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On the Importance and Peripheralization of Women in the Four Gospels

by

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### Abstract

Each gospel in the New Testament shows women playing key roles within Jesus' ministry, but women are also often forced to submit to the patriarchal strictures of the time. These female figures exist within works written in the first century in Israel under the Roman Empire, with the authors writing to preserve and spread the teachings of early Christianity. Past research regarding women in the gospels shows an awareness of the historical and social context of the gospels. Previous research also shows an awareness of how that context affects the way that Jesus interacts with women in the gospels. I argue that the New Testament gospels simultaneously show the significance of women and marginalize them. I do so by examining how the gospels portray women, noting the agency of women who take actions apart from or in opposition to male influence, and comparing the ways the authors of the gospels present women. Jesus humbles both male and female characters in the gospels. However, situations such as the lack of even one woman in the twelve disciples make clear the disparity in how Jesus treated men and women.

*Keywords:* women, New Testament, Jesus, gospels, agency

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This study will consider the presentation of women in the four gospels in the canonical New Testament. The four gospels within the New Testament present women as both important and marginal. Other studies on women either emphasize how Jesus respects women or accentuate his failure to respect them. Those studies see the gospels as either respectful towards women or as sexist in their presentation of women. My thesis is that the communities responsible for the four gospels saw women as integral to Jesus' healing, teachings, and life, but those same communities also saw women as peripheral to Jesus' genealogy, and followers. The gospels have two different but overlapping messages regarding women.

This paper contains seven sections. The "Introduction" includes the thesis statement and an overview of the paper. In "Women in the Greco-Roman World," I examine the lives of women in Ancient Rome and Ancient Palestine. "The Literary and Historical Background of the Gospels" notes the setting of the gospels. In the "Importance of Women in the Gospels," I explain how women are continually significant to the gospels. "The Peripheralization of Women in the Gospels" contains an examination of moments in the gospels where women experience mistreatment or are explicitly second to men. "The Differences Between how the Four Gospels Portray Women" explains primary ways the gospels differ in their portrayal of women. The "Summary and Conclusion" sums up the main idea of the paper.

## **WOMEN IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD**

Three contexts are important backgrounds for studying women in the gospels. The first context is the Roman Empire, which included Palestine at the time of the

gospels. The place of women in Ancient Roman society is relevant to texts written in the time of the Roman Empire. The second context is Second-Temple Judaism. Since Christianity grew from Judaism, Jewish tradition and the mores of Second-Temple Judaism are indispensable to understanding the world of the gospels. The third and last context is early Christianity. The writers of the gospel were early Christians working to understand what roles women had played so far in the early church and trying to decide what roles women should play in the church's future.

**MOST** first-century and second-century Roman texts depicted women as ancillary to men or dismissed them entirely. Women would become relevant because they related to the needs, wants, and goals of the men who were the protagonists of the writings. A woman would be the daughter, or mother, or wife, or lover, or concubine of a male heroic or political figure. Legends, histories, and poetry, when focused on a woman, would define the woman by how she related to male characters. These conditions were implicative of the societal expectation that women would be secondary to men.

There were exceptions, as some writings focused on women. While works focusing on women would still define women to at least some extent by the men in their lives, a female protagonist would have more agency and would probably have some positive interactions with other women. Agency, in this paper, will mean "the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power" (*Merriam-Webster*). When women behave in a way which changes their situation or the situation of someone else, they are exercising agency.

Shelton, a Professor of Classics, writes that aristocratic men wrote most surviving writings from ancient Rome, limiting the perspectives and information available to

researchers and historians (Shelton, xxiv). Despite the predominately male perspective, written information about women allows for a limited understanding of their lives and situations.

Ancient Roman society did not hesitate to place women in a state of eternal childhood. The leaders of ancient Rome did not see women as capable of handling their own decisions. Accordingly, adult women had guardians (Shelton, 34). Therefore, even outside of written works, women had limited options and opportunities compared to men.

The limitations did not mean that all women in ancient Rome were powerless. Using the example of Cornelia, Distinguished Professor of Classics and Religious Studies Sarah B Pomeroy mentions how elite women could have political and diplomatic power in the later years of ancient Rome (“Pomeroy, Sarah B;” Pomeroy, 149-150). The laws which governed the lives of women in the Late Roman Republic show men held power over women’s lives with the exceptions being limited and requiring effort (Pomeroy, 150-170). Elite women learned from tutors and participated in discussing poetry and politics, even if some men criticized this behavior (Pomeroy, 170-176). Men often praised or criticized the virtues and behavior of women because they saw the behavior as emblematic of male status (Pomeroy, 182-182). Despite men seeing women’s existence as important only in how it reflected men’s existence, elite Roman women could exercise political and financial power. Lower-class women did not have access to the influence which upper-class women possessed (Pomeroy, 189).

Lower-class women had varied experiences. Enslaved women worked in a variety of domestic, ceremonial, sexual, and entertainment roles (Pomeroy, 190-193). Free

women also had diverse lives, working with wool, as businesswomen, as millers, and participating in other jobs as well (Pomeroy, 198-202).

Religion was also important to women's lives. Religion could give women opportunities, although class could limit what those opportunities were. In particular, Vestal Virgins and priestesses of Ceres, while following rules specific to their roles, also had freedoms that other women did not (Pomeroy, 210-217). Pomeroy also emphasizes Isis as a goddess whose status as a creator associated with the sky, among other varied qualities, made her a significant figure for women (Pomeroy, 217-226). These examples of the feminine in relation to the divine or the divine's representatives are significant, particularly considering hostility towards women participating in important religious roles.

In "Making Jesus," Marianne Sawicki, an educator and lecturer of philosophy and religious studies, describes how the behaviors of Greco-Roman women could have influenced the lives of Jewish women as well (*Marianne Sawicki*). Some girls would go to choirs and dancing schools and would learn "music, dance, and pantomime" (Sawicki, 152). History and recitation played a part in these activities. Since certain Jewish boys and men had access to an education that resembled the Greek tradition, some Jewish women and girls probably did as well. These experiences would have given young women a chance to form friendships with each other, to learn of art and culture, and to experience a form of self-expression.

The experience Sawicki describes would not be available to all women. Women in first-century Rome had different liberties and responsibilities depending on their class and culture. Elite women had the opportunity to exercise political and cultural power in



ways which lower class women could not, yet the men in their lives often restricted their ability to travel and communicate with others. Lower class women had a variety of responsibilities which required them to travel, help the men in their communities, and communicate with people outside of their household. However, their class prevented lower class women from obtaining the large-scale power which was accessible to wealthier women.

**HOWEVER**, it is not just the mores of ancient Greco-Roman society which are relevant to the gospels. The gospels came from writers familiar with traditions that came from the Tanakh, along with various Jewish writings and customs. During the Second-Temple Period, Jewish women had lives based around their obligation to their family and obedience to male familial authorities. While there were opportunities for Jewish women to protect themselves financially and socially, they were still operating within a patriarchal society.

Samuel L. Adams, Mary Jane and John F. McNair Chair of Biblical Studies and Professor of the Old Testament, argues for the significance of women in the daily operations of life, even if many writings dismissed their importance. “Women frequently managed essential aspects of daily life, such as food preparation, family worship, and the nurture of offspring” (“Samuel L. Adams;” Adams, 41). Women, with their children, participated in earning the family’s income (Adams, 41). Texts from the Second-Temple Period suggest varied ways of inheritance. Men received inheritances, although divorces and widowhood were situations in which a woman might inherit (Adams, 74-77). Whether or not they received inheritances, women had many responsibilities which were important to the operation of their family’s household.

Women were primarily responsible for managing food for the household. They cooked, rationed food supplies, and managed the religious limitations on the household's diet (Adams, 43). Women's responsibility for preparing barley and grain allowed them to network with other families, aiding the political, economic, and marriage opportunities available to them (Adams 43-45). As food held an important place in religious traditions, with food often being used as an offering, women could influence the religious practices of their household as they were preparing food (Adams, 49). The extent to which a woman created the food her family ate depended on "the income of her household, whether she lived in a rural or urban area...household size, gender distribution within the kinship group and level of wealth" (Adams, 46). Lower populations of women or a lower level of wealth for a family made it more likely that women would participate in farming (Adams, 46). Women were the primary producers of beer and clothing (Adams, 47-49).

Jewish women living in Second-Temple Society held other responsibilities besides food preparation. While young, daughters would be responsible for domestic chores similar to what sons handled (Adams, 66). However, despite the importance of women's responsibilities, they had limited access to education. Adams notes, "The educational paths available to certain males in Second-Temple Society did not apply to females, even those young women in more elite circles" (Adams, 66). Evidence from the New Testament and inscriptions show women could hold important leadership positions within the context of religion, suggesting some prior training before they had such roles (Adams, 66-67). At the very least, they would have learned of the Torah and their religious traditions from their parents (Adams, 66-67). Hellenistic writers such as Ben Sira and Tobit urged fathers to keep their daughters separated from the outside world,

hidden within their house and room (Adams, 67). However, Adams states, “This type of seclusion endorsed by more elite voices undoubtedly occurred, but this does not necessarily represent the common experiences for agrarian farmers with limited resources, a group that made up the majority of the population” (Adams, 68). Young women would have helped with farming, were debt slaves (both sons and daughters had to worry about the potentiality of their parents selling them into debt slavery), aided in building structures, and participated in public life as needed (Adams, 69, 77). Betrothals and marriages occurred when children were young (Adams, 72).

