

**MARY SLESSOR: MIRRORING THE UNIQUE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES OF
THE OLD TESTAMENT DEBORAH – A PARADIGM FOR TODAY’S WOMEN
LEADERS TOWARDS NATION BUILDING**

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ABSTRACT: *Experience has proven that goodness does not hide and consequently, goodness cannot die! This is true about Mary Slessor, a missionary who came to Nigeria and left so much positive impact behind. The good life of this missionary has kept her ever relevant and prominent not only in the pages of history but physically in the sands of Nigeria and psychologically in the minds of people even after more than 100 years. She came for religious reasons but also ended up impacting meaningfully in political and social restructuring. Today, people still wonder where she drew her inspiration and motivation from. Even in the face of challenges of social status, race bias, language barrier, health issues and cultural difference etc, as a religious, Mary Slessor’s contributions to politics and social life were outstanding and could have very few precedence. One of such is the only female Biblical judge, Deborah. Motivated by the need to keep her legacy alive and, above all, desiring to project her religious background as the basis for her successful service to humanity, this article, using the Historical and comparative methods, highlights and appreciates the leadership qualities of Mary Slessor as mirroring those of the Biblical Deborah in Judges 4. The findings of this comparative study are revealing and impressive. Apart from the fact that an interesting correlation between Deborah and Mary Slessor which proposes to be a subject of further research and scholarship is discovered, Mary Slessor’s personal achievement assumes a more credible status and, as projected, becomes a paradigm for women leaders today.*

KEYWORDS: Mary Slessor; Leadership Qualities; Old Testament Deborah; Women Leadership; Nation Building

INTRODUCTION

That the path of greatness in life is created in company; and, that service is what distinguishes great leaders from other rulers becomes very clear in the case of Mary Mitchel Slessor, a Scottish Missionary to Nigeria who earned acceptance and still enjoys post-humors goodwill by the Nigerian people as a result of her unique leadership qualities. In today’s world where many leaders are only celebrated while in office and hardly come down before they are rejected, condemned and forgotten, Mary Slessor’s case calls for an appreciative inquiry. Besides, the fact that she is a lady and has remained relevant for ages in a near male-dominated society makes her case a subject of viable inquiry. As a missionary, her highly appreciated multi-faceted service to humanity can only be a reflection of great Biblical figures. One person that readily comes to mind when one considers the life and deeds of Mary Slessor is the Biblical Deborah in Judges 4. As the world celebrates the centenary of Mary Slessor’s service, this write-up honours this history maker by exploring, extracting and evaluating her unique leadership qualities as a mirror of that of the Biblical Deborah. The aim

of this is to map out tested and trusted paths for contemporary leadership – secular or religious.

EXPLICATION OF TERMS

The Topic of this write-up is: MARY SLESSOR: MIRRORING THE UNIQUE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT DEBORAH – *A Paradigm for Today's Women Leaders Towards Nation Building*. The major terms here include: Mary Slessor; Leadership Qualities; Old Testament Deborah; and, Nation Building. These all need to be put in perspective.

Mary Slessor

The use of the name Mary Slessor in this write-up refers to both the person and the deeds of the Scottish Missionary to Nigeria, Mary Mitchell Slessor who, after many years, still remains alive in the minds of many Nigerians especially in the South-south because of her serviceable work and strong personality (Proctor, 2000).¹

Leadership Qualities

By leadership qualities, we mean those decisions, actions and deeds which support and enhance proper direction in leadership. Such qualities would not only facilitate good governance or direction but they would also promote responsible followership.

Old Testament Deborah

By this qualification of Deborah with the term Old Testament, we mean to eliminate all ambiguity about the Deborah in question. Since there could be other Deborah(s), it was necessary to narrow it to the particular one we are referring to. Therefore, by Old Testament Deborah, we mean the person, life and deeds of the Israelite JUDGE by name Deborah as recorded in Judges 4 - the first part of the Christian Scriptures (Coogan, 2001).²

Nation Building

The building of a nation, meaning the development of a political entity, begins with the organization of small units from the family to the extended community. By nation building in this paper, we mean the desired actions which will promote the orderly and fruitful organization and workability of the nation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This work basically has two parts. There is the part that seeks to project the leadership qualities of Mary Slessor. There is also the part that seeks to exhume and re-present the example of the Biblical Deborah in Mary Slessor. The Uniqueness of this work is in the attempt to relate both areas and adapt lessons there-from to benefit today's leaders especially women. Women need to appreciate themselves the more (Agbola, 1996).

