

V  
**JESUS AND WOMEN**  
Walter F. Specht

**Jesus Championed Women's Rights**

In recent years more than one author has described Jesus as a champion of women.<sup>1</sup> Is such a designation justified by Christ's words and acts as preserved in the four Gospels? A casual examination of the tradition as presented in the Gospels does not indicate that He was a revolutionary, vocally contending for the rights of women. If He was indeed a champion of women, in what sense was He such, and how did He contend for womanhood?

In evaluating the evidence one must carefully consider the Jewish environment in which Jesus lived, taught, and worked.

In the Judaism of Jesus' day women were not generally regarded as equal to men. The rabbinical writings more than once record a prayer<sup>2</sup> that, with some modification, is still found in the Jewish *Daily Prayer Book*. In its modern form it reads:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe,  
who hast not made me a heathen.  
Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe,  
who hast not made me a bondman.  
Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King, of the universe,  
who hast not made me a woman.<sup>3</sup>

For the last sentence women now substitute:

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe,  
who hast made me according to thy will.

The Jewish document *Pirkē Aboth*, or *Sayings of the Fathers* (a collection of ethical and religious maxims of Jewish teachers who lived between the third century B.C. and the third century A.D.), records that:

“Jose ben Johanan of Jerusalem said: . . . talk not much with a woman. He said it in the case of his own wife, much more in the case of his companion's wife. Hence the Wise have said: Everyone that talketh much with a woman causes evil to himself, and desists from the words of Torah, and his end is he inherits Gehinnom.”<sup>4</sup>

In his commentary on this passage, R. Trevor Herford remarks:

“The ground of the maxim is explained to be that if a man talks much with a woman his thoughts will be turned away from words of Torah to things of no importance. But he may talk with her on the necessary affairs of the household and upon serious subjects. The maxim belongs

---

<sup>1</sup>As examples see Halford E. Luccock in *The Interpreter's Bible* 7:795; Arthur John Gossip in *The Interpreter's Bible* 8:529; Harold cooke Phillips in *The Interpreter's Bible* 6:617; C. G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teaching*, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>T. Ber 7, 18; J. Ber. 13b, 57 ff.; b. Men. 43b.

<sup>3</sup>S. Singer, tr., *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>4</sup>Aboth 1.5. R. Trevor Herford, *Pirkē Aboth—The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers*, Edited with Introduction, Translation, and commentary, p. 24.

to an ethic which modern thought has outgrown, as it takes for granted the inferiority of the woman to the man. Upon these lines the relation between the sexes never attains to perfect companionship; and is the more exposed to degradation, in so far as the woman is looked down upon as foolish or shunned as a source of temptation.”<sup>5</sup>

Among other rabbinical dictums that denigrate women or treat them as inferiors, two may be cited:<sup>6</sup> “Happy is he whose children are males, and woe to him whose children are females.”<sup>7</sup> “Ten qabs of empty-headedness have come upon the world, nine having been received by women, and one by the rest of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Into such a social environment Jesus was born and lived. Yet He never looked down on women or spoke of them as inferior.

“In all four Gospels, Jesus is never reported as acting or speaking to women in a derogatory fashion. He always treated them as equals, individuals, and persons.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Illustrations From Women’s Experiences**

Although numerous rabbinical parables have been preserved, women seldom appear in them. When a woman does appear she is most often presented in a bad light, unless she is a well-known person, such as a king’s daughter.<sup>10</sup> It is significant, therefore, that Jesus often spoke of women in His teaching ministry. And in His sayings and parabolic teachings He drew illustrations from the life and problems of women that clearly indicate His sympathetic understanding of them.

He compared the kingdom of God in its present mystery form to a woman’s placing leaven in three measures of meal (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). He likened God’s initiative in seeking the lost to a woman diligently searching her house for a lost silver drachma, which was probably part of her marriage dowry (Luke 15:8-10). In the parable of the Ten Virgins He illustrated what it means to be ready for the Second Advent (Matt 25:1-13). In His account of the persistent widow pleading for justice from an unscrupulous judge He drove home the necessity for prevailing prayer (Luke 18:1-8). By the example of Lot’s wife He also warned His followers against attachment to the world (Luke 17:32; cf. Gen 19:26).

