

Women and the Spirits

by Jacques Ellul

Translator's Note

[An article](#) published by the CBE discussed a history of Jacques Ellul's views on women and feminism; this remains the only source online available in English regarding this subject. Through some digging, I was able to acquire a French copy of one of the essays by Ellul cited in the article, and have taken to translating it into English.

This article was published in the French Protestant weekly journal *Reforme* in November of 1950. It is worth noting that Ellul's views have evolved in the decades since, but the core themes of this essay can still be traced in his subsequent thought, albeit revised.

To be entirely transparent, I do not know French. I transcribed the article by hand and then ran it through DeepL for the bulk of the text. From there, I proofread it and made various corrections by hand where the translated output came out awkwardly. These corrections can be seen in the footnotes, I had to take a guess with some of the words, it's possible there exists some mistranslations.

Introduction

In all that follows, two mistakes must be carefully avoided. The first would be to look for a knowledge "in itself" concerning woman, a kind of antroposophy. Everything that follows must be read in the light of the whole of the biblical revelation concerning women: I am merely emphasizing an aspect that one does not usually dare to stress. But this has no meaning and no significance outside the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The second mistake was to look for a special spiritual destiny for women. In reality the spiritual nature, the spiritual journey¹ of the woman is, I believe, different from that of the man, but her destiny is the same, that is to say that she is called to salvation in Jesus Christ in the same way as the man is called to receive personally and directly the joy of salvation. The Bible shows us that the difference between man and woman is not only physiological but spiritual, and therefore condemns all conflation².

The "Weakness" Of Woman

The woman is often represented to us, biblically, as weaker than the man (e.g., 1 Pet. 3:7). It is not a question of physical weakness, but of psychic weakness: and what constantly reappears as an expression of this weakness is the fact that the woman spontaneously submits to the "spirits" as opposed to³ the man.

Submissive to the spirits, to the spiritual powers, which is not necessarily good, because she is indifferent to the Holy Spirit and to the revoked powers - which does not necessarily mean that she has a more spiritual "nature" than the man - it may simply mean that the woman is more sensitive to the spiritual impulses, and that she has less defense against them.

This does not mean that man is not subject to these powers, but we see two major differences: very generally (except for the prophets), the Bible shows man in relation to the powers through a material agent, e.g. the state, magic, money (which are 'expressions of spiritual powers) or through

the woman herself, who is actually the interpreter of these powers for man, whereas the woman is directly in relation to them.

On the other hand, the man always presents a moral, regulating element, which forms a counterweight to the activity⁴ of the spiritual powers, whereas the Bible rarely shows the woman in this light.

We will recall some very simple examples of this situation of the woman:

Obviously, it is useless to insist on the story of the Fall. The spirit of evil acts directly on the woman, she is sensitive to the "evidence" that he shows her, and she serves as an intermediary between this spirit and the man. And this is confirmed by the obscure passage of Genesis 6:1, where we see the celestial spirits seduced by the woman, who can therefore act directly on these powers. And it is through this seduction and relationship that "the blasphemous replica of the birth of the Savior of the world" (Vischer) is given to us here.

And under the influence of these spirits she plays a "critical" role with man in the Bible, she questions man's vocation, she tends to subject man to the spirits that drive her, or to take away his power: thus Delilah with Samson, Solomon's wives who push him to idolatry, Tamar, Job's wife, and even when she seems to act for purely physical motives like Potiphar, the motive and the outcome are still the fight of the powers against God.

The woman is also, equally, sensitive to the workings⁴ of the Spirit of God. This is shown to us in particular by the following fact: whenever the woman is, in the biblical accounts, called upon to play a "religious" role, it is not the role of the father, nor of the priest, nor of the teacher, nor of the king, but exclusively the role of the prophetess: that is to say, precisely the one in which the spirit of God expresses itself directly through a being⁵. Thus Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14) Noadiah (Neh. 6:14), Anna (Luke 2:36). And one cannot help but relate this to the fact that in the New Testament the main role of the woman is still that of a prophet (Acts 21:9 - 1 Cor. 11:5). And when, very exceptionally, a woman fulfills the role of a ruler: like Deborah, we see that she is first a prophetess and then, in matters of state, she hands over the power to a man (Judges 4:4).