Women also had to contend with the possibility of divorce. Deuteronomy allows for divorce, while Malachi condemns the practice (Adams, 33-35). There were women with the ability to get divorced and women with protection from their husbands divorcing them. Shelamzion, in 128 CE, had “the ability to exit the marriage with the financial resources she brought into it and the latitude to initiate the process herself” (Adams, 36-37). Therefore, a woman having the ability to initiate a divorce would not have been merely theoretical, albeit not the norm of the period. Texts from later than the Second-Temple Period place strictures on woman’s freedom in the divorce process while enlarging the range of options available to men.

Widows were often in precarious situations, as the patrilocal culture of Second-Temple Judea limited their options once their husbands were dead. Adams explains:

...a widow could return to her father’s house, but the patrilocal nature of society often worked against this option. Once the woman married into her husband’s family, she became a member of and dependent on his “house of the father” for her security such that his household had to care for her

well-being and perhaps provide a suitable replacement if her husband died... If they rejected her, the widow could become unmoored from her social standing, losing the essential benefits of a marital union (Adams, 42).

Passages from the Pentateuch, Ben Sira, and various writings from the Second-Temple Period emphasize the importance of caring for widows (52). An example of this is Deuteronomy 25:5-10, wherein the marriage of widows to their brothers-in-law exists as a remedy to the lack of support a widow would experience otherwise (Adams, 53). Still, widows without access to land or material goods faced extreme poverty with no support if their husband's family was disinterested in supporting them (Adams, 53). Adams notes that there is evidence of Levirate marriage being a well-known concept during the Second-Temple Period, but such knowledge does not indicate that it was a widespread practice at that point (56). Rabbinic literature provides an updated understanding of Levirate marriage, which gave more protection to both men and women (Adams, 56).

While Adams' research shows that such limitations on women's physical freedoms varied depending on a woman's class, Leonard J. Swidler emphasizes how scholars discouraged the education and liberty of women. A professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue, Swidler notes that Jewish religious teachers did not encourage women to study the scriptures. "One first century rabbi, Eliezer, put the point sharply, 'Rather the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman... Whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her lasciviousness'" (Swidler; Swidler, 35). Following the teachings of the Talmud, women did not participate in the daily prayers and did not count in group worship (Swidler, 35).

**THE** early Christian church included powerful women but also attempted to limit what authority women could have. Women from a variety of economic backgrounds supported the church. Because of the various contributions of women, the church had resources and members whom it would not have had otherwise.

Through examination of Acts and Paul's letters, scholar Margaret Mowczko highlights the financial and political power of common businesswomen like Lydia and powerful noblewomen such as Bernice (Mowczko, 4). During the church's early years, women often hosted other Christians in their homes, acted as patrons, and were ministers (Mowczko, 5-6). These freedoms are significant in understanding what options may have been open to women in the gospels. Women's support of the church is relevant as a later development of the support Jesus receives from women during his ministry. Women's support also gives context for how the communities responsible for the gospels might have felt about women within the church.

Writings of the early church, such as Paul's letters, mention influential women yet also restrict the roles which were accessible to women. Swidler argues that the sexism of the Christian church contradicted what Jesus taught. Considering the Jewish instructions which discouraged or demonized teaching women scripture, Swidler notes, in contrast, that "women became followers of Yeshua not only in the sense of learning from him but also in the sense of following in his travels and ministering to him... the significance of this phenomenon... can be properly appreciated only when it is recalled that not only were women not to study the Scriptures, but in the more observant settings they were not even able to leave their households, whether as a daughter, or a wife, or a member of a harem" (Swidler, 42).

While Sawicki, Pomeroy, Adams, Swidler, and Mowczko show the strictures experienced by women varied widely, they existed and often had the support of teachers and philosophers. It was in this context that the evangelists wrote the gospels.

## **THE LITERARY AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE GOSPELS**

Unidentified authors wrote the gospels during the first and second centuries within the Roman Empire. In *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity*, Delbert Burkett, Seynaeve Professor of Biblical Studies, explains the time and context in which the evangelists wrote the gospels. The author of Mark wrote his gospel a little after 70 CE (Burkett, 157). The author of Matthew wrote his gospel somewhere during the period from 80 CE to 100 CE (Burkett, 178). Luke's author wrote his gospel after 70 CE, perhaps between 80 CE and 100 CE, although the author could have finished it in the second century (Burkett, 200). John's author wrote his gospel somewhere between 80 CE and 110 CE (Burkett, 220).

Though the authors responsible for these gospels wrote at different times, all focus on Jesus. All four gospels have Jesus as the primary character of importance. They portray Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy regarding a messiah. Each gospel also argued for the relevancy of Jesus to Gentiles, though some emphasized his significance to Gentiles more than others. Professor Emerita of New Testament Sharon H. Ringe, in "A Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited," while examining Mark 7:24-31, notes how the narrative of the gospels destabilizes the potentiality for seeing the perspectives of all parties (*Working Preacher from Luther Seminary*). "Despite the woman's prominence in the story, it is told as part of the Gospel in which he is the focus, and not as her story

(Ringe, 81). When anyone appears in the gospels, man or woman, their significance and virtue are relevant to how they relate to Jesus.

Each of the four evangelists wrote for a different community, each with specific purposes in mind. Mark's gospel argues that Jesus is the Messiah, despite him dying from crucifixion (Burkett, 161-162). The gospel of Matthew presents Jewish law as still valid (Burkett, 189). The author of Luke wrote his gospel as the first of two volumes, of which Acts is the second. Oppressed figures and the Gentile community are both important themes within Luke (Burkett, 199). John's author wrote from the perspective of a Jewish community that had been expelled from the Jewish synagogue because of their belief in Jesus (Burkett, 227-228).

The gospels, especially the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) share many of the same stories and sayings. Scholars explain this shared material by the theory that the evangelists used some of the same written sources. The material common to all three Synoptics came either from Mark or from an earlier source similar to Mark. The material common to Matthew and Luke came from a hypothetical source that scholars call "Q." The Gospel of John drew some material either from these sources or from the Synoptics themselves. Each gospel except Mark also drew on a source or sources unique to that gospel. The differences between the shared content, the content absent in one gospel, and the material present in only one gospel show the particular concerns of the communities responsible for the four gospels (Burkett, 128-129). Each gospel has a different understanding of Jesus and his ministry. How a particular gospel interprets Jesus' ministry affects what stories about women are present.

## **PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN AS IMPORTANT IN THE GOSPELS**

The gospels portray women as important through Jesus' words, their actions, and the significance of their contributions to his ministry. First, Jesus speaks of women as significant within a variety of contexts. Second, widows are present as figures worthy of compassion and respect. Third, Jesus often shows the behavior of women as admirable examples or as worthy of forgiveness. Fourth, Jesus heals and teaches women, often at their insistence. Fifth, Luke portrays Mary as the parent of importance during Jesus' birth and childhood, and John has Jesus' mother as the one who prompts his first miracle. Sixth, women support Jesus' ministry through financial means and welcome Jesus into their homes. Seventh, they show agency throughout the gospels. Eighth and last, they have important roles during his crucifixion and resurrection.

**JESUS'S** words often show the importance of women. When referring to Jewish Law, Jesus often mentions both men and women. Particularly, when mentioning honoring parents, Jesus specifies both the mother and father (Mark 10:19; Matt 15:4-5; Luke 18:20). Jesus criticizes those who dismiss or reinterpret this command. Luke has another instance of him respecting a positive view of women with origins in Jewish tradition, as Jesus regards wisdom as female (Luke 7:35). By teaching people to obey scriptures that encourage respecting women as parents or metaphorical figures of virtue, the authors of the gospels present Jesus as preserving positive examples of womanhood from Jewish tradition. Jesus speaks most of the gospels' words regarding women.

Sometimes, the authors of the gospels refer to women in Jewish scripture directly, without filtering it through Jesus or another character. The author responsible for



Matthew cites the scripture regarding Rachel mourning for her children (Matt 2:18). Both Matthew and John refer to “the daughter of Zion,” in a quotation of scripture (Matt 21:5; John 12:15).

One way in which Jesus acknowledges women is when he speaks of how female relatives, along with male relatives, could be a hindrance to people following him. Jesus includes mothers and sisters as relatives a follower has to leave (Mark 10:29-30; Matt 19:28; Luke 18:29). He also included mothers and sisters as relatives whom people will regain during eternal life. This inclusiveness fits with other instances in which the gospels present a Jesus who takes the time to emphasize that both women and men are relevant, whether as potential obstacles to eschew or as family members one will gain in the afterlife.

The same awareness of the significance of female family relationships is clear in another passage. Jesus recognizes daughters and mothers (and daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law) as having relationships. Jesus came to cause enmity between daughters and mothers, and also between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law. The gospels present him as saying anyone who loves a mother or daughter more than him is unworthy of him. Loyalty to him will destroy some of these relationships. Jesus mentions the mother and daughter relationship to emphasize that he expects his followers to consider such relationships as less important than their relationship with him. Note, he expects the same in father and son relationships (Matt 10:36-38; Luke 14:26). The gospel writers show Jesus emphasizing the importance of spiritual relationships over other relationships, whether the relationships are between women or men.