He commended a poor widow who dropped two tiny copper coins in the treasury: “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living” (Mark 12:43-44, RSV). The conundrum regarding whose wife a woman would be in the resurrection who had had seven husbands did not come from Jesus, but from the Sadducees who tried to make the doctrine of the resurrection appear ridiculous. But in

---

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>As a balance to these strong statements it must in fairness be recognized that occasionally Rabbinic writings reflect a sincere appreciation of women, particularly of outstanding ones. Albrecht Oepke cites the saying, “Her husband is adorned by her, but she is not adorned by her husband” (Gn. r., 47 on 17:5). Then he continues, “Before God[,] wives have equal if not greater promise than their husbands (Ex. r., 21 on 14:15; Tanna debe Eliahu Rabba, 9; Rab. gest., 247 A.D.; b Ber., 17a). Particular mention may be made of Beruria (Veluria? Valeria?), the daughter of R. Chanina ben Teradion, and wife of R. Meir (c. 150 A.D.) [,] as an outstanding and quick-witted woman, or of Rahel, the wife of Akiba, as an example of one who manifested an extraordinary piety and readiness for sacrifice in the Jewish sense.”—*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1:782.

<sup>7</sup>B. Qid, 82b.

<sup>8</sup>B. Qid, 496.

<sup>9</sup>Alicia Craig Faxon, *Women and Jesus*, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup>Johannes Leipoldt, *Jesus und die Frauen*, p. 25.

dealing with it He revealed profound truths regarding the life to come (Matt 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-30). In the parable of the two sons our Lord made the startling statement that publicans and harlots would enter God's kingdom ahead of the chief priests and the elders of the people (see Matt 21:28-32).

Jesus also drew a lesson from the story of the queen of the South (that is, of Sheba), who visited Solomon in OT times (Matt 12:41-42; Luke 11:31-32). In His first recorded sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth He spoke of the widow of Zarephath who ministered to Elijah, as an example of a Gentile who was blessed by a prophet of God (Luke 4:25-26).

Looking to judgment day, Jesus declared, "There will be two women grinding together; one will be taken and the other left" (Matt 24:41; Luke 17:35, RSV). John records that Jesus declared that in a little while they would be separated from Him, and then in a short time they would see Him: "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world" (John 16:20-22).

Clearly, women had a prominent place in Jesus' teaching, as well as in His service. It is to be noted that the Gospel of Luke more than any of the others emphasizes Jesus' teaching about, and relation to, women. It has sometimes been designated as the Gospel of womanhood. All told, some 13 women who are not mentioned in the other Gospels are mentioned in Luke.

## **Marriage and Divorce**

The outstanding aspect of life where Jesus took issue with the social laxness of His time was in the area of marriage and divorce. He set forth a high ideal of marriage and condemned the easily obtained divorces in the Jewish society of His day.

When He was in the trans-Jordan territory of Perea and on His final approach to Jerusalem, He was confronted by some Pharisees who sought to entrap Him with the question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (Mark 10:2, RSV). Note that they did not ask, "Is it lawful for a woman to divorce her husband?" They were thinking only of the rights of a man, and gave no consideration to the rights of a woman. In Judaism it was well-nigh impossible for a woman to divorce her husband, though desertion was possible.

In His reply our Lord asked, "What did Moses command you?" (vs. 3). Jesus evidently intended to direct their attention to the original institution of marriage given in Gen 1:27 and 2:24. But instead the Pharisees referred to the passage in Deut 24:1-4 concerning the status of a divorced woman in relation to her former husband.<sup>11</sup> They replied to Jesus, "Moses, allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away" (Mark 10:4, RSV).

The intention of the Mosaic provision was to protect a wife from hasty and unjust treatment. In the Semitic world it was easy for a man to divorce his wife; he simply ordered her out of the house.<sup>12</sup> The Deuteronomic code allowed divorce on condition that her husband "found some indecency in her." But a legal procedure required the husband to present his wife with a certificate of divorce, allowing her to remarry. This legal requirement was never intended to sanction easy divorce, or divorce at all;<sup>13</sup> it was designed to protect a wife from a capricious husband.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup>William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 354.

<sup>12</sup>Siegfried H. Horn, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, s. v. "Divorce."

<sup>13</sup>John Murray, in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, s. v. "Divorce."

<sup>14</sup>Horn.

