

JESUS

the forgotten feminist

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SAMPLE



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Note:

The author has indicated with an asterisk (*) any RSV passage of scripture that he has modified somewhat in an attempt to convey its meaning more directly or, in a few instances, to present in his own words the nature of a particular scriptural interaction, or to record an occasional explanatory note within a quotation.

Looking Through a Wide-Angle Lens

The story told between the covers of this book is a tragic one for all true believers.

Such hope turned to ashes, and so quickly. A dazzling vision for the future reduced to a grey monotone within a few generations. A brave new world undermined and forgotten.

The Jesus of the gospels never drew up a policy statement on women to distance himself from all forms of misogyny, to abrogate an anti-feminist use of the Adam and Eve myth, to assert that women were equal to men in status and importance, that they were full members of his kingdom movement with all its rights and privileges, that they were to be involved in ministry and free to act with his authority and in his name. He never declared that within his salvation movement women were to be forever inferior to men as they were in the wider community during his lifetime, subject to their husbands and fathers, and reduced to silence in the prayer gatherings within the synagogues.

But then again, Jesus never announced a policy about men either, about sex's purpose and frequency, or about the environment, climate change, war, wealth, capital and banking, slavery, or about liturgical worship. No dogmatic formulae, as far as we are told, fell from his lips. Nothing about Adam and Eve, or original sin, or about the filth of sexual concourse. No rules and regulations. All that came later – with Paul of Tarsus and with the faceless author of the pastoral epistles, with Tertullian and Jerome, with popes,

bishops, abbots and theologians. Jesus was not a philosopher, or a theologian. Certainly not a lawyer, or a businessman, a politician, a spin doctor, a union organiser or an expert in administration. All these activities were left to others who would be called on to erect structures and barriers around the message of the kingdom. Jesus was the visionary, the message-man sent by God to show the way.

When it came to all the other issues, including the general status and role of women and their place within the Christian communities, in so far as an answer to those questions is governed by the mind of Jesus, the relevant principles and values have had to be teased out from his sayings and from the description of events as recorded some decades later. The implications rumbling about under the texts have had to be made explicit, and God knows, theologians and primates of the Church have been hard at work over the centuries. Even now, as always, passages have to be carefully scrutinised, assessed and interpreted. The rich vein of subtext in the gospels has to be identified. We have to be ready to accept that some passages have been ignored in the past, or misinterpreted, exaggerated, given more importance than they can bear – or less. These passages have been viewed in the past within a devotional context. Blinded by ignorance or prejudice or by a desire to hang on to power, Christians have failed to appreciate their obvious political (even radical) weight.

As Jesus travelled about, in and out of people's lives and homes, he made frequent contact with women, meeting with them, speaking to them, preaching to them, sharing secrets, encouraging, forgiving and healing them. Some of these women became members of his group of followers and were important witnesses of what Jesus had said and done in and around Galilee and on the road to Jerusalem. They were witnesses in the Temple city itself, were maybe also at a last farewell supper, perhaps in the garden of Gethsemane, certainly when he was on the cross and throughout the period of his post-Resurrection appearances.

Apart from those women who were Jesus' regular companions during his public ministry and at the time of his death, other women came into his life, briefly, unexpectedly, and quietly exited stage left, never to be heard of again. The much-married Samaritan woman was one. And the sinner (*not* Mary of Magdala) who had washed and oiled his feet at the house of Simon the Pharisee was another. The gospel authors mentioned others. We should watch carefully to see how he related to them and how they treated him.

The movie that the gospel producers have projected onto our religious screens tells the life-story of a Jesus who did not steer clear of females of any age, even those with suspect reputation. He was not avoiding them or even, as the law and custom of the land required him to do, strictly controlling their contact with him. He engaged with them in ways that were unconventional, even illegal, for the times. He engaged with women in ways that would eventually be strongly advised against by church authorities and spiritual directors monitoring the behaviour of celibate clergy and members of religious orders who rejoice in, (or suffer each day the torment of) their vows of chastity.

Jesus was not on his guard, protecting his virtue, safeguarding his reputation and preserving his ritual purity. When he was out and about in public, he was walking the streets, eating and drinking with publicans and sinners. He was not 'taking Prudence by the hand', as seminarians were advised to do in my day. It was not his way to be forever vigilant, screening his followers, making sure they were male members of his club and no threat to his sexuality. Jesus was out there – open, available, fully present, aware, ready to engage; challenging and confronting the established bureaucrats, official secretaries, clerks, religious leaders. He was always inviting his listeners to respond generously. He was never on the defensive and welcomed anyone, including the women who were going out to him with trust and personal warmth.

The goldmine of references to women in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life is remarkable, especially when compared to the literature of the day, to the works of Josephus, of Philo, or the Book of Proverbs, for example. In these more or less contemporary works, women were mostly invisible. When they did appear, they generally attracted only a passing mention, or else were notorious for their beauty, their sexual attractiveness, or for some noteworthy wickedness. It is different in the gospels.

All four gospels frequently make reference to women in the life of Jesus, and Luke's Gospel is a stand-out. When we read the literature, what is peculiar is that of all the other groups of people with whom Jesus was regularly in contact – Pharisees, priests, scribes, Sadducees, tax collectors, guests at table, even the apostles – none of them appear to have included women as members of their group. Their troops were made up of men. In the gospel literature, where events that do not involve Jesus are narrated (the infancy narratives, for example, involving shepherds and kings, or accounts of feasts, the synagogue, crowd scenes in which Jesus is questioned or challenged), women are almost absent. Apart from an occasional reference here and there, women pass unnoticed. We presume they were there in the picture, but when they were away from Jesus, they hovered in the ether like ghosts, while men, alone or in the company of other men, were strutting about on the Palestinian stage.