While such an emphasis on placing Jesus before one's female relatives may seem to be a negative portrayal of women, it is important to note how both men and women are shown as less significant than Jesus. The writers would have devalued female relationships if they had only mentioned the relationships between fathers and sons. It would suggest a dismissal of familial relationships between females, as if such relationships were not deep enough to compete with one's love towards Jesus. By including mothers and daughters, along with mothers-in law and daughters-in-law, the writers of the gospels show an awareness of and respect for family relationships between women. While the authors of Matthew and Luke expect these relationships to come second to devotion to Jesus, they acknowledge the presence and strength of these relationships. Jesus' words then become an example of women's importance, as opposed to their peripheralization.

In Luke, a woman blesses Jesus' mother for giving birth to and nursing him. Jesus, in behavior characteristic of his dismissal of the precedence of earthly familial relationships, blesses those who listen to God (Luke 11:27-28). In Luke, Jesus's response to those who see women from a sexual and maternal perspective is to emphasize the "intellectual and moral faculties, being primary for all" (Swidler, 68). Similarly, in the gospels, Jesus sees his true mother and sisters as those who do God the Father's will. Jesus's mother (along with his brothers) wants to talk to him in the middle of his preaching. Jesus dismisses his mother's request. All women who obey God become family to Jesus. Men and women are all able to become related to Jesus (Mark 3:31-35; Matt 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21).

Jesus not only considers how women can become a part of his family, but presents them as symbolic of significant figures. The gospels portray Jesus as habitually respecting women in his parables and when he observes worthy behavior from them. Women play important roles in Jesus's parables and lessons. He considers women worthy of representing his followers or God. Jesus refers to the Queen of the South while scolding the current generation. She, along with the people of Nineveh, are examples of Gentiles who will condemn the generation Jesus is criticizing (Matt 12:42; Luke 11:31). In Matthew, Jesus states prostitutes will enter God's kingdom before the chief priests and elders (Matt 21:31). In the gospels, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a woman's yeast, which she uses to make bread (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). Jesus compares the comforting behavior he wants to show Jerusalem to the behavior of a mother hen (Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34). In Luke, he describes the joy a woman has over finding a lost coin as akin to the joy God feels when a sinning individual repents (Luke 15:8-10). These examples all connect the behavior of female figures to the growth of God's influence or the emotions Jesus and God feel regarding Jerusalem and sinners, respectively. In John, Jesus describes the disciples' emotions using a metaphor about a woman. He uses the example of a woman in labor to represent the sorrow turned to joy which he expects the disciples to feel (John 16:21).

Matthew and John also contain passages where a bridegroom represents Jesus and a bride (or bridesmaids/virgins) represents his followers or potential followers. For instance, in John, John the Baptist describes Jesus as a bridegroom, mentioning a bride to complete the metaphor (John 3:29). In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus continues to include women in his parables. The women are bridesmaids or virgins

representing those waiting for the kingdom of heaven. The author of Matthew presents Jesus using women to represent a group that would include both men and women (Matt 25:1-13).

Marriage is a symbol more than once in Matthew. In Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus tells a parable regarding a wedding feast or banquet which represents the kingdom of God (Matt 22:1-4). There are not any women directly mentioned in this passage, but the reference to marriage in first-century Palestine implies the existence of a bride.

Women in Jesus' parables represent God or Jesus' followers, or they are an example of Jesus' acceptance of women as part of the community. Swidler elucidates what the prominence of women in Jesus' parables suggests:

...the images of women Yeshua used were never negative, but rather always positive... these positive images of women were often exalted, at times being associated with the reign of heaven, likened to the chosen people, and even to God herself...parallel stories and images also confirm the presence of women among his hearers; they were often used to bring home the point of a teaching in an image familiar to the women. (Swidler, 65-66)

The presence of women in Jesus' parables and lessons, especially as the representation of God or Jesus' followers, suggests a perspective on women which does not present them as inherently divorced from holiness, divinity, and the spiritual.

However, Jesus, as portrayed in the gospels, also moves beyond such symbolic stories to show especial concern for the situation that pregnant and nursing women would face during the Jewish war with Rome (Mark 13:17; Matt 24:18; Luke 21:23). Early

Christians interpreted this war as a sign of the last days. Jesus' care for the fate of mothers is noticeable as he is speaking in eschatological terms. In this context, the concern for mothers holds two purposes. First, it stresses how severe the end times will be, a period that will threaten the future and survival of people in Judea. Second, however, it emphasizes the value of the young women who would hypothetically be pregnant or nursing during the end times. Jesus brings them to the forefront as significant, albeit in their suffering.

Jesus also speaks of women in connection to the end times in situations distinct from motherhood. As he encourages his disciples to expect the end to occur at an unexpected time, Jesus mentions marriage as one behavior that people will exhibit during the end times. In both Matthew and Luke, the continuation of marriage happens because of people's ignorance regarding the timing of the end (Matt 24:37-38; Luke 17:27). In Luke's version, shortly after this warning, Jesus refers to Lot's wife as an example of someone failing to have the proper focus during a time of God's judgment (Luke 17:32).

**WIDOWS** are frequently present in Jesus' parables, and widows are important figures throughout Jesus' life. Jesus mentions widows when he argues for people outside of Israel experiencing God's blessings and miracles (Luke 4:23-26). One of his earliest miracles in Luke is resurrecting the only son of a widow. Jesus shows personal concern for the widow, comforting her. Afterward, he brings her son back to life (Luke 7:11-15). Later, Jesus uses a widow as a positive example in a parable he gives. Jesus speaks of her insistence on repeatedly requesting justice from a judge to encourage similar persistence from his followers when they speak to God (Luke 18:1-5). Jesus criticizes scribes who harm widows (Luke 20:47; Mark 12:40). When a widow gives only two coins to the

temple, she shows her piety and generosity in her actions. Jesus emphasizes the nobility of her behavior compared to that of the wealthy (Luke 21:2-4; Mark 12:42-44).

**JESUS** often uses women as examples of positive behavior. This may include defending a woman's behavior as righteous or giving context to a woman's behavior. In one instance, when a woman's behavior was not acceptable to him, Jesus reframes the situation. For instance, each gospel contains a story wherein a woman anoints Jesus with oil, to the dismay of those watching. The story ends with Jesus defending the woman's behavior (Mark 14:3-9; Matt 26:6-13; Luke 7:36-50; John 12:1-8).

In John, some of Jesus' sympathetic words towards women also occur in a context where he is not approving of positive behavior, but is emphasizing the humanity of a woman even when others are rejecting her for her behavior. Jesus' response to a woman caught in adultery<sup>1</sup> is to encourage her accusers to consider their sinful behavior and how that behavior proves them unfit to judge the woman. He then encourages her to avoid further sin after he states he will not condemn her. While the woman says and does little during this passage, Jesus' care for a woman accused of adultery speaks to the views of the preservers of this story (John 8:1-11). They disagreed with the idea of killing a woman for immorality, as everyone has participated in immoral behavior before. At the same time, they considered repentance important. The passage also rejects the idea that a woman's life is worthless if she breaks or disrupts patriarchal rules, even when those patriarchal rules are part of the moral customs of the time.

**WOMEN** actively seek healing or wisdom from Jesus. They also are repeatedly recipients of Jesus' healing even when someone else asks on their behalf. All four

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<sup>1</sup> The story of the woman caught in adultery is not originally part of the Gospel of John. However, it is still an early account of Jesus' behavior towards women.

gospels have examples of women who ask Jesus questions or even take what they need without asking. The women seeking Jesus' aid receive what they ask for. Women are often as active as the men within similar narratives, sometimes behaving in ways that earn praise from Jesus. In "Women in Action: Models for Discipleship in Mark's Gospel," Holly J. Carey, Professor of Biblical Studies, argues that women in Mark are better disciples than the Twelve if one judges discipleship by a person's initiative. While Carey focuses on Mark, each gospel contains women who show devotion to Jesus.

In Mark 1:30-31, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. Her response, to wait on him, differs from the typical response of male recipients of Jesus' healing. Carey explains how Simon's mother-in-law's service towards Jesus is an example of active discipleship on her part (435-436). Although her actions do not align with the responses of others to Jesus' healing, her taking action is significant despite the difference.

In Mark, Matthew, and Luke, a hemorrhaging woman actively gains healing from Jesus. Her story contrasts with the accompanying story of the girl whose father represents her interests. The woman, believing she will experience healing if she touches Jesus' garment, touches Jesus' clothing accordingly. While the details differ depending on the gospel, the result is her receiving healing from Jesus (Mark 5:21-43; Matt 9:18-26; Luke 8:40-56).

In Mark and Matthew, a Gentile woman persistently asks for healing from Jesus despite him ignoring her. She not only gains healing for her daughter, but impresses Jesus with her words. In Mark, a Syrophenician woman looks for Jesus, shows him respect, and then makes her request. While Jesus rudely dismisses her request, the overall result of her actions suggest that the author of Mark sympathized with her (Mark 7:24-30). She

becomes an example of positive and successful behavior. In Matthew, a Canaanite woman begs Jesus for healing for her daughter, and Jesus ignores her. As this version prolongs the interaction between the woman and Jesus, both her respectful but insistent requests and his cold behavior are evident. Jesus' ultimate response to the woman suggests that Jesus' initial responses were motivated by his desire to test the Gentile woman (Matthew 15:29-31). However, even so, she comes across as someone who intelligently and faithfully handles a stressful situation.