In the days of Jesus there was a dispute between the disciples of Shammai and the disciples of Hillel (the heads of two prominent rabbinical schools) regarding the meaning of the phrase in Deuteronomy translated, “Some indecency” (RSV), or “something shameful” (ASV). Both of these famous teachers accepted divorce but differed concerning the grounds on which a divorce could lawfully be granted.<sup>15</sup>

The school of Shammai interpreted “some indecency” as something morally shameful, such as adultery, or a failure to observe Jewish laws about wifely conduct.<sup>16</sup> The school of Hillel took a much more liberal position, allowing divorce on the most trivial grounds—anything that might give the husband displeasure, such as burning food or putting too much salt in the soup.<sup>17</sup>

According to Matthew’s Gospel the Pharisees asked Jesus, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (Matt 19:3). The question may have been designed to force Jesus to take a position with one or the other of the rival schools<sup>18</sup>—apparently in an attempt to trap Him (Matt 19:3; Mark 10:2). John the Baptist had been executed for denouncing the conduct of Herod Antipas and Herodias. Jesus was in Perea, which was part of Antipas’ jurisdiction. Perhaps Jesus could be led to say something that would cause the tetrarch to seize Him, as well.

But in His reply Jesus sought to elevate the concept of marriage by pointing to its origin (compare the Genesis Creation account). The provision in Deuteronomy was a concession to man’s “hardness of heart.”<sup>19</sup> But God’s ideal for marriage is revealed in the original state in Paradise. That original plan called for lifelong union. “A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one” (Mark 10:7-8).

This *henōsis* (oneness) includes more than sexual union. (“Joined” may well be used in the figurative sense, meaning “adhere closely to,” or “be faithfully devoted to.”)<sup>20</sup> It is a union that has the sanction of God Himself, and is therefore sacred and inviolable. Hence Jesus added the warning, “What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder” (vs. 9). This was Jesus’ concept of the ideal in marriage. Divorce was not in God’s plan.<sup>21</sup>

In dealing with the Pharisees’ question our Lord placed the wife on a status of equality with her husband. He did not recognize a double standard of sexual morality. The husband, no less than the Wife, was required to maintain fidelity to the marriage partner.

But even more important than what he said about women, or about marriage and divorce, are the accounts of how Jesus related to women. In this respect His position might have been called revolutionary. A contemporary theologian puts it this way:

“In this relationship his life style was so remarkable that one can only call it astonishing. He treated women as fully human, equal to men in every respect; no word of depreciation about women, as such, is ever found on his lips. As the Savior who identified with the oppressed and disinherited, he talked to women and about women with complete freedom and candor.”<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* 2:332ff.

<sup>16</sup> Lane, p. 353.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.; Goerge Foot Moore, *Judaism* 2:123ff.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick C. Grant, “The Gospel According to St. Mark,” *The Interpreter’s Bible* 7:795.

<sup>19</sup> Lane, pp. 355-56.

<sup>20</sup> F. Hauck, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 4:733.

<sup>21</sup> Ethelbert Stauffer, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1:649.

<sup>22</sup> Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, p. 94.

## Christ's Signs and Wonders on Behalf of Women

How did Jesus relate to women? How did He treat them?

### Jesus Made Provision for His Mother

Let us note first how He related to His mother. A man's true self is often best revealed in his own home, to those who are closely associated with him. What was Jesus' attitude toward His mother? How did He regard her status as a woman? How did He relate to her? The gospels present four incidents that give us some indications regarding Jesus' relation to Mary.

The first of these was at the Passover visit in Jerusalem when Jesus at the age of 12 was becoming a *bar-mitzvah*, a son of the law (Luke 2:41-51). It was a great epoch in Jesus' life, for He now revealed a consciousness of His Messianic mission. When the Passover feast was over, Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem. His absence was not discovered until the conclusion of the first day's journey. With great anxiety Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem to look for Him. When Mary discovered Him in the school of the rabbis she reprovably asked, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously" (vs. 48, RSV). His answer was somewhat mystifying: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (vs. 49, RSV).

These were indeed strange words for a boy of 12. Jesus was disclaiming the paternity of Joseph and declaring His sonship to God. Nevertheless, Jesus showed no disrespect to Mary and Joseph. The record states, "And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them" (vs. 51, RSV).

The second episode took place in Cana, where, according to John's Gospel, Jesus performed His first miracle, or "sign" (John 2:1-12). Jesus, His disciples, and His mother were guests at a wedding festival. He was now nearly 30 years of age. When the supply of wine was exhausted during the feast, Mary suggested that He do something to reveal His true Messianic dignity. Jesus' answer at first seems harsh: "O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come" (vs. 4, RSV).