There is no doubt that a good number of scholars have said many laudable things about Mary Slessor (Benge, 1990; Buchan, 1981; Kalu, 1996; Luke, 1929; Quinn, 2017; Taylor, 1993;

Wellman, 1998, etc). Most of them picked on her missionary life. She has been portrayed as a faithful missionary (Benge 1990), a simple lady of faith (Kalu, 1996) and an ardent example of humility (Wellman, 1998). Some scholars have also portrayed her leadership qualities. On the other hand, a few scholars have commented on the unique leadership qualities of Deborah (Deen, 1955; Nissan, 2007; Frolov, 2014, etc). This work has benefitted from all these scholarship and more. However, the relevant adaptation of this situation to serve the needs of the present especially today that women leadership potentials are still being suppressed, has remained a gap. It is this gap that this particular research intends to fill. The relevance of this research therefore, is that it builds on the foundational but theoretical platform already established to provide a more practical scenario for effective leadership as we face the future.

APPRECIATING THE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES OF DEBORAH IN THE BIBLE

Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was one of the Judges in Israel. As we can see in Judges 4: 1-24, she took over as Judge in Israel after the death of Ehud. According to the Scriptures, she would sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim and the Israelites flogged to her for judgment.³ Given the fact that she was a lady, with the less favorable connotation associated with the status of women in that society, there must have been something about Deborah that attracted people to her (Nissan, 2017).

Besides the dispensing of judgment, her role in the political, social and religious growth of Israel was significant (Agbola, 1996).⁴ At the time that Deborah was Judge, Israel was under serious oppression by Jabin the king of Canaan. When she became aware of this threat, she acted like a patriotic and convinced leader. She commissioned Barak of Israel to lead the Israelites to war. Barak in turn demanded that she (Deborah) be part of his team. It is interesting to see that Deborah courageously accepted and followed Barak to battle at which Israel was victorious and Canaan subdued.⁵

With all the factors fighting against her and her success, it is interesting to note that the leadership qualities of Deborah as implied in this account contributed immensely to her success (Frolov, 2014). These qualities are not limited to but would include the following: Service, Courage, Attractiveness, Integrity, Sacrifice (Tanya 2017).⁶

Service

Leadership is all about service. Deborah exhibited this in her role as Judge in Israel at a very challenging time. She was always at her duty post to dispense objective justice. That was the reason people would go to her because they trusted her objectivity. There is no better way to describe this than 'service.'⁷

Courage

Deborah was a courageous woman. She did not mind the fact that she was a woman in a patrilineal society (Luke 1929).⁸ Her courage kept her relevant. She did not just dispense judgment objectively, but she courageously appointed the leader of Israel's army and also followed him (Barak) to battle in favour of Israel. A good leader needs to be courageous in order to make necessary decisions without fear or favour. Deborah was a good leader in this regard.

Attractiveness

A leader needs to be attractive. There must be something about him or her that would draw followership. Deborah had good followership. Many would go to her for judgment and she would dispense same appreciably. This attitude of the people implies that she was attractive to them.

Integrity

A leader must be a person of integrity (Brian 2017).⁹ Besides, if there is any virtue that is needed in judgment, it is the virtue of integrity. The fact that many people used to flock to Deborah for judgment implies that she was a woman of honesty and integrity.

Sacrifice

A good leader must make some sacrifices for his or her followers. Deborah sacrificed much for Israel. Her status as a woman did not deter her. She risked her life and sacrificed comfort, following Barak to battle for Israel. Her sacrifice paid off as she was able to secure deliverance from the hands of Canaan and consequent peace for Israel.

Fear of God

The fear of God is very important in leadership. Deborah was not just a Judge she was also a Prophetess. Believing in God and trusting in His providential care, she accepted to accompany Barak to the battle field and Israel defeated Sisera and his army.