Finally, a fact to be emphasized in the same line is the use of the symbol in Revelation. The woman is used twice as a symbol: in Rev. 12:1-6, 12:13, and in Revelation 17.

On the one hand, she is a symbol, of the Spirit of God, then of the Church, the manifestation of the Spirit (and here we find again this comparison often recalled in the last few years, the woman is to the man as Church is to Christ).

On the other hand, she is a symbol of the Spirit of Satan, who perverts the will of God (and it is very remarkable that this perversion is always expressed in terms of the temple: e.g. prostitution, sterility, etc.).

This symbolism obviously means nothing by itself, but it is acceptable that it is by chance that the woman was taken as a symbol of these two spiritual powers, which are inverted. This does not mean that the woman is possessed by⁶ Satan, or vice versa⁷, but when one wants to signify a spiritual power, it is the woman that one thinks of. This is reinforced by the setting of this symbol in both texts: Rev. 12:14 and 17:3, the woman is "in the desert", and the desert is traditionally the place where the spirits act. So the woman is in this direct and dangerous relationship with the spirits.

The Spiritual Role of the Husband

This makes it easier to understand the role assigned to the husband, which appears to be primarily a spiritual one. In reality, the husband is called to protect his wife against this influence², to detect its presence⁸. He himself is a spiritual power in relation to his wife, which on the one hand protects her from others, and on the other hand makes her obey the impulse of the Spirit of God. (This alludes to another biblical indication concerning the wife, which we do not have the space to develop here, and which can be summed up as follows: the wife always tends to realize by herself the promises she receives from the Spirit of God instead of letting the Lord do it). The husband has ἐξουσία (authority over his wife) (1 Cor. 7:4).

The spiritual role of the husband is very clear in two well known texts, Ephesians 5:25: Christ loves the church, and gave himself up for her in order to sanctify her after purifying her, so husbands should love their wives; this is the perfectly clear (though surprising) meaning of the text. It is obvious that this sanctification and purification is the work of Jesus Christ and not of the husband, but the husband, because he is the head of the wife, must help her in the walk of faith (let each of you love his wife as himself), and this assistance takes the form of protection, as the other text reminds us: 1 Cor. 11:3-10. The veil is the mark of the woman, but it is the "ἐξουσία", the spiritual power that the husband has received from his wife, which protects her against the "angels", against the influence⁴ of the spirits. This is especially true when the wife is praying or prophesying (v. 5), i.e. when she is in direct contact with the Spirit of God or, perhaps, in the case of prophecy, with the other powers.

But on the other hand, the husband has this authority over the wife only because Christ has all authority and because Christ has dominion over all powers. The husband's power is real only because Christ has real power over the spirits. This role is assigned to the husband and he cannot fulfill it naturally.

And that is why finally the woman, not married, but in the Church, has the same protection from the powers as the married woman. And even she has a preferable situation, because she is directly protected by Christ as the man. Christ does not break in the church the order set by God in the world of the Fall. And because in this world the husband has authority over the family, Christ maintains this authority, without bringing about the superiority of the man. But in the Church this charge of the husband (which as a burden is demanded of him), is no longer indispensable for the wife, for it is really the Spirit of Christ who inspires her now in her life.

Footnotes

1. Literally translated as “assimilations” from French *assimilations*
2. Literally translated as “adventure” from French *l’aventure*
3. Literally translated as “than man” from French *que l’homme*
4. Literally translated as “action” from French *action*
5. Literally translated as “creature” from French *créature*
6. Literally translated as “woman is the possession of Satan” from French *la femme soit possession de Satan*, might instead mean “woman is Satanic”
7. Could possibly mean “nor is Satan of a feminine essence” or “nor is woman possessed by God”, from French *ou inversement*
8. Literally translated as “to discern its action powers” from French *discerner dans cette action des puissances*