While there is nothing derogatory in the address "woman" (it may be one of respect and affection),<sup>23</sup> it may appear to be an unusual way to address a mother. Perhaps the time had come to let Mary know that it was not her place to make suggestions about His Messianic work. Jesus is no longer under her direction and authority.

Yet while hanging on the cross Jesus made provision for His widowed mother, and addressed her as "woman" (John 19:26-27). At the wedding feast Mary did not take offense at Jesus' reply, or regard it as a sharp rebuke. She instead gave expression to her faith by saying to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). Jesus responded to that faith by performing His first miracle—turning water into wine. He then accompanied His mother to Capernaum, and from there separated from His family to go on His mission.

The third incident apparently occurred at Capernaum (Mark 3:19), where a large crowd had gathered to hear Jesus teach (Matt 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21). At this time our Lord was so busy that He scarcely had time to eat (Mark 3:20). Reports of this reached His family, who were concerned not only about His physical well-being but about His mental balance, as well. Jesus had healed a blind and mute demoniac, and the scribes and Pharisees attributed His

---

<sup>23</sup>William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 167; Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 363, "voc., as a term of respect or affection, mistress, lady."

power to Beelzebul, the prince of demons (Matt 12:24). Jesus showed the unreasonableness of such a charge, and warned the Jewish leaders against blaspheming the Holy Spirit (vss. 25-32). At this juncture Mary and His brothers arrived to take Jesus away to a much-needed rest. Because of the crowd, however, they were unable to reach Him. So they sent word that they were waiting for Him outside. But Jesus refused to go out to see them. Apparently He felt that He was grossly misunderstood even by His own mother. Mary was seemingly again trying to direct His Messianic work. Jesus took this occasion to make a pronouncement concerning His true family: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mark 3:35, RSV; Matt 12:50).

Connected with this experience was a woman’s exclamation, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!” (Luke 11:27, RSV). In a male-dominated society a woman’s claim to recognition was in rearing a son. How fortunate was the mother of a son like Jesus! This woman’s exclamation, recorded only by Luke, echoed the song of Elizabeth before Jesus’ birth, “Blessed are you among women!” (Luke 1:42) or perhaps the words of Mary’s *Magnificat*, “Henceforth all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:48). Similar ascriptions of blessedness occur in rabbinical writings,<sup>24</sup> the most significant being, “Blessed is the hour in which the Messiah was created. Blessed is the womb from which he came.”<sup>25</sup>

In His reply Jesus shows the inadequacy of such a remark. Mary’s place as His mother did not bring her salvation. This is dependent upon a spiritual relationship. “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Luke 11:28, RSV).

There can be little doubt that Jesus was devoted to His family. Nevertheless He recognized a higher loyalty to God, and to a larger family—the family of God. Even His earthly family loyalty was to take second place to the paramount loyalty to God. This is no denial of the claims of family love, but that love must not interfere with love and service for God. This is an important truth to be kept in mind in every age.

In the final scene we see Mary standing by the cross of Jesus (John 19:25-27). Jesus loved His mother. What could He say that would brighten her heart at such a time? All He could do was to commit her to the care of the beloved disciple John, who accepted the sacred trust given him.

## **Jesus Worked Miracles on Behalf of Women**

Several times in the Gospels Jesus is pictured as working miracles on behalf of women. This readiness to help women again distinguishes Him from the rabbis. While there is a profusion of rabbinical miracle stories, only a few tell of women being helped.<sup>26</sup>

Early in His Galilean ministry our Lord was a guest in the home of Simon Peter in Capernaum, where He was told of the illness of Peter’s mother-in-law. Although it was the Sabbath day, Jesus made her well (Matt 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-39). His action violated not only the Pharisaic rules of Sabbathkeeping but also the norms of propriety in dealing with women. The rabbis declared that a man was not to look at a beautiful woman, even if she were single, nor at a married woman, even if she were not beautiful, nor even at a woman’s lovely attire.<sup>27</sup> To take a woman’s hand was quite shocking to Jewish sticklers for propriety. But

---

<sup>24</sup>Aboth 2.10; 2 Baruch 54.10.

<sup>25</sup>Pesiqta 149a.

<sup>26</sup>Leipoldt, pp. 16-17.