Apart from the women in and around Jesus' group, there were also a few cameo roles for other women in the gospels – the female slave who accosted Peter for being with Jesus the Galilean; the wife of Pilate who had had a troubling dream about Jesus; the daughter of Herodias whom Josephus identified as Salome, dancing her heart out to pleasure the king and his courtiers. These passages support what common sense would suggest – that women were present in the society of the times, playing their minor part in the social fabric of the day, in the royal court, around

the perimeter of the Sanhedrin, for example, but not graced with a speaking role.

The authors of the gospels did not avoid the fact that Jesus' behaviour was contrary to the custom of the day and, as we will see, often offended both Jewish customs and the strict prohibitions of the Mosaic Law. He was portrayed in the early Christian literature quite simply as going about his business, living his life as a layman, dealing with people, giving little heed to the petty restrictions of the law, paying no attention to what might be said by way of criticism.

He was deeply religious, but not what one might call a strictly 'orthodox', law-abiding Jew. A non-conformist. A liberal Jew, proud of his heritage, but free of scruples, untroubled by crazy legalism and religious obsessions. And it should be unnecessary to observe that he was not a bishop, or a priest, or a Catholic; and of course, not a Roman Catholic cardinal of reactionary persuasion.

Jesus' primary message centred on a kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven – a kingdom which was peopled by sinners, by the lost and the lame, the blind and the deaf, by children and by women – a kingdom where everyone was equal and the first were last and the servant of all. A vision in which people loved one another and in which it didn't matter whether you were black or white, Jew or Gentile, young or old, slave or free, male or female. Jesus had appeared in an isolated region of the world preaching revolution.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male and female
– for all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28)*

Here (in our community) there cannot be Greek or Jew,
circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave,
free man, but Christ is all, and in all. (Col 3:11)

For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews
and Greeks, slaves and free – and all were made to drink on
one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:13)

A kingdom of heaven on earth. In the life of Jesus and in his kingdom, women were front and centre – female friends and companions; female admirers and camp-followers who worked with him; women in need who sought him out for help for themselves and the members of their families. He consistently treated them with dignity and respect. As we will see, he listened to them and communicated directly with them. Not once did he condemn a woman, as he did the Pharisees, scribes and Sadducees. Women were not the object of reproach, much less of bitter condemnation. Jesus treated women as friends and enjoyed their company. Stepping outside the square, shocking the conservatives and traditionalists: surprising, challenging, generating gossip, horrifying. It must have been a heady experience for a woman to be in his company and part of his team, observing the reactions of the crowd and especially of the Jewish officials.

In the gospel narratives, women are also depicted as exemplars of the level of faith and commitment Jesus was seeking from his followers. While challenging the quality of the twelve's faith and criticising their woodenness, Jesus was ready to praise the faith of the women he met casually in the street – even pagan women. The faith of the female members of Jesus' entourage received special attention from the composers of the gospels, who were almost certainly all males.

Women were accepted, without comment, as followers of Jesus, as his disciples. This presentation of women in the life and work of Jesus was radical and counter-cultural in a Jewish society where women were expected to be submissive and largely invisible in public places.

Contrary to the legal practice of the time, women were depicted by the gospel writers as trustworthy witnesses of the crucial gospel events – the suffering, death and resurrection of the Lord. They were there on the scene when the generals had deserted the battlefield. The female witnesses were entrusted with

delivering the message of the Resurrection, and though initially not believed, their evidence eventually proved true. Jesus' female followers are presented to us as reliable messengers and authorised prophets.

We can see from the early records that after Jesus' death and disappearance, women continued to be involved, at least for a time, at the centre of the Christian communities – as missionaries, servants or deaconesses, prophetesses, teachers – participating in the life and work of the community and active within its liturgical prayer meetings. But quite rapidly their involvement began to fade: as Christians came into contact with the world outside Palestine and Paul began to institutionalise the visionary movement Jesus had launched and to develop authority structures. Paul also began to construct his theological insights around Jesus and the Church and it was then that serious fault lines emerged.

Modifications began to appear in the warp and weft of the movement. The kingdom preaching that had flavoured Jesus' message would disappear with him. Instead of looking to the future, to the coming of the kingdom, the leaders and authorities very soon began to look back over their shoulders to the past, to preserve their traditions, to conserve what they had been taught, to establish structures, ministries, rules and regulations, and lines of authority.

The immensely flexible symbol of a new kingdom, the new world order, so rich and polychromatic on Jesus' palette, would be replaced by the image of an institution – a church, or churches, founded among local communities. The inhabitants of the kingdom, the marginalised and fringe-dwellers, lepers, tax collectors, the invisible riff-raff (and women), some with highly suspicious reputations, would be replaced by Jewish and pagan converts, those who had been baptised and who attended the prayer meetings, with those who believed in Jesus and who formed part of the institution and who agreed to abide by its regulations

and accept its faith formulae. The prominent, prophetic women were replaced with women who were submissive, who knew their places and who would remain silent in the gatherings.

Christians would see changes occurring – the vision disappearing and Jesus' dream (of a future kingdom where women could live with the same dignity and importance as their counterparts) becoming an ugly nightmare. Within a few generations women had become the enemy: daughters of Eve, the primeval temptress and the gateway to Hell.

When Jesus' visionary movement emerged from its homeland at the far-flung regions of the Roman Empire, it hit rough territory around the borders of the Mediterranean – Greco-Roman culture, pagan beliefs, many strange gods, wild Eastern cults, powerful Gnostic sects – a cauldron of beliefs and practices to contaminate the pure message of the preacher-man. Against these pressures, the kingdom message of Jesus, his policy of inclusion and equality, love and acceptance, would have little chance of survival in its pure form. His newly minted attitude to women would be just one of the many items of collateral damage.