In John, the Samaritan woman is eager to engage in Jesus' conversation regarding spiritual and theological matters. She shows curiosity and astuteness through her questions. She shows more interest and understanding of the symbolism Jesus uses than the disciples do. As a consequence of her evangelism, many come to believe in Jesus. The writer of John presents the Samaritan woman as nuanced and sharp (John 4:7-42).

Later in John, Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus asking him to heal an ailing Lazarus, actively taking charge of their family's health and wellbeing. The author presents the sisters in relation to each other. Martha is Mary's sister. Lazarus is their brother. The author of John describes Mary as Martha's sister when mentioning Jesus' love for them (John 11:1-6). When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Martha does not hesitate to hold Jesus accountable for being too late to save her brother from dying. Martha shows awareness of theological matters, specifically the resurrection of the dead. She also perceives Jesus to be the Messiah. After speaking with Jesus regarding these matters, she tells her sister that Jesus wishes to talk with her. When Mary arrives, she bows before Jesus. She also repeats Martha's statement regarding Jesus' absence. It is her weeping that moves Jesus to cry as well. Later, when Jesus asks for the removal of the stone from



in front of the tomb, Martha objects because of the smell that her dead brother would produce. According to the author of John, many of those who followed Mary to the scene of Jesus resurrecting Lazarus became Christians. Throughout this story, Martha and Mary's intelligence, feelings, and influence are evident (John 11:1-46).

**MARY**, Jesus' mother, is vital to Luke's depiction of Jesus' birth. During the passage regarding Jesus' birth, the author of Luke focuses on Jesus' mother, Mary, prioritizing her interpretation of her experience. Mary, in Luke, speaks to the angel, praises God with Elizabeth, and is the more prominent parent of Jesus.

Luke shows Mary's thoughts about her circumstances, beginning with initial concerns regarding how Gabriel greets her (Luke 1:29). Gabriel does not tell her she has any choice in her pregnancy. After Gabriel elaborates, mentioning Elizabeth's pregnancy as well, Mary names herself "the servant of the Lord" and accepts his expectations for her. In a situation where her thoughts are secondary, she still decides who she is. On the other hand, her words could be the acceptance of a situation in which she is not in a position to resist. Either way, the author of Luke gives her feelings and words during the angel's visit (Luke 1:26-38).

As Mary's reception to Gabriel's message is positive and accepting, her behavior contrasts with Zechariah's skepticism. In "The Significance of Three Narrative Parallels of Men and Women in Luke 1, John 3-4, and Acts 9" professor David E. Malick notes that this passage is an "example of where the narrative structure implicitly exalts a woman over a man—even one who is a leader in the community" (Malick, 17). Mary is willing to accept God's power, whereas Zechariah struggles to accept that God is capable of supernatural actions (Luke 1:8-20). The author of Luke does not hesitate to place a

man and a woman in similar situations, then shows the woman's behavior as acceptable to God.

In Luke, the focus on Mary, and to a lesser extent Elizabeth, continues throughout the passage regarding the conceptions of Jesus and John. Mary visits Elizabeth. When Mary arrives, the Holy Spirit fills Elizabeth and causes her to speak. Mary replies by praising God, with no one from the outside causing her actions. (Luke 1:46-56). Throughout these events, Mary's actions and feelings are paramount. Additionally, she has a close relationship with Elizabeth. Elizabeth not only supports Mary but also plays an important role in naming her son (Luke 1:57-60).

In the second chapter of Luke, Mary gives birth to Jesus while in Bethlehem with Joseph. Luke continues to present Mary as a thoughtful person, with her considering the significance of the shepherds visiting her and Jesus (Luke 2:5-7, 16-18). She goes with Joseph to present Jesus to the temple and listens to the various prophecies and words people say about her and Jesus (Luke 2:22-38). The third repetition of Mary's introspective nature occurs when Mary considers Jesus' reply to her and Joseph after they find him in the temple (Luke 2:41-46, 48-51). Mary is the parent to question Jesus, prompting his response. The author of Luke not only focuses on Mary but consistently points to her understanding and appreciation of her experiences.

While John differs from Luke, Jesus' mother is noteworthy in a context different from Jesus' birth. Jesus' mother, whom the author of John does not name, notices the hosts ran out of wine at the wedding they are visiting. Scholar Ritva H. Williams, in "The Mother of Jesus at Cana: A Social-Science Interpretation of John 2:1-12," notes that a wedding, in first-century Palestine, was a public event during which women served men

and celebrated separately from them (Williams 681). Jesus' mother is making her choices within the context of two relationships. She is Jesus' mother. Mothers and sons held close relationships which could be paramount in the son's life (Williams, 682). She is the matriarch of a household which is part of a larger community. Honor, the social standing and prestige of households, came from multiple public interactions, including weddings (Williams 682-684). In a society where honor was paramount, running out of wine at a wedding was a dishonorable misfortune. Within this context, Jesus' mother is working within an existing system of relationships when she takes ownership of the trouble the host is having providing wine. Jesus' mother is acting as an agent of her family's wellbeing and the health of her family's relationships. She tells Jesus of the issue and when he dismisses her words, she encourages the servants to obey him anyway (John 2:1-12).

**JESUS'** mother is not the only woman who has an important role in Jesus' life. The respective authors of the gospels portray women as playing crucial roles in Jesus' ministry. These roles can be both financial and domestic. Women are supporters of Jesus' ministry financially. They also invite Jesus into their homes.

Women support Jesus' ministry financially. Luke's gospel notes that women who followed Jesus used their finances to support him (Luke 8:3). The author names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, but notes that many other women were also supporting Jesus. In Luke, these women travel with Jesus and the twelve, and it is specifically their finances that fund his ministry (Luke 8:2-3). Mark's author shows women provided for Jesus, following him to Jerusalem. Through their provision, they enable Jesus to live and minister (Mark 15:40-4). The same applies to Matthew, wherein Mary Magdalene, Mary

the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of John and James are just some of the women who provided for Jesus during his ministry (Matt 27:55-56).

Women support Jesus' ministry domestically. Some particularly notable examples are Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:31, Matt 8:15, Luke 4:39) and Martha (Luke 10:38, John 12:2). The domestic services which women provided for Jesus were of value. Professor of New Testament Deborah Krause in "Simon-Peter's Mother-in-Law," examines the meaning of the word often rendered as either "serve" or "minister" in Mark 1:29-31, wherein Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law ("Deborah Krause," Krause, 43). The author of Mark uses the same word to describe actions done both by Simon Peter's mother-in-law and by the angels who visit Jesus after he experiences temptation (Krause, 43-45). Krause emphasizes the importance of scriptural and historical context when interpreting the message of Mark 1:29-31. She concludes that Peter's mother-in-law only did domestic service, but sees the acknowledgment of that as more useful than reinterpreting the situation without evidence (Krause, 51-53). Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law in Matthew as well. In response, she serves him (Matt 8:14-15). Luke also has this story. Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law, and she serves him afterward (Luke 4:38-39). In all three stories, after Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law, she serves him.

Although not a recipient of Jesus' healing, Martha invites Jesus into her house. From this, the reader can glean that she has a house and holds jurisdiction over who enters it. The author of Luke focuses on her generosity by criticizing it. Martha is worried about handling the responsibilities of having guests over and criticizes her sister Mary's refusal to help. Meanwhile, Mary is showing initiative in her way, learning from Jesus and avoiding the domestic setting in which her sister is dominating. Jesus scolds Mary for her

worrying, but the author of Luke does not examine the tension between the expectation that one devotes themselves to spiritual matters and the responsibility women would have in making a welcoming environment for guests or men. Still, in Luke, Mary's eagerness to focus on moral and spiritual learning instead of domestic chores is a notable action within her historical context. The result is a presentation of women in which the importance of both their hospitality and their learning is evident, but the evangelist ignores the difficulties of the former (Luke 10:38-42).

**WOMEN** are also prominent characters who behave with agency in the gospels. They make choices which impact their lives or the lives of those around them. These choices are made without someone else directing them and sometimes contradict the desires of the men in their life. Their choices also have consequences, either for themselves, those around them, or both.

Mary, Jesus' mother, asks questions regarding the logistics of her pregnancy (Luke 1:34). She shows initiative in both her speech and agency in traveling as she desires (Luke 1:46-56). Similarly, Mary's cousin Elizabeth shows agency. When Elizabeth gives birth, she advocates for naming her son John, despite the disapproval of her relatives (Luke 1:57-60). Mary and Elizabeth act from their own motivations and desires early in the Gospel of Luke.

Martha, in the Gospel of Luke, shows agency when inviting Jesus into her home. Mary, Martha's sister, focuses on listening to Jesus' teachings, showing her intelligence and independence (Luke 10:38-42). Martha's criticism of Mary's behavior and Jesus' criticism of Martha's behavior shows how people might have interpreted their behavior in the past. Some people, represented by Martha, may have considered the

behavior of Mary as irresponsible neglect of the domestic hospitality women were expected to show. The early Christian community from which the author of Luke came from, however, considers a woman learning of Jesus' teachings to be of more importance than fulfilling others' expectations of their domestic abilities. However, as there is no indication Martha changed her behavior in response to Jesus' words, Luke's community either supported the idea of some women choosing Martha's path or considered Martha's choice meaningful, even if it did not align with Jesus' response.