<sup>27</sup>B. Aboda zara 18b, quoted in Leipoldt, pp. 17-18.

to help a sick woman, Jesus was willing to break rabbinical Sabbath rules, as well as the accepted rules of social propriety.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus had compassion on a bereaved widow of Nain and raised her son to life (Luke 7:11-17). Jesus, His disciples, and a great crowd were approaching the gate of the village just as the funeral procession was moving toward the cemetery. The plight of the widowed mother who had lost her only son touched the Master's heart. In such a situation she was helpless and defenseless. The bier on which the body of the young man lay was not an enclosed coffin, but a litter consisting of a board with narrow sides attached. It was customary for the body to be wrapped in linen cloth, but with the face exposed. Although contact with the dead would render Him ceremonially unclean (Num 19:11), Jesus stepped up and touched the bier. The pallbearers stopped, and Jesus raised the young man to life.

At Capernaum (Matt 9:1) Jesus also raised the 12-year-old daughter of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue (Matt 9:18-19, 23-26; Mark 5:21-24, 35-43; Luke 8:40-42, 49-56). Again ignoring the fact that contact with the dead would make Him ceremonially unclean (cf. Lev 21:11), our Lord took her by the hand and said, "'Talitha cumi'; which means, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise.'" Thus, Jesus demonstrated that He valued human need above ritual requirements.

On the way to Jairus' home Jesus healed a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for 12 years (Matt 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48). She had spent all or her financial resources on physicians and remedies, only to be pronounced incurable (Mark 5:26). According to Jewish law a woman in this condition was in a state of perpetual uncleanness. (Lev 15:25-33.) Apparently she lacked the opportunity or the courage to confront Jesus directly and ask for help. Perhaps she feared she might be refused. But she had faith to believe that if she could only reach out and touch His garments she would be healed. She managed to make her way through the crowd near enough to touch "the fringe of his garment" (Matt 9:20, RSV). The moment she did so she was healed.

Even though contact with such a person rendered our Lord ritually unclean, He did not reproach her for touching Him. He did, however, insist that she reveal her identity in the presence of the vast crowd. Alicia Craig Faxon has correctly assessed the situation with these words:

"Not only did He heal her from her physical illness, but He released her from her fears and suffering, often concomitants of sickness but frequently existing by themselves. . . . Jesus also liberated this woman from her feelings of inferiority and unworthiness. He called her forth from her hiding place and confirmed her as a person. He acknowledged her faith and her determination.

"And He called her out of passivity into activity in holding her responsible for her acts. He said in effect, 'Don't feel unworthy and inferior; you are a person worthy to be healed, worthy to claim my attention. Stand up and acknowledge your personhood, your rights as a human being.'"<sup>28</sup>

### **Jesus Tested a Woman's Faith**

The Syrophenician woman's plea to have her possessed daughter healed was at first refused (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30), not because of her sex, but because she was a Gentile. Jesus was trying to break down His disciples' prejudice by taking them into Gentile territory. By treating

---

<sup>28</sup>Faxon, pp. 50-51.

the woman this way gently rebuked His disciples and drove home a much-needed lesson.<sup>29</sup> The woman's persistence led Jesus to exclaim, "'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly" (Matt 15:28, RSV).

The Gospel of Luke also records Christ's Sabbath healing of a woman who had been physically deformed for 18 years (Luke 13:10-17). Jesus addressed her in the synagogue, told her that she was freed from her infirmity, and publicly laid His hands on her. In doing so He violated Jewish traditional Sabbath laws and disregarded the social proprieties of His time. When the ruler of the synagogue publicly expressed his indignation Jesus replied, "Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?" (Luke 13:15-16). If a domestic animal bound for a few hours can be loosed for watering on Sabbath, could not a woman, yes, a daughter of Abraham, be loosed from the bond of an 18-year infirmity on the Sabbath?

### **Jesus Related His Teachings to Women**

One of the most remarkable illustrations of Jesus' willingness to help a person was His visit with a Samaritan woman (John 4:4ff.). The Jews looked upon the Samaritans with considerable contempt.<sup>30</sup> On one occasion they expressed their hostility toward Jesus by calling Him a Samaritan and one who was demon-possessed (chap. 8:48). The Samaritans were regarded not only as enemies but as ceremonially unclean. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus went so far as to say, "He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine."<sup>31</sup> John's explanation, "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (chap. 4:9, RSV), probably means, "Do not use vessels in common" (NEB). According to the Mishnah, "The daughters of Samaritans are [deemed unclean as] menstruants from their cradle."<sup>32</sup> This means that the Samaritan woman was regarded as ceremonially unclean by the Jews, and that this uncleanness would be conveyed to the water utensil she carried.<sup>33</sup>

David Daube asserts, "By asking the woman to give him to drink, Jesus showed himself ready to disregard that hostile presumption respecting Samaritan women for the sake of a more inclusive fellowship."<sup>34</sup>

Jesus was fully aware of her sordid life, and He tried to arouse her slumbering conscience. He offered her living water and revealed Himself as the Messiah (vss. 25-26).

