the Johannine Gospel can help to promote a culture of respect and nonviolence.

d. Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

The concept of “Zoe” in the Johannine Gospel can be used to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in African Christianity. The theological and ethical vision of “Zoe”

⁴⁹ Sugirtharajah, R. S. "Jesus and Women in the Fourth Gospel." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1, no. 2 (1985): 45-56.

⁵⁰ Van Dijk, Hannah J. "Zoe: Life in God and Beyond Death in John's Gospel." *Neotestamentica* 47, no. 2 (2013): 319-42.

⁵¹ Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, "Violence against Women in Africa: A Sociocultural Explanation." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 3 (2004): 847-77.

emphasizes the equal worth and dignity of all human beings, which challenges traditional patriarchal structures and has implications for gender relations in African Christian communities. In African societies, gender inequality remains a significant challenge, with cultural and religious norms often used to justify and perpetuate such inequality.⁵² However, the vision of “Zoe” can provide a powerful theological and ethical framework for challenging these norms and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. By affirming the value and worth of all individuals, regardless of gender, the Johannine Gospel can help to promote a culture of respect and equality in African Christian communities.

Moreover, the Johannine Gospel emphasizes the important role that women played in the ministry of Jesus, including the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) and Mary of Bethany (John 11). These interactions challenge gender roles that have contributed to women's marginalization in African societies and underscore the value and worth of women as leaders and agents of change.⁵³ The vision of ‘Zoe’ also calls for a commitment to the flourishing of all human beings, which includes a responsibility to address and confront gender-based violence and other forms of oppression. African Christian communities can draw upon the vision of ‘Zoe’ to promote nonviolence and challenge the social and cultural norms that perpetuate violence and injustice. In summary, the concept of “Zoe” in the Johannine Gospel can be used to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in African Christianity. By affirming the equal worth and dignity of all individuals, regardless of gender, the Johannine Gospel challenges traditional patriarchal structures and promotes a culture of respect and equality in African Christian communities.

CONCLUSION

The portrayal of Zoe, or eternal life, in the Johannine Gospel is complex and multi-layered, and it is not necessarily tied to a specific gender. However, there are some gender-related themes and motifs that run throughout the Gospel that shed light on the cultural context in which it was written. On the one hand, the Gospel of John portrays Jesus as a champion of women's rights and dignity, which was a radical departure from the patriarchal norms of his time. For example, Jesus engages in theological discussions with women, such as the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42), and he defends the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Additionally, Mary Magdalene is portrayed as a key witness to Jesus' resurrection (John 20:1-18), which underscores the importance of women's testimony and undermines the idea that women are not credible witnesses.

⁵² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. (London: Heinemann, 1969).

⁵³Ngwainmbi, Emmanuel. “Women and Development in Africa: A Theological Perspective.” *Theology Today* 57, no. 2 (2000): 213-27.

On the other hand, there are some passages in the Gospel that reinforce gender stereotypes and hierarchies. For example, in the story of the feeding of the 5,000, the men sit down on the grass while the women and children stand (John 6:10). Additionally, some scholars have argued that the imagery of bride and bridegroom in the Gospel reinforces gender binaries and patriarchal norms. Overall, it is clear that the Johannine Gospel presents a nuanced and multifaceted view of gender relations that reflects the cultural and social context in which it was written. While there are elements of gender equality and empowerment in the Gospel, there are also passages that reflect patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes. Ultimately, the message of eternal life and the importance of faith in Jesus Christ transcend gender and invite all people, regardless of gender identity or expression, to partake in the abundant life that he offers.

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