Mark and Luke both mention the widow who gives a small amount of money to the temple treasury (Luke 21:2-4; Mark 12:42-44). Despite only giving two coins, she has given everything that she possessed. She shows agency in making this decision, though the gospels present its significance primarily through Jesus' commentary.

The woman who anoints Jesus, present in some form in each gospel, also shows her agency in her actions. She shows agency in entering the house and anointing Jesus' head. The criticism the woman receives for her behavior highlights the courage it takes for her to honor Jesus in this way. Throughout the exchange between the critical crowd and Jesus, the woman says nothing. However, she completes her objective, regardless of what others may have thought of her behavior.

In Matthew, the mother of James and John asks Jesus directly for her sons' future in his kingdom. She is assertive in her words (Matt 20:20-22). While she speaks on behalf of her sons and does not succeed in getting what she wants, she shows agency in doing so.

The hemorrhaging woman displays agency when she touches Jesus' clothing (Mark 5:21-32; Matt 9:18-22; Luke 8:40-48). Another example of women actively

seeking healing from Jesus is Mary and Martha's request on behalf of their brother. The humanity and agency of Mary and Martha are evident throughout John's account (John 11:1-46).

However, the women of the New Testament do not have to interact with Jesus to show agency within the gospels. A servant girl who appears in all three Synoptic gospels questions Peter's allegiance and two women in Herod's family protect their interests against forces hostile to them.

The servant girl in the gospels, who accuses Peter of following Jesus, shows agency. Her certainty and her willingness to tell others precipitates Peter's denial of Jesus (Mark 14:66-69; Matt 26:69,71; Luke 22:56-57). The effect the servant girl has on Peter's psyche is negative, but her boldness is clear.

Herodias and her daughter are other instances of women who have hurt the gospels' primary characters when they exercise their agency. Herodias and her daughter are an example of women aiding women, albeit in a neutral, bordering hostile, depiction of their actions (Matt 14:1-12; Mark 6:17-29). Together, Herodias and her daughter are two of the most proactive women in the gospels. John the Baptist protested the fact that Herodias married Herod. John the Baptist's words were harmful to Herodias's reputation. His words threatened the security of her position. Herodias does not appear to have the power to order John killed. Herod is the one with authority. If Herodias wishes to change the situation, she has to rely on her ability to influence him. Herodias's daughter dances and Herod offers her a favor. Once she receives John's head, she gives it to her mother. Herodias and her daughter successfully navigate a situation to remove an obstacle to their lives, using what resources they have.

**WOMEN** are present during Jesus' burial and are the first to be aware of Jesus' resurrection. In all four gospels, women are loyal to Jesus during and after his death.

Mark continues to present women as actively caring for Jesus, with Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene knowing Jesus' burial place (Mark 15:47). Matthew also presents Mary Magdalene as knowing Jesus' burial place, as she is a witness to his burial. Another Mary is with her (Matt 27:61). Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome decide to anoint Jesus' body. While they lack a full plan, they show initiative in going. The shorter ending to Mark presents them as too afraid to tell anyone of their experience after they meet the angel and learn of Jesus' resurrection. The longer ending presents them as following the angel's instructions (Mark 16:1-8). While one might interpret the shorter ending as a negative portrayal of women, since their fear leads them to keep Jesus' resurrection from others, their silence is a reasonable response within the context of Mark's gospel. Scholar Victoria Phillips, in "The Failure of the Women who Followed Jesus in the Gospel of Mark," notes that "Failing to deliver a message is not comparable to deserting one's teacher after promising loyalty" (Phillips, 223). Throughout the chapter, she examines how the women "do not know that Jesus would not be there [the tomb] but in Galilee, because they were not members of the group privileged to learn his plans" (Phillips, 233). Whereas Jesus repeatedly tells the twelve disciples of his death and resurrection, albeit to their confusion or denial, Mark does not emphasize Jesus giving the same information to the women who followed him. If one takes Mark's silence on this issue as evidence for the women's absence during these conversations, then the women are first hearing of the possibility of Jesus resurrecting from a stranger who then gives them commands. While the longer ending



shows them as embracing the evangelical calling, the shorter one presents an understandable hesitance on their part.

The longer ending presents the women as far more self-motivated and confident than their counterparts in the shorter ending. Mary Magdalene is the first to see Jesus. Although she tells others, no one believes her. Her decision to tell them in the first place is her own without outside prompting (Mark 16:9-11).

Matthew also has women as the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, specifically Mary Magdalene and another Mary, who hear the angels' words. While they experience the fear that the women in Mark's shorter ending experience, they also are joyful because Jesus is alive. They explicitly leave to tell the other disciples, making them akin to the women in Mark's longer ending, but distinguishing them from the women in Mark's shorter ending. As they leave to tell the other disciples, they then meet Jesus, making them the first in Matthew's gospel to see the resurrected Jesus (Matt 28:1-10).

The community responsible for Luke considered the women's position as the first witness of Jesus' resurrection as important enough to describe and emphasize. In Luke, as in the other Synoptic Gospels, the women are the ones to find the location of Jesus' tomb and to plan to tend to his body (Luke 23:55-56). The women go to Jesus' tomb on the first day of the week. When they find it open, they show curiosity and determination in entering the tomb. The arrival of two previously absent men naturally frightens them. However, Luke's gospel clarifies that the women were aware of Jesus' words regarding his death and resurrection. Without any prompting, they tell the eleven disciples what happened. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary, the mother of James, are some of the women present, though the author states that there were others as well (Luke 24:10).

While none of the men listen to their words, they leave enough of an impression that those walking to Emmaus mention it in conversation (Luke 24:22-24).

The author of John saw Mary Magdalene as an individual, showing the humanity of one woman while removing the presence of the others. In John, it is Mary Magdalene, alone, who visits Jesus' tomb in John. She informs Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loves, then cries outside of the tomb. While she is there, after she speaks to angels, Jesus approaches her and slowly reveals his presence. On one hand, in John, the loyalty of several of Jesus' female followers collapses into the devotion of one woman. However, the smaller focus allows Mary's personality and feelings to be clearer. Mary calling him teacher and telling the disciples of Jesus' resurrection shows her to be a student of Jesus and one of the first evangelists (John 20:1-18).

## **THE PERIPHERALIZATION OF WOMEN IN THE GOSPELS**

**IN** the gospels, Jesus's words towards women are occasionally disrespectful. Jesus sometimes describes women as passive objects of male behavior. Jesus treats Gentile women with disrespect. Women in Jesus' ministry are peripheral to men, particularly the twelve disciples. A similar peripheralization occurs when Jesus miraculously feeds a large crowd. Within Jesus' genealogies, many or all of Jesus' female ancestors are absent. Gospel writers sometimes neglect women within Jesus' family. These examples differ from the passages in the gospel which show women as important and active.

**THE** view of women as passive recipients of male behavior is one example of disrespect towards women. In Matthew, Jesus speaks of women as objects of lust (Matt

5:28). He encourages men to not look at women with lust, but as is frequent in such texts, does not mention the possibility or need for women to have similar discretion regarding men. Therefore, the author of Mathew presents women as potential, if passive tempters, but the possibility of their experiencing temptation no one acknowledges.

**JESUS** is disrespectful towards the Gentile women he interacted with. In Mark and Matthew, this disrespect manifests in the way he treats a woman who needs him to heal her daughter (Mark 7:24-30; Matt 15:21-28). In John, he questions the Samaritan woman on her personal history (John 4:16-19). While the women are important and complex figures in their own right, Jesus' initial response to them shows hostility.

In both Mark and Matthew, the Gentile woman speaks to Jesus in Tyre. Mark shows the woman to be Syrophoenician, and Matthew shows her to be Canaanite. However, the woman has a possessed daughter in both versions. In Matthew, Jesus ignores the woman at first, with his disciples urging him to send the persistent woman away. In Mark, Jesus responds to the woman immediately. Both gospels show Jesus comparing the woman, and by implication Gentiles, to dogs. The woman reframes the metaphor to emphasize how dogs eat the crumbs left by children, therefore Gentiles can have access to God's miracles without harming the rights of Jewish people. In Matthew, Jesus heals the woman's daughter because of her faith. In Mark, he heals the woman's daughter because of her words.

As Jesus shows compassion towards those injured or those representing the injured, his behavior towards the Gentile woman stands out. Ringe critiques the common readings of Mark 7:24-30, which either see Jesus as responding as a product of the historical context or as testing the woman through his response (Ringe, 82). Instead of

focusing on the Gentile woman's gender or ethnicity, Ringe introduces the wealth difference between the Gentiles from whom the woman came and the Jews from whom Jesus came (Ringe, 89). Ringe acknowledges the difficulty of interpreting Jesus' behavior in the text.

Jesus' treatment of the Gentile woman in Mark and Matthew is rough and unkind. In Mark, he creates a metaphor at her expense. In Matthew, his initial refusal to acknowledge her is cruel, and he makes the same unfortunate comparison. However, Jesus never treats a Jewish woman with the same carelessness. In Matthew, Jesus is more polite to the Gentile man he speaks to (Matt 8:5-13). Jesus' words towards the Gentile woman appear to be from prejudice against Gentiles mixed with prejudice against women. Ringe suggests Jesus is harsh to her because of her wealth, but without either evangelist mentioning such a critique, it is difficult to ascertain if that is how the evangelists understood the narrative. Jesus' words do not mention wealth, but they call attention to the woman's ethnicity, as Rebera notes. However, the woman's ethnicity could invariably imply wealth, particularly to a reader familiar with the social dynamic between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman. Still, while Ringe's interpretation is possible, the lack of a direct reference to wealth in the text makes it difficult to dismiss the woman's gender and ethnicity for an unmentioned aspect of her identity. If she came from wealth or a higher social status, her status as a woman would still limit the amount of respect she received. Moreover, when one considers Jesus' admiration for the centurion, who was a wealthy Gentile, his disrespect for the Gentile woman is clearer.

In "Jesus, the Syrophenician Woman, and Other First Century Bodies," Jennifer A. Glancy, Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Humanities, explores the effect of

Jesus' multiple identities and the Syrophenician woman's multiple identities in Mark ("Jennifer Glancy). The writer of Mark, with their own identities influencing their understanding, depicts Jesus' behavior and the Syrophenician woman's behavior.

Glancy believes that the physical behavior of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman reveal what the writer of Mark wanted to portray of their social positions (Glancy, 350). The multiple identities the Syrophenician woman inhabits distinguishes her from other women whom Jesus interacts with. Glancy notes that the woman bows before Jesus as others asking for his help had done (Glancy, 360-361). Since other figures behaved similarly towards Jesus, such as the synagogue leader, it is something besides the woman's behavior that prompted Jesus' response towards her (Glancy, 363). Her ethnicity, social class, and gender all comprise her. Jesus' initial behavior results from her being a woman, even as it results from her ethnicity and social class.

In the fourth chapter of John, there is a Samaritan woman who gets water from the well when a stranger she has never spoken to before, Jesus, directs her to give him water. The woman is curious regarding why a Jewish person would speak to a Samaritan woman and asks about this. Jesus replies cryptically but shifts the conversation towards spiritual matters. The Samaritan woman continues to show curiosity, asking Jesus what he means. Her response shows knowledge of her history and an awareness of the spiritual importance of that history. When Jesus continues using a spiritual interpretation of water, the Samaritan woman participates in the conversation. However, when she asks for the water he can provide, Jesus tells her to get her husband. By doing so, he shifts the conversation from the Samaritan woman's spiritual health and seems to imply that her ability to receive eternal life is reliant on her husband's presence or authority. When she

replies she has no husband, Jesus further changes the conversation by commenting on her current and past relationships. However, the woman is relentless in her interest in the spiritual and religious conversation she and Jesus are having, and she keeps the conversation on that track. She gets the truth from Jesus without retrieving a male authority figure. Later, “the Samaritan woman preached the good news, the evangelion, of Yeshua: that is, she was an evangelist” (Swidler, 53). The woman’s intelligence, along with her willingness to participate in evangelism, show her to be an admirable figure. Comparing the Samaritan woman’s behavior to Nicodemus’s behavior, Malick states, “This outcome surprises the reader as the author uses the technique of duality and balance to elevate the spiritual sensitivity and ministry of a woman over a man—even a Pharisaic teacher of Israel” (Malick, 19).

Despite how the story ends, Jesus’ mentioning of the woman’s past is still discordant with the rest of the conversation. Later in the text, the evangelist downplays the woman’s influence when those she shares the gospel with emphasize how her words are not what had a lasting impression on them (John 4:1-42). The response of those she spoke to undercuts the significance of her ministry.

Jesus’ hostile response to the Syrophenician woman and his critical response to the Samaritan woman raises questions regarding his intent, along with the intent of those responsible for writing the gospels. Post-doctoral researcher Susanna Asikainen elaborates on Jesus’ treatment of the Syrophenician woman and the Samaritan woman:

Although Jesus does not explicitly condemn the woman’s sexual history, bringing it up is a form of “slut shaming,” which is an attempt to control and denigrate women who are perceived to transgress traditional

expectations related to sexual behaviour...Moreover, is it Jesus's intention that the woman should identify him as a prophet, or does this interpretation simply follow from the fact that the woman does so? ...It is the Syrophenician woman who introduces the notion of the table and changes the meaning of the parable. Similarly, the Samaritan woman refuses Jesus's attempt to derail the conversation and silence her by changing the subject to her sexual history, insisting that they continue to discuss theological issues. (Asikainen, 188-189)

The women focus on the spiritual and theological aspects of the world. They show perseverance as they attempt to receive aid from Jesus. However, Jesus is the primary example of moral excellence within Mark, Matthew, and John. His teachings are prevalent in these gospels and his behavior is preferable to the contrasting practices of others. Therefore, despite the Syrophenician woman's wisdom and the Samaritan woman's curiosity, the writers of the gospels probably wished for readers to sympathize with Jesus' understanding of these women. While Jesus helps and compliments the Syrophenician woman, he still ignores and insults her. This behavior encourages a perspective that considers the Syrophenician woman as less than the other people whom Jesus helped without purposefully ignoring first. When he speaks of her in a derogatory manner, emphasizing her status as a foreigner, he explicitly marginalizes her. Similarly, by presenting Jesus as interrogating the Samaritan woman's personal relationships with the opposite sex, the author of John encourages readers to view the Samaritan primarily through her marital and sexual history. While these women receive what they were

looking for, it is only after they overcome the obstacles which Jesus himself places before them.

However, as indicated by the Samaritan woman and the Syrophoenician (or Canaanite) woman being in the section examining how the gospels portray women as important, Jesus' initial treatment of these women is not the only aspect of their story worth revisiting. The Samaritan woman is able to confidently express herself in a theological conversation with Jesus. She also influences others, convincing them to see Jesus for themselves. The Gentile woman is persistent in requesting help from Jesus, showing her determination. When Jesus insults her, she is intelligent and changes the implications of the insult. While the gospels show Jesus as disrespecting these women, the overall narratives show the women to be important.

**THE** gospels marginalize the women in Jesus' ministry. Female followers of Jesus are peripheral to male followers of Jesus. This is most notable in how Jesus does not have a single woman as one of his twelve disciples. However, there are other moments where the authors of the gospels portray the women who follow Jesus or who come into contact with him as less important than their male counterparts. Whatever the reasons for the absence of women in the twelve disciples, it contrasts with the presence of women among Jesus' followers.

Jesus sees his followers as potentially men or women. The evangelists sometimes illustrate this perspective by using words that could refer to men or women. At other times, he calls attention to his acceptance of women as followers. In the gospels, when his mother and brothers insist on him coming to them, Jesus uses their claims of duty towards family to make a lesson. Verbally, he changes his family from those related to



him by blood to those who follow God's will. Since he refers to the circle of followers around him, implicitly the people who sit at his feet to hear his teachings are doing God's will (Mark 3:31-33). He asks regarding the identity of his "mother and brothers and sisters," then notes that the crowd surrounding him are his "mother and brothers" (Mark 3:33-34). He finishes by noting that whoever does God's will is not only Jesus' mother and brother but also his sister (Mark 3:35). The continuing acknowledgment of a "mother" and "sisters" emphasizes the female presence within his followers, although Luke and Matthew do not mention "sisters." Still, Matthew and Luke show Jesus' willingness to see women as his "mother," if they obey God's will (Luke 8:19-21; Matt 12:46-50). Both aspects of Jesus' statement are evidence of his acceptance of women. However, compared to his acceptance of men, Jesus limits his reception of women. Earlier, in the same chapter in which Jesus notes women as part of his family, Jesus chooses twelve apostles from among his followers (Mark 3:13-19). All of them are men.

**THE** gospels also exclude or ignore women in contexts separate from Jesus' teachings. An example of this is when Jesus feeds four thousand people. Presumably, Mark is counting women and children, as he does not specify their absence nor speak of only men (Mark 8:1-10). In Matthew, Jesus feeds five thousand men and a not counted number of women and children (Matt 14:21). Swidler notes Matthew is the only gospel to mention women as present when Jesus increases the number of loaves and fish to feed the crowd (Swidler, 107-109). A second time, Jesus feeds four thousand people, not counting women and children (Matt 15:38). In Luke, Jesus feeds five thousand men. The gospel avoids mentioning women during this miracle (Luke 9:14). In John, Jesus feeds a crowd

of five thousand, but the author does not specify the absence or presence of women (John 6:1-14).

**THOSE** authors of the gospel who consider Jesus' genealogy also fail to count all the women who would be relevant to the situation. Matthew's version of Jesus's genealogy only occasionally mentions the women in his ancestry. Matthew acknowledged five women as related to Jesus: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, "the wife of Uriah," and Mary (Matt 1:3,5,6, 16). These women are in the genealogy because of their relation to men and only if they are significant in scripture.

The emphasis on the women's relation to men emphasizes the unusual sexual relationships (or lack thereof) that all five women experience. Swidler observes how the list of women appearing in Matthew's genealogy for Jesus all have sexual histories which makes them abnormal according to the mores of first-century Palestine: "Tamar played a harlot and seduced Judah, her father-in-law; Rahab was a prostitute; Ruth sneaked into Boaz's bed and seduced him to marry her; Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, committed adultery with David, and Mary was found with child before her marriage" (98-99). If the community which produced Matthew saw these women as significant because their sexual relationships with men differed from the norm, the community appeared to both link women's importance to how they interact with men and present women as worthy of honor even if their sexual histories differ from the norms of the time.

However, the women also act as important figures in biblical history. Wim J. C. Weren, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies, argues for a different commonality between the five women present in Matthew's genealogy. "If it had not been for the five women, Israel's history would not have reached its goal" (Merwe; Weren, 295). Weren

also emphasizes that the women were multidimensional figures with complex stories (296). Tamar's, Ruth's, and Bathsheba's actions led to the birth of future descendants who were crucial to Israel's future. Rahab saved Israelite spies from destruction, aiding Israel in defeating Jericho. This perspective relies on Matthew's author (or authors) seeing the five women from a perspective based on their relevance to Jewish history. The limited number of women present in Matthew's genealogy, along with their placement in Jesus' genealogy, suggests this to be the case.

The presence of the women in Jesus' genealogy shows them to be important to Jesus' story. As his ancestors, they contributed to his existence. Through their status as women who broke the rules of their society, they show the value of women who live outside of societal norms. As women who played important roles in Israel's history, they represent how women can contribute to a nation. However, since there are only five of them compared to the longer selection of men, the evangelist suggests women must be extraordinary to be worthy of mention. Since the male figures in Jesus' genealogy are present regardless of their historical importance, the difference in how the author presented men and women is clear. Another possibility is that the author was unaware of some of the female ancestors of Jesus because whatever source they used did not contain such information. Here, the writer would have inherited the biases of an earlier work. However, Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah are all female figures well known in Israel's history who could have been in the genealogy with their husbands. Instead, they are absent. The author's willingness to not include famous women who were part of Jesus' genealogy emphasizes an intentional decision by the author to exclude some of Jesus' female ancestors.

Luke contains an extensive examination of Mary's experience once she is pregnant with Jesus, but does not mention her in the genealogy. Luke's genealogy for Jesus does not mention women in any form. Instead, the genealogy mentions fathers and sons only (Luke 3:23-28). Conversely, despite including five women in Jesus' genealogy, Matthew's author does not pay much attention to Mary.

**THE** authors of the gospels neglect women related to Jesus in contexts separate from the genealogies. All of the gospels marginalize Jesus' sisters. While the gospels mention the names of Jesus' brothers, his sisters' names are absent. While Jesus' siblings are not important figures in the gospels, the brothers having specific names provide the reader with individualizing information which is lacking for the sisters.

Mary is passive in Matthew's account of Jesus' conception and birth. The account does not describe her thoughts upon discovering her pregnancy. Joseph's reactions, in contrast, are clear. Swidler describes how Joseph privately handling Mary's apparent pregnancy before marriage instead of enacting *Sotah*<sup>2</sup> is an example of Matthew's gospel showing sensitivity towards women (Mamre). While Joseph chooses the more merciful option, this choice does not change how the gospel fails to show Mary's words and actions. Joseph marries Mary, but she continues to exist as the passive recipient of others' actions (Matt 1:18-25). Mary is with Jesus when the wise men visit, but the gospel does not describe her response (Matt 2:11). When an angel tells Joseph to move Mary and Jesus to Egypt, her actions and thoughts are absent (Matt 2:13-14). During these verses, the evangelist describes her only as a mother, instead of by her name. Again, Joseph takes

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<sup>2</sup> *Sotah* was a trial by ordeal that tested if a woman was faithful towards her husband.

Mary to a different location, this time from Egypt to Israel, but Mary does nothing and does not react in any way (Matt 2:20-21).

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not mention Jesus' birth. His family still appears occasionally. The women in Jesus' family are present in Mark 6:3, although this verse mentions only his living, immediate female relatives. While Mark names Jesus' brothers and mother, his sisters are only referred to by their relation to him, with no identifying names.

The Gospel of John also neglects to name Jesus' mother. This neglect is most noticeable during the passage in which Jesus turns water into wine, but the silence regarding her name is present at other times as well (John 2:1-12). For example, when the "Jews" comment on their knowledge of Jesus' parentage, they mention Joseph by name but do not mention Mary (John 6:42).

## **THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HOW THE FOUR GOSPELS PORTRAY WOMEN**

While the gospels share certain parables, narratives, and themes regarding women, the details and stories which differ in each gospel illuminate the different perspectives of each community behind the gospels. Depending on the gospel, Jesus holds a differing opinion of a woman's capability and agency regarding divorce. In Luke, women are prominent yet still peripheral. The beginning of Luke, which focuses on Mary and includes the experience of other women, is especially sympathetic towards women. Matthew's genealogy has multiple mentions of Jesus' female ancestry, although not to the extent of the male ancestry. Luke and Matthew share certain stories about women,

and some of these stories are also in Mark. There are differences in how these stories appear within the different gospels. The Synoptic Gospels each portray the hemorrhaging woman differently. The story of Herodias and Salome differs between gospels. Even outside the Synoptic Gospels, there are different versions of the same story regarding women. Within John, Mary, the sister of Martha, is the one to anoint Jesus' feet. The Synoptic Gospels show an unnamed woman as anointing Jesus instead. Although John does not have most of the stories the Synoptic Gospels have, John's story regarding the Samaritan woman along with Mary's and Martha's interactions with Jesus after their brother's death are both examples of the importance of women within the gospels.

In Mark, Jesus holds a woman morally responsible if she gets a divorce and remarries. Matthew and Luke also contain passages in which Jesus responds to Pharisees questioning him regarding divorce (Matt 5:31-32; Matt 19:9; Luke 16:18). However, in those two gospels, he does not see women as those with the capability to choose to divorce or remarry. The differences lie in the law which the evangelists were considering when they were writing their respective gospels. As Buckingham Professor Emerita of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation Adela Yarbro Collins observes, Mark was conscious of Roman law, while Matthew and Luke wrote considering Jewish Law (Yale Divinity School; Collins, 459-465; 469-470).

Luke has the largest role for women, though the gospel also downplays their importance. The Gospel of Luke portrays Jesus' conception and birth through Mary's experiences. There is a healing story unique to Luke and a parable unique to Luke in which a widow plays a crucial role. Luke emphasizes women traveling with Jesus, along with the financial support they give him. However, Luke fails to recognize women's

importance in his version of Jesus' genealogy. Other gospels may contain a story or detail sympathetic towards women which Luke omits.

Luke is not only the sole gospel to present Jesus's birth through the eyes of women, but Luke contains narratives regarding women besides Mary who were significant to the events before and after Jesus' birth. The perspectives of Mary, Elizabeth, and Anna are prominent in the text. Elizabeth speaks her thoughts regarding her pregnancy and is the first to recognize the special status of Mary's unborn child (Luke 1:24-25; Luke 1:40-45). In contrast to Matthew's focus on Joseph's musings regarding Mary's pregnancy, Luke has Mary's response to her situation. She speaks to the angel, praises God, and considers the strange things others say to her (Luke 1:26-38; 1:46-55; Luke 2:19; 2:33). The author of Luke examines the life of Anna, a prophet, and her response to Jesus (Luke 2:36-38). Adjunct Professor of the New Testament Michael Chung, in *The Annunciation, Anna, and Luke's Egalitarianism*, notes "The fact that Luke insists on inserting Anna's story shows that he wants to elevate the prominence of women during the New Testament times" (Chung, 26). The result of these perspectives, combined with the various responses which men have towards Jesus' birth, is a balanced picture of how men and women responded to Jesus' birth.

Matthew emphasizes the importance of women by highlighting a few within Jesus' genealogy. Tamar, related to Jesus through being the mother of Perez, executed a plan which successfully gave her a place in Judah's family after he had neglected her rights (Matt 1:3; Genesis 38). Rahab, who gave birth to Boaz, protected her life and her family's lives by aiding the Israelites (Matt 1:5; Genesis 2; Genesis 6:22-25). She and her family live among the Israelites after the destruction of Jericho. Like Tamar, she is part of

Jesus' genealogy because of the actions which she took. Ruth, the mother of Obed, with the aid of her mother-in-law plans the marriage which leads to Obed's birth (Matt 1:5; Ruth 3:1-5). Bathsheba, which the author or authors of Matthew refers to as "the wife of Uriah," continues the theme of including women who advocated for themselves (Matt 1:7; 1 Kings 1:15-21). When Solomon needs David's approval and consent to become the heir to David's kingdom, Bathsheba advocates on Solomon's behalf, ensuring her legacy. Mary is the one exception, as her actions and reactions are not present in Matthew. Additionally, it is unclear why Matthew contains references to the specific women within the genealogy when other prominent women (such as Sarah, Abraham's wife) were not present. However, because of these references, the gospel successfully notes the significance of women to the history of Israel and the eventual birth of the Messiah.

Matthew and Luke share some of the same stories regarding women, though occasionally with differing details. This results from both gospels using the same source for many stories. These stories share similar purposes in both gospels while including women as significant figures in Jesus' words. Some examples are the gospels' shared stories of Jesus speaking about his effect on familial relationships and references to the same historical figures. Jesus often uses women as examples in all gospels. Matthew and Luke both show Jesus speaking of mother and daughter relationships, in the context of his destroying them (Matt 10:34-37; Luke 12:51-53). Both gospels emphasize that the gospel will cause contention within families. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus refers to the Queen of the South (Matt 12:42; Luke 11:31). In both gospels, by emphasizing the wisdom of a foreign female ruler, he holds those who reject his message responsible for their failure to recognize the truth of his message. Jesus speaks of one woman being taken



while one remains behind during the end times (Matt 24:41; Luke 17:35). By including the example of women living their everyday lives during the end times, the communities behind Matthew and Luke show women to be followers of Christ and members of society.

Matthew and Luke share certain stories and figures with Mark. One example is when Jesus heals a hemorrhaging woman and a dead little girl. The story of the little girl is consistent. However, the woman's story changes a bit depending on the gospel in which she appears. In Mark, the bleeding woman takes her healing instead of merely receiving it. During the healing, Jesus does not know who receives healing from him, only that power has left him (Mark 5:30,32). The woman, through her belief in Jesus' power and her determination, enacts her healing (Mark 5:27-34). As the agent of her healing, she has power that the other versions of her do not possess. As Matthew presents the story, she must wait (if briefly) for Jesus to see her and acknowledge her faith before the healing occurs. This change emphasizes Jesus's power over the woman and her sickness. It also emphasizes the importance of faith. The author of Luke gives the woman's backstory but does not consider her thought process as Mark and Matthew do. However, as in the other Synoptic Gospels, Luke's Jesus states it was the woman's faith that healed her (Luke 8:40-56). As a result, the woman's personality and individuality are not as clear. Each iteration of the story provides the woman with different levels of complexity and humanity.

The story of Herodias and Salome varies depending on the gospel, changing the characterization of the figures in the story (Matt 14:1-12; Mark 6:17-29). Herodias is self-motivated in Mark, wishing for John's death. Also in Mark, Salome goes to her mother

for guidance, a woman treating another woman as an ally instead of a threat. When her mother requests the head of John the Baptist, Herodias's daughter asks for it, albeit with the addition of a platter. Her obedience to her mother aligns her with the primary female character within the story. Matthew's version of John the Baptist's death mentions Herodias and her daughter as key actors, but also emphasizes Herod's control over the situation. Specifically, Herod wishes for John the Baptist's death but does not kill him because of the disapproval that would follow. Still, he is sad because of John the Baptist's death. Herodias' feelings are not clear until after her daughter appears. Her daughter, who has no name in Matthew, dances before Herod. Her dance prompts him to promise her whatever she asks for. As in Mark, Herodias is the one who suggests that the head of John the Baptist should be the request, but Herodias's daughter does not explicitly ask her mother for her opinion. Since their desires are not clear, with Herod's desires dominating instead, Herodias and her daughter have less agency in Matthew than in Mark (Matt 14:3-11). Luke's gospel first refers to Herodias in passing as the wife of Herod's brother (Luke 3:19). He does not go any further, however, and the story of Salome's dance is absent.

Swidler argues that the presentation of Herodias and her daughter in Mark is an evil picture of women. To him, Matthew fixes it only slightly when he makes Herod the one to want John the Baptist dead. The Gospel of Luke neglecting to mention Herodias and Salome, to Swidler, is the best way to preserve a positive perspective of women (Swidler, 86-87). Certainly, within the context of the gospels, Herodias and Salome are not positive characters. They align themselves against John the Baptist, requesting his death. John the Baptist's death leads to Jesus mourning him. However, despite the

context of the story, Herodias and Salome are two women who work together to achieve their security, heedless of how others may judge them for their behavior.

There are other examples of the gospels including the same figure but characterizing her in different ways. One is how the gospels do not agree in their presentation of the details regarding the woman who anointed Jesus. John shows Mary, the sister of Martha, as the woman who anoints Jesus. In John, this story occurs in a different context than in other gospels. Jesus is at the home of a friend, and it is Judas who criticizes the woman anointing Jesus' feet. The story becomes part of the narrative of friendship between Martha, Mary, and Jesus. Mark and Matthew do not identify the woman, but Luke presents her as a sinner. Therefore, Mark and Matthew present the woman as merely a devoted follower of Jesus, while Luke emphasizes her immorality. This is an instance of Luke not always having the most positive view of women compared to the other gospels. Every gospel but Luke has the woman's critics concerned about money. In Luke, it is her morality that concerns people. Since the woman in Luke's gospel is the most physically intimate with Jesus, kissing his feet and drying them with her hair, the focus on her morality becomes a question of modesty and sexual behavior. Referring to Luke 7:36, Swidler notes how Jesus does not see the woman washing his feet from a sexual perspective, as the Pharisee does, but considers her as human first. Jesus views and describes her as a human in need of love and forgiveness (Swidler, 44). The cultural norms of the time meant her letting her hair down, touching Jesus, and Jesus' response to her were all actions outside of the normal mode of behavior (Swidler, 54). Luke also changes how Jesus reframes her actions. Instead of the woman preparing Jesus for his burial, as in the other gospels, she is instead grateful that he forgave her

wrongdoings. Jesus also tells the woman that her faith saved her, making the story one of her ministering to him physically as Jesus ministers to her spiritually (Luke 7:36-50).

Luke 7:36-50 illustrates the importance of women in the gospels as positive counterpoints to male behavior. In “Hosting Jesus: Revisiting Luke’s ‘Sinful Woman’ (Luke 7.36-50) as a Tale of Two Hosts,” lecturer and Honorary Fellow Dorothea H. Bertschmann argues that the woman who washes Jesus’ feet shows the respect and care for Jesus that the Pharisee fails to provide despite being the official host (University of Durham; Bertschmann, 35-47). In this context, the woman’s sinfulness is less important than her willingness to honor Jesus. Despite the abnormality of her behavior, the author of Luke presents the woman as someone who understands who Jesus is and how to treat him. Bertschmann argues for the woman hosting Jesus, treating him as the giver of salvation (45). As someone who shows love towards Jesus in her actions of service to him, the woman is an admirable example within Luke’s story, even if she has a sullied reputation compared to her counterparts in the other gospels.

Whereas women have crucial roles in John’s gospel, the specifics often vary from the Synoptic Gospels. The Samaritan woman is unique to John, along with the detailed story of Lazarus’ resurrection. Both stories have women who communicate with confidence, expressing their thoughts to Jesus regardless of how he might respond to them. The Samaritan woman asks questions when she feels confused by Jesus’ behavior and is inquisitive regarding Jesus’ focus on spiritual matters. Through her words, the Samaritan woman’s personal life and personality become clear. She prompts her neighbors to speak to Jesus, which leads others to meet him for themselves. Within the chapter she appears in, her thoughts and actions are paramount. Similarly, Martha and Mary’s emotions are

clear within the book of John. They initiate contacting Jesus once Lazarus is ill. Martha and Mary speak frankly with Jesus regarding Lazarus's death. Their perspectives on Lazarus' death and Jesus' reliability are evident through their actions. While Jesus' teachings mention women less frequently in John than in other gospels, when women appear, their emotions and thoughts are evident.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The gospels, on the whole, agree that women are a necessary part of Jesus' story as followers, examples of good behavior, and active figures. However, the gospels fail to name and count women on occasion, portray Jesus as disrespectful towards Gentile women, and do not portray any women as part of the twelve disciples. The evangelists wrote the gospels during the first and second centuries while under the rule of the Ancient Roman Empire, during Second-Temple Judaism, for the benefit of the early Christian church. These contexts informed what the evangelists wrote about women.

The gospels continually portray women as important. Jesus frequently speaks of women, and they are vital to his parables and lessons. Widows, in particular, are pious and admirable figures in the gospels. Jesus also speaks regarding specific women he observes or meets, either honoring their behavior or reimagining the implications of their behavior. Women receive healing and knowledge from Jesus, often seeking it out. Jesus' mother is a significant figure in Luke and John. All gospels present women as financially and domestically supporting Jesus' ministry. Regardless of their participation in Jesus' ministry, women show agency throughout the gospels. Women are also the first to learn of Jesus' resurrection.

The gospels also peripheralize women. Jesus sometimes describes women as passive objects of male thought or behavior. He speaks disrespectfully to Gentile women. Despite how Jesus' female followers support him in a multi-faceted way, he does not choose any as disciples. Sometimes, when Jesus performs miracles, the evangelists do not acknowledge female recipients. Matthew and Luke, the two gospels which contain genealogies for Jesus, either limit the number of women in the genealogy or ignore Jesus' female ancestors entirely.

The gospels, on the whole, agree that women are a necessary part of Jesus' story, but the gospel also agree that women were not included as part of the twelve disciples and were not always treated respectfully by Jesus. Jesus often speaks of women positively in his teachings and they are often recipients of his healing and favor. They also seek him out for his wisdom and ability to heal. Women support Jesus' ministry as financial supporters, hosts, and evangelists. However, both in Jesus' words and his actions, women are often stationary recipients of outside commentary or action. The gospels present women as marginal to male followers of Jesus. All four gospels give a complex, contradictory picture of women in relation to Jesus.

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