

Women in God's Service: Jesus' Life and Teaching

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With a look at some of the implications of creation theology and the roles of women in the Old Testament narrative before us from the past two Lord's Days, we have some biblical background for studying the relationship of women to Jesus today. At the same time, going directly from the materials in the Hebrew Bible to the Four Gospels is radically discontinuous. A great many of the things women were doing in the biblical narratives we have studied so far this month are absent from the cultural context into which the Son of God came. So much had changed with regard to the attitude toward women in the Old Testament to the practices of Jesus' contemporaries, in fact, that his own attitude toward, teachings about, and treatment of women was genuinely radical.

Remember that the Old Testament itself – both in narrative and in law – presents females in a more positive light than most ancient documents. The way the Hebrew people were taught to treat women and the roles they filled were significantly advanced over the practices of the Ancient Near East. She is not a domestic servant but was created by Yahweh to be “a helper as his partner” (Gen. 2:18,23). While the more obvious duties portrayed in the Hebrew Bible are domestic, she was nevertheless to be honored and praised for performing them – not viewed as a dutiful slave (Prov. 31:18,28; cf. 12:4; 18:22). Children were commanded to honor their mothers as well as their fathers (Ex. 20:12; cf. Lev. 19:3). Women could inherit property and be landowners in Israel (Num. 27:1ff).

In a distinctly religious setting, the office of priest was limited to males in the priestly line (Ex. 28:1; Num. 18:1-7); beyond this restriction, however, there was significant freedom for Israel's daughters. They served Yahweh at the door of the tabernacle (Ex. 38:8) and served in the music ministry of both tabernacle and temple (Ex. 15:20-21; 1 Chron. 25:5). They could take religious vows (Num. 6:2). We can point to females such as Miriam and Huldah who prophesied to the nation. There was one woman, Deborah, who was both a prophetess and judge for the people (Judg. 4:6-7). In the Post-Exilic reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, “both men and women” were called together to hear the reading and commentary on the Books of Moses (Neh. 8:2-3). Women were hardly shut out of worship and ministry to Israel's God.

“Human Precepts” Become Doctrine

But something dramatic happened in the social and religious life of Israel in the few centuries before the birth of Jesus. When the transmission of the Hebrew text, worship culture, and faith structures was taken over by the class we know today as scribes or rabbis, heavy strictures that had not been Spirit-given began to evolve. Their propagation and enforcement were sometimes needlessly restrictive and sometimes downright mean-spirited and harsh. These things were not willed by the Lord. They were not approved by him. And the reaction of Jesus to them constituted a challenge to prejudiced males and must have been a breath of fresh air to many oppressed females.

For example, remember that women served at the entrance to the tabernacle. Yet both temple and tabernacle in the first century had disenfranchised them. The temple standing in the time of Jesus was approached through a series of terraced courtyards. The outer court was the Court of the Nations; anyone could mill around in it – even Gentiles – and witness

the bartering over animals. Then came the Court of the Women where Jewish females could enter but beyond which they could not pass; this is likely where the elderly widow, Anna, saw and adored the infant Jesus (Luke 2:36-38). [Note: The text calls her a "prophet," but we do not know how she was viewed by her peers. The text makes it clear that she had no official standing in the priest-controlled hierarchy of Israel.] Climbing fifteen steps, one came next to the Court of Israel into which only the Hebrew males could pass; this is where worshippers prayed and handed over their sacrifice animals to the priests – who, in turn, entered into the Court of the Priests to actually make the offering. This means, of course, that a woman's worship had to be twice-mediated – not only through the priests but also through a male who alone could lay his hands on the head of the animal before it was laid on the altar! In a similar way, the synagogue separated women from the men, kept them from view of the males by a wall or curtain, and allowed them no participation. [Thus Mary – like all other women of her time – had to wait outside the Court of Israel, while Joseph carried Mary's purification sacrifice to the priests forty days after the birth of her son! Cf Luke 2:22-24.]

According to the Talmud – written later but reflecting the practice of Jesus' day – women were not to be taught Torah either by themselves or even in the company of men. Contrary to Ezra's practice of calling men and women together to hear it read and interpreted, *Sotah* 10a reads: "May the words of Torah be burned, than that they should be handed over to women." Again, *Sotah* 21b says: "Rabbi Eliezer says: Whoever teaches his daughter Torah teacher her obscenity." Women could not communicate the words or teaching of Torah to others – not even to children, according to the Mishnah (*Kiddushin* 4.13). Women could not pronounce the benediction after a meal in her home (Mishnah *Bereshit* 7.2). Rabbis certainly did not receive women as their disciples.

Because a woman is typically regarded as a seductress in rabbinic writings, men generally were cautioned to be circumspect about conversation with women. Among the stricter rabbis, there was a tradition of never even speaking to a woman in public – not even one's own mother, wife, or daughter. Women were disqualified from giving testimony in court proceedings. "Though the woman is subject to the commandments, she is disqualified from giving evidence" (*Baba Kamma* 88a).

The list of particulars could go on. But these facts are certainly adequate to establish the nature of the environment for women that Jesus "inherited" from the rabbis who had come before him. One suspects that just such human restrictions layered onto Holy Writ are what Jesus had in mind when he told a group of Pharisees and scribes this:

You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

'This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines' " (Matt. 15:7-9).

The Reaction of Jesus

Jesus was neither subtle nor hesitant in challenging the "human precepts" that had evolved about women in his culture. His view of, teaching about, and behavior toward women set a radical new precedent that would certainly enhance a woman's self-esteem. More than that, it established an attitude for Christian treatment of women that would be far nobler than the one that dominated the scene into which he was set by the Father. The challenge for the church in second, tenth, fourteenth, and later centuries was not to back away from Jesus'

teaching

and

example.

Jesus treated all people with dignity and respect – without regard to their gender. His respect was especially evident in the face of others' contempt for and abuse of a woman, such as happened at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36ff). He worked miracles involving little girls and grown women; one of them is particularly remarkable because it involved touching a woman who was "unclean" by virtue of a chronic gynecological problem – and even called attention to the fact that she had touched him (Luke 8:40-56). He showed compassion to a crippled woman on the Sabbath and used a particularly tender and unusual term of her – "daughter of Abraham" (Luke 13:10-17). He commended a poor widow's generous giving before all (Luke 21:1-4), and made women central characters in several of his parables. Women were part of Jesus' world, and he took them and their place in that world seriously. He didn't patronize women. He didn't make jokes about them. Instead, quite at odds with the typical rabbi, he taught them and included them among his disciples.

Because of the limitations of time, notice three texts in particular. First, Luke seems at great pains in his Gospel to point out Jesus' unusually respectful and positive attitude toward women.

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources (Luke 8:1-3).

It is wrong to cause needless offense, correct? Wrong to create pointless obstacles that would keep people from hearing the gospel? I can assure you that Jesus' free association with women was among the things that caused him to be rejected by many of his own time and place. So why did he make women so central to his public life as a rabbi? Whatever the full answer is to such a question, part of its answer is to say that affirming female dignity and showing them respect as persons in God's image who are important to Christ's redemptive purpose must be important – even when counter-cultural.

Just a moment ago, I pointed out that Luke "seems at great pains" to point out Jesus' inclusion of women in his ministry, teaching, and life. Scholars of biblical literature have pointed to that fact for a long time now. And the obvious explanation for his observations appears quite human – though Spirit-approved and Spirit-encouraged – in its nature. He was a Gentile and found it impressive that Jesus himself went to great lengths to include people who had been most noticeable previously by their exclusion. It gave him home. It helped him believe the gospel was relevant to him. Is this message important to today's culture?

Second, what do you make of this account?

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).

Jesus had no criticism of Martha for her concern for managing the house and making him comfortable. He surely appreciated and affirmed it! But her sister, Mary, was flouting the social norms of her day by staying in the public part of the house where Jesus was teaching. The expression "sat at his feet" is more likely an idiom for listening, paying attention, perhaps even for questioning than a description of her posture. When Martha either needed another pair of hands or thought it appropriate to call her sister from an avant-garde or forbidden role, she was defended rather than set right. "Mary has chosen the better part," Jesus said, "which will not be taken away from her." The rabbis thought women either should not or could not be serious students of the Word of God. Jesus disagreed.

Third – and perhaps to show that Luke isn't the only one who noticed these gender-related events – there is the long account in the Fourth Gospel about Jesus and a woman of Samaria. Some rabbis avoided conversations with women? They didn't think important spiritual issues were appropriate issues to discuss with women? Women did not have a primary stake in the kingdom? They weren't to be teachers? Their public testimony was suspect and ineffective? The account at John 4:1-42 challenges every one of those false "human precepts" which had discounted females and trumped the Scripture in those days.

Jesus sat at Jacob's Well, revealed himself as the Messiah to that Samaritan, and gave an excursus on the nature of acceptable worship that we still study with diligence. The disciples had gone to a nearby village for food, and the exchange took place in their absence. As they were returning to their Lord, their surprise was not that he was talking with a Samaritan but that he was occupied with the instruction of a woman. "Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, 'What do you want?' or 'Why are you talking with her?' " – but they were all thinking it! (John 4:27). At the risk of their misunderstanding, offense, or confusion, Jesus tended this woman's spiritual state. And she brought her whole village to Jesus by her testimony about him (John 4:39).

Conclusion

A woman (i.e., Mary) was the first person to know of God's intention to enter the world as Jesus. She quite literally "carried the gospel." Women were among Christ's most eager disciples. They were the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. Women were the first to testify to the resurrection event. The last had been made first! It is not the task of a faithful church today to push them back to the distant, unseen, and silent last place in line again.

The ability of Jesus Christ to capture the minds and hearts of women in our culture will depend, at least in part, on the faithfulness of his church in following his example of affirming women generally. Defending them from abuse in our culture. And celebrating their gifts in service to the Lord.

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