Appreciating Mary Slessor

Apart from the submissions by other scholars in other parts of this work, by virtue of her personality, Mary Slessor, in this context, does not need a detailed introduction. Suffice it to place on record that this great Missionary, was born on December 2, 1848 in Aberdeen, UK. She was a Presbyterian of great faith (Kalu 1996).¹⁰ Influenced greatly by David Livingstone, she sailed, on mission, to Nigeria on the 5th of August 1876. Her approach to the mission work earned her the relevance, popularity and sustained glory/appreciation that is associated with the name even after 100 years since she died. The legacies of this “Obonganwan Okoyong” still lives on...¹¹

Mary Slessor: A True Women-Leader

While in Nigeria as a Missionary, Mary Slessor distinguished herself as a true women-leader.¹² She is primarily remembered for protecting native children and promoting women’s right. Though a woman in a male dominated society, she worked hard to earn the respect of the people including the men (Benge, 1999). As a good leader, she learnt and spoke the native language. That really facilitated inter personal and inter communal relationship.

As a woman herself, she was very interested in solving the issues which affected women and mothers most. As an agent of social change, she settled disputes, fought against human sacrifice and addressed the problem of the killing of Twins. Concerned also about the lack of western education, she was instrumental to the founding and establishment of schools. The Hope Waddel Training Institute in Calabar was one of such. As a true missionary also, Mary Slessor, especially by her deeds, spearheaded the spread of the Gospel into the hinter-lands (Benge 1999). Her unique leadership qualities were more vividly brought to focus when in

1892, she became the Vice Consul presiding over courts in Okoyong. In 1905, she was the Vice President of Ikot Obong native court.¹³ As a woman-leader, she dispensed justice not only for the women or only in favour of the women, but she is only seen as a women-leader because in her objective dispensing of justice to both men and women, she became a pride to the woman-folk for good representation in leadership.

Mary Slessor: A Mirror of the Old Testament Deborah

Mary Slessor is a true reflection of the only woman-Judge that Biblical Israel had in history. As discussed above, Deborah is celebrated in Biblical scholarship as a great leader who exhibited unprecedented commitment to service and sacrifice (Bird, 1974).¹⁴ She manifested leadership qualities of courage, integrity and honesty in judgment and objectivity in settlement of disputes. These and many more leadership qualities of the Israelite Judge, Deborah, are mirrored by Mary Slessor.

Like the Biblical Deborah, Mary Slessor was not only a religious leader but also doubled as a secular leader. Just as Deborah, a Judge, delved into the political life of Israel (cf. Judges 4: 4), Mary Slessor did not only settle cases in the local court but also served officially as Vice Consul and latter as Vice President of a native court in 1905. Like Deborah, Slessor was a lady and experienced all the challenges associated with such status. Like Deborah, Mary Slessor oversaw the judgement of sensitive cases, settled disputes and decided on matters affecting both men and women in the society. Above all, like Deborah, Mary Slessor was largely seen to be very objective and honest in her judgments. Only such qualities can explain why and how people flocked to Deborah for judgement in the Bible (Judges 4: 5). Mary Slessor's case was not different. History has it that people had so much confidence in her judgement that they would go to him even with trivial family issues. He would not send them away but would settle the disputes amicably. The leadership qualities of courage and selflessness which Deborah largely exhibited are also found in the case of Mary Slessor.¹⁵ As a woman, Deborah showed great courage in following Barak to the battle field (Judges 4: 8-9). Her encouraging presence helped Israel to win the Canaanites but that was a great risk. The same thing is happening in the case of Mary Slessor. She showed great courage in fighting social ills (Deen 1955). Her efforts to stop human sacrifice and the killing of Twins was not only unprecedented but it was a great risk which demanded a lot of courage. Mary Slessor, dared all odds and the traditional provision of the time and stood her grounds until human sacrifice and the killing of twins were put to rest. It is to her credit as a responsible, selfless leader that these issues were solved and they have become the center of her legacies (Wellman, 1998).¹⁶

Mary Slessor: A Unique Missionary

It is good to believe in what one sets out to do. Mary Slessor believed in what she set out to do. She came to Nigeria as a missionary and she objectively kept that missionary spirit alive. One unique leadership quality that coloured her missionary life was the need for a leader to be available and close to his/her followers. Though Mary Slessor had health reasons to visit home, she desired more to be with her people and she readily came back to her duty post in southern Nigeria.

As a unique Missionary, she allowed her personality as a religious ambassador to colour her identity more than her political status as a Vice Consul. The true missionary spirit demands humility and self-emptying. Generally, most missionaries came with political and

commercial ambition while projecting their religious. Mary Slessor was different. The things Mary Slessor did, the manner in which she attended to them and her areas of pragmatic interest, all mark her out as a unique missionary who shaped missionary work with tested and proven leadership qualities (Taylor 1993).¹⁷

Mary Slessor: An Example for Women Towards Nation Building

There is no doubt that in contemporary setting, women have a very important role in administration and nation building. The success of such responsibility can be enhanced by looking at, and by emulating the example of Mary Slessor.

Many societies today are patrilineal and patriarchal and that could make it challenging and sometimes discouraging to women leaders. Here Mary Slessor remains an example of forthright to other women. She did not allow her sex or social status to slow her down or deter her in her efforts to better the lot of the people towards nation building (Lacks, 1979).¹⁸

Women leaders have a great inspiration in Mary Slessor. In politics, Mary worked her way to the top not minding the mentality of the people. She brought a mother's passion into it and embarked on life-saving and life-enhancing projects. There are some women in politics today whose contribution to national development has fallen below standard because they are not able to overcome the challenges posed by the society regarding their status as women. Mary Slessor was familiar with these challenges. Working as a lady Chief Magistrate in the native court, she could not have had it easy but marrying integrity with objectivity, she gradually gained the confidence of the people. Women can be very useful in nation building but there is need for them to first believe in themselves before bemoaning the fate of their status in this patriarchal world (Agbola, 1990).¹⁹

As we see in the case of Mary Slessor, missionary work or any religious endeavor can also be very helpful towards nation building. Therefore, women who see themselves in this must appreciate it as an opportunity for nation building and therefore they must employ all amount of responsibility and self sacrifice to ensure that it works. This is another example of Mary Slessor. Her missionary endeavours rationalized communal life and directly or indirectly contributed to nation building. Today, there are women who are involved in religious movements and who occupy positions and play roles of authority. They are advised to look up to Mary Slessor's qualities and emulate same for the desired national benefit.

Generally, Mary Slessor, in her many efforts to regularize political, social and religious life, remains an example and a serious motivation to the women-folk as far as leadership qualities are concerned.

Evaluation

One major importance of history is that its knowledge can really shape the present and the future. Even though the story of the Biblical Deborah may be ancient, it is important to note that that of Mary Slessor is relatively close. But what is more interesting is that even after 100 years the memories of this great missionary is still as fresh as if it were yesterday. Deborah was a wonderful woman-leader. In many aspects, she was a model of good leadership as seen in qualities like service, sacrifice, vision, courage, integrity, strategic planning, focus, commitment, honesty and a host of others. While history is trying to evaluate Mary Slessor 100 years after her sojourn in Africa, it has become evident that she fits into the circle of great women leaders like the Biblical Deborah. Indeed Mary Slessor by her words

and deeds proved to be a great women leader mirroring those important leadership qualities that Deborah also showed. Mary Slessor was inspirational, creative, positive, committed, courageous, confident, humorous, honest, visionary, humble and above all, God fearing (Buchan, 1981).

In the course of this work, we have come to see these unique qualities of Mary Slessor as what is needed in the larger administrative society especially among the women folk. We have therefore come to project her life as a paradigm for effective leadership roles especially during this era when many more women are into politics or other leadership roles.

It is also important to note that the primary reason why Mary Slessor came to Nigeria was religious. It is therefore interesting to see how she was able to remain a God-fearing person while exercising political and social rights.²⁰ Today many women's (and even men's) religiosity is swept astray by the tides of bad politics. Mary Slessor, mirroring the qualities of the Biblical Judge, Deborah, has given an example that political leadership can comfortably be combined with religious responsibility. She has also confirmed that status, sex or rank should not be used as any excuse for irresponsibility or non-responsibility.

CONCLUSION

It is indeed worthy of note that 100 years after the life of Mary Slessor, her footsteps are still clearly manifest on the sands of times and places. Apart from appreciating the unique qualities of this great woman, the world is, today, invited to follow her footsteps. As we have seen in the course of this paper, her life, providentially mirrors the leadership qualities of other great women like the Biblical Deborah. As we discover the relevance of her type of life today, let this presentation challenge the typical woman leader today to make her mark in nation and ecclesiastical building. Just as Deborah, in the course of this work is made alive in the evaluation of Mary Slessor's life, may contemporary women leaders also rise up to more responsibility in their duty so that they too can also be considered mirrors of our great icon, the *eka ofuri owo*²¹ – Mary Mitchele Slessor.

NOTES

¹ Cf. J. H. PROCTOR, (2000) "Serving God and Empire: Mary Slessor in South Eastern Nigeria, 1876-1915" in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 30, no 1 (2): 45-61.

² In general see: MICHAEL D. COOGAN, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, Oxford: University Press, 2001. Specifically, read more about Deborah: "Deborah" in *Jewish Encyclopedia* accessed on 8th May 2017 from www.jewishencyclopedia.com

³ MINDEL NISSAN. "Deborah the Prophetess" accessed on 8th May 2017 from www.chabad.org

⁴ See T. AGBOLA, (1996) "Women and the Development Process: A Study of Rural Women's Organisations in Community Development in Nigeria" in *Women Development and the Nigerian Environment*, edited by Yomi Oruwari. Ibadan: Vintage Publishers, Pp. 125-133

⁵ See S. FROLOV. (2014) "How Old is the Song of Deborah?" in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (2): 163-184

⁶ For more possible qualities of a leader read PRIVE TANYA. "Top 10 Qualities That Make a Great Leader" Accessed on 9th May 2015 from www.forbes.com and BRIAN TRACY. "Top Seven Leadership Qualities and Attributes of Great Leaders" Accessed on 9th May 2017 from www.briantracy.com

- ⁷ Deborah's service to Israel paid off in the prevalence of peace and order especially at a time national insecurity. Service is a key factor in leadership.
- ⁸ Women in Patrialeanial societies are usually marginalized but Mary lived above this. Cf. LUKE, JAMES. (1929) *Pioneering in Mary Slessor Country*. London: Epworth, pp1ff.
- ⁹ BRIAN TRACY. "Top Seven Leadership Qualities and Attributes of Great Leaders" Accessed on 9th May 2017 from www.briantracy.com
- ¹⁰ See OGBU KALU (1996) ed. *A Century and a Half of Presbyterian Witness in Nigeria, 1846-1946*. Lagos: Ida-Ivory Press, p. 1ff.
- ¹¹ For Details about her life history, see: QUINN FRDERICK, "Mary Slessor 1848-1915" in *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* accessed on 8th May 2017 from www.dacb.org
- ¹² Great women at different times have always impacted on national development. Cf. FAITH EKONG, "Contributions of Women to National Development: Example from Akwa Ibom State." Accessed on 9th May 2017 from www.krepublishers.com. Mary's case was extraordinarily significant as she combined religion and politics.
- ¹³ GEOFF BENGE & JANET BENGE (1999) *Mary Slessor: Forward into Calabar*. Seattle WA: YWAM Publishing, Pp. 14ff.
- ¹⁴ PHYLLIS BIRD (1974) "Images of Women in the Old Testament" in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, edited by RoseMary Ruether. UK: Simon & Schuster.
- ¹⁵ See EDITH DEEN (1995), *All The Women of the Bible*. New York: Harper and Row, p. 24ff.
- ¹⁶ See SAM WELLMAN (1998) *Mary Slessor: Queen of Calabar*, Ohio: Barbour Publishing,, p. 1ff.
- ¹⁷ W. H. TAYLOR, (1993) "Mary Slessor (1848-1915), Pedagogue Extraordinary" in *Scottish Education Review* 25, no 2 (1): 109-122.
- ¹⁸ Cf. ROSELYN LACKS. (1979) *Women and Judaism: Myth, History, and Struggle*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday. The status of women in some religious and secular settings demands courageous struggle.
- ¹⁹ T. AGBOLA, (1990) "Women, Self Actualization and the Theories of Development" in *African Urban Quarterly*, 5(3&4): 170-175
- ²⁰ See JAMES BUCHAN (1981) *The Expendable Mary Slessor*. New York: Seabury, pp. 25, 84 and 168
- ²¹ *Eka ofri owo* is the Efik nick-name given to her which actually means "mother of all"

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