At this juncture the disciples returned from buying food and were amazed to find Jesus conversing<sup>35</sup> with a woman (vs. 27).<sup>36</sup> No rabbi would have done such a thing. In fact the rabbis had a saying: "A man shall not be alone with a woman in an inn, not even with his sister or his daughter, on account of what men may think. A man shall not talk with a woman in the street,

---

<sup>29</sup>DA 401-3.

<sup>30</sup>See, e.g., Sirach 50:25-26.

<sup>31</sup>Sheb. 8.10 (Danby ed.), p. 49.

<sup>32</sup>Nid. 4.1 (Danby ed.), p. 748.

<sup>33</sup>Kel. 1.1 ff (Danby ed.), p. 605.

<sup>34</sup>David Daube, "Jesus and the Samaritan Woman," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 69 (1950): 138.

<sup>35</sup>For, *meta* plus the genitive as suggesting the idea of *communication, with*, see C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, p. 61; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, p. 611.

<sup>36</sup>John 4:27. The translators of the KJV mistakenly translated *meta gunaikos* as "with *the* woman." "The translators of the King James Version, under the influence of the Vulgate, handle the Greek article loosely and inaccurately."—Robertson, p. 756. "It was 'a woman,' any woman, not the particular woman in question."—Ibid.



not even with his own wife, especially not with another woman on account of what men may say.”<sup>37</sup>

The disciples, however, did not outwardly question their Master’s behavior. Often they had seen Him violate Jewish conventions, and apparently they were able to control their scruples while Jesus remained in Sychar for two days evangelizing the Samaritans.

### **An Adulterous Woman Finds Forgiveness**

The story of the adulterous woman (John 7:53-8:11) discloses Jesus’ tender dealings with women—in this case, a woman of ill repute. The account asserts that she was “caught in the act of adultery” (John 8:4, RSV). But the record makes it clear that she was brought to Jesus for the sole purpose of trapping Him into saying something that could be used against Him.<sup>38</sup> They hoped He would either acquit the woman, thus in effect setting aside the Law of Moses, or condemn her, thus challenging the Roman authorities who alone had the right to impose capital punishment.

These would-be guardians of the law revealed their own male prejudices. Why was not the man who had committed adultery with her also brought before Jesus? Why was he allowed to escape?<sup>39</sup> According to the Mosaic law both the adulterer and the adulteress were to be executed (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22).

Death by stoning was prescribed only for a man and a betrothed virgin who were guilty of adultery (Deut 22:23-24). Apparently stoning became the method of executing others guilty of sex crimes. But it seems that women were dealt with more severely than were men.<sup>40</sup>

Not only did this woman’s accusers drag her into Jesus’ presence but they placed her in full view of everyone. Instead of immediately answering the loaded question of the scribes and Pharisees, however, Jesus stooped and began writing in the sand. We can only speculate as to why He did this.<sup>41</sup> He may have chosen to ignore these professed guardians of the law.<sup>42</sup> Or He may have wished to spare the woman further embarrassment. One scholar suggests, “The Lord is tortured with the horror of it all. He would not look at them or her.”<sup>43</sup>

Nor does the passage reveal what He wrote, though several manuscripts include the expression “the sins of everyone of them” after the word “ground”<sup>44</sup> Derrett<sup>45</sup> suggests that He wrote part of Exod 23:1, “You shall not join hands with a wicked man, to be a malicious witness” (RSV). Morris thinks He may have written the words He later spoke.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup>Strack-Billerbeck 2:438, quoted in Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 274.

<sup>38</sup>Jewett, p. 96.

<sup>39</sup>As a matter of fact, Ellen G. White in DA 461, asserts, “These would-be guardians of justice had themselves led their victim into sin, that they might lay a snare for Jesus.”

<sup>40</sup>Note Ellen G. White: “With all their professions of reverence for the law, these rabbis, in bringing the charge against the woman, were disregarding its provisions. It was the husband’s duty to take action against her, and the guilty parties were to be punished equally. The action of the accusers was wholly unauthorized.”—Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>See the discussion of this point in DA 461, and MH 88.

<sup>42</sup>Morris, p. 888.

<sup>43</sup>William Temple, quoted in Morris, n. 20.

<sup>44</sup>These include U II 73 331 364 700 782 1592 and some Armenian MSS; cf. DA 461: “There, traced before them, were the guilty secrets of their own lives.”

<sup>45</sup>J. Duncan M. Derrett, “Law in the New Testament: The Story of the woman Taken in Adultery,” *Journal of New Testament Studies* (10 (1963-64): 18ff.

<sup>46</sup>Morris.

When these men, impatient at Jesus' delay and indifference, pressed for an answer, He replied, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7, RSV). Thus He "not only sidestepped the snare which his critics had laid, but them down to size." It was a "devastating rebuke to male arrogance."<sup>47</sup>

Though He did not condone the behavior of the adulterous woman, He did not condemn her, but admonished her, "Go, and do not sin again."

### **Sympathizing Women From Jerusalem**

Another scene near the close of Jesus' life is worth noting.

On the way to Golgotha to be crucified, Jesus was attracted by the demonstration of grief by a company of women who followed Him on the *Via Dolorosa* (Luke 23:27-31). This company apparently consisted of sympathizing women from Jerusalem. Alfred Plummer notes, "In the Gospels there is no instance of a woman being hostile to Christ."<sup>48</sup> Although He was touched by the grief of these Jerusalem women, He felt that it was misplaced. Our Lord was not being driven to an unwilling death, but was voluntarily giving His life for the world—even for them. These women would do better to weep for the same cause for which He wept—a doomed Jerusalem whose judgments might have been averted. "Weep for yourselves and for your children," He urged (w. 28, RSV). He foresaw the doom of Jerusalem. If an innocent one like Jesus could be crucified, what would be the fate of guilty Jerusalem?

### **Close Associates Revered Christ's Instruction**

An outstanding example of Jesus' association with women, and his high regard for them, is seen in His close friendship with Martha and Mary. These two women are introduced in Luke's Gospel with the words, "Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching" (Luke 10:38-39, RSV).

The unnamed village where these sisters lived, according to John's Gospel, was Bethany, situated less than two miles from Jerusalem (John 11:1, 18). Because of the prominence of these women, John referred to Bethany simply as "the village of Mary and her sister Martha." Apparently these sisters were unmarried and were living together in the little village. Since Luke represents Martha as the mistress of the home (Luke 10:38), likely she was the older of the two. Her Aramaic name means "lady," which may indicate that she came from a fairly wealthy circle.<sup>49</sup>

Contrary to rabbinical custom, Jesus not only accepted the hospitality of Martha's home but also taught His message to her and her sister. Just as "people pressed upon him to hear the word of God" at the Sea of Galilee (chap. 5:1); so Mary took a seat at His feet and eagerly listened to the word.<sup>50</sup> ("To sit at someone's feet" was an idiomatic way of saying "to study under someone." As a young man, Paul was educated "at the feet of Gamaliel" in Jerusalem [Acts 22:3]. To sit at a teacher's feet suggests the humble position of the learner. The Jewish rabbi Joezer of Zerediah is reported to have said, "Let thy house be a house of meeting for the wise

---

<sup>47</sup>Jewett.

<sup>48</sup>Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, p. 528.

<sup>49</sup>*Marta* is the feminine form of *mara* "master." See Leipoldt, *Jesus und die Frauen*, p. 128, n. 189.

<sup>50</sup>Greek, *logon*.

[recognized teachers], and bedust thyself with the dust of [that is, sit at] their feet, and drink with thirst their words.”<sup>51</sup>

Although there is no evidence that there was a formal teacher-student relationship between Jesus and Mary, such as existed between a rabbi and a *talmîd*, our Lord did not hesitate to impart His teachings to her and to her sister. In Judaism, women, as a general rule, were not allowed the privilege of studying under a rabbi. George Foot Moore says, “Some of them may have been taught by their fathers or their husbands at home or read the Bible, but since this involved the learning of the ancient Hebrew language, it is probable that such cases were rare. . . Instruction of women in the unwritten law was still more rare.”<sup>52</sup> Some of the rabbis were strongly opposed to efforts to teach women. Jeremias cites two sayings of Rabbi Eliezer (about A.D. 90), whom he describes as the “tireless upholder of the old tradition.”<sup>53</sup> “If a man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery.”<sup>54</sup> “Better to burn the Torah than to teach it to women.”<sup>55</sup> Jesus was not bound by such Pharisaic notions, but enjoyed discoursing with women who hungered for spiritual food.

It seems evident from Luke’s account that Martha, as well as Mary, loved to sit and listen to the teachings of our Lord. However, while Mary sat at Christ’s feet and listened to His words,<sup>56</sup> Martha became distracted by domestic interests. Irritated by Mary’s neglect of the household duties, she inquired, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me<sup>57</sup> to serve alone? Tell her then to help me” (Luke 10:40, RSV). With sublime tact, Jesus defended Mary.

His mild rebuke of Martha contains an invaluable point: “Martha, Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things; but one thing is necessary. The part that Mary has chosen is best; and it shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42, NEB).<sup>58</sup>

### Martha Trusted Jesus Implicitly

Although there is no specific record of Jesus’ having visited this Bethany home before the death of Lazarus, our Lord frequently stayed there.<sup>59</sup> Following the triumphal entry Jesus went out to Bethany with His disciples (Mark 11:11), and returned to Jerusalem the next morning.

The account of the death and resurrection of Lazarus (John 11) indicates the closeness<sup>60</sup> of Jesus’ relation with the sisters and their brother and His affection for them (John 11:5). This is

---

<sup>51</sup>Aboth 1.4.

<sup>52</sup>George Foot Moore, *Judaism* 2:128.

<sup>53</sup>Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 373.

<sup>54</sup>Sot. 3.4, quoted in Jeremias, loc. Cit.

<sup>55</sup>J. Sot. iii.4. 19a 7.

<sup>56</sup>NEB. The aorist tense of *parakathestheisa* means, “having taken her place at the Lord’s feet”; *ékouen*, however, is the imperfect, suggesting her persistence in listening.

<sup>57</sup>Some MSS read the aorist, *katelipen*, “indicating that she had been assisting before she was drawn off by Jesus’ presence,” Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies* 1:358. However, if one follows Nestle in reading the imperfect, *kataleipen*, it would mean, “She had continued to leave me.”

<sup>58</sup>The Greek manuscripts have various forms of vs. 42. Some read, “few things are needful” (not an elaborate meal such as Martha was planning). Others read, “one thing is needful,” which may refer to one dish, or the spiritual communion Mary had chosen, or, perhaps, does it refer to both? The reading of some MSS, “few things are needful or only one,” seems to be a conflation of the other two.

<sup>59</sup>See DA 524: “At the home of Lazarus Jesus had often found rest. The Saviour had no home of His own; He was dependent on the hospitality of His friends and disciples, and often, when weary, thirsting for human fellowship, He had been glad to escape to this peaceful household, away from the suspicion and jealousy of the angry Pharisees. Here He found a sincere welcome, and pure, holy friendship. Here He could speak with simplicity and perfect freedom, knowing that His words would be understood and treasured.”

especially evident in Jesus' conversation with Martha after Lazarus' death. "If you had been here," she cried, "my brother would not have died" (vs. 21, RSV). But then she added, "And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you" (vs. 22, RSV).

What did she mean? She had come to trust Jesus implicitly with full assurance of His interest in them, His compassion for them, and His power to do what should be done. Jesus assured her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha responded bravely, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (vs. 24, RSV). Jesus replied, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (vss. 25-26, RSV). Of special significance was Martha's response, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world" (vs. 27, RSV). No greater affirmation of faith was made by any of Jesus' followers. After assuring Mary, as well, Jesus went to Lazarus' grave and raised him to life.

### Jesus Awakened a Loyal Following Among women

The supreme example of Mary of Bethany's<sup>61</sup> devotion to Jesus was her anointing of Him at a feast in Bethany a few days before the crucifixion. While the guests were reclining at the table, Mary came in with "a pound<sup>62</sup> of costly ointment of pure nard,"<sup>63</sup> broke the alabaster flask containing the perfume, and poured it on Christ's head. This was more than an act of courtesy and respect.<sup>64</sup> One writer suggests: "The breaking of the flask was perhaps the expression of the whole-heartedness of her devotion. Having served this purpose it would never be used again."<sup>65</sup> The act of pouring the perfume on Christ's head was perhaps in recognition of His royalty as the Messiah.

According to the Gospel of John, Mary "anointed the feet of Jesus"<sup>66</sup> with very expensive perfume,<sup>67</sup> valued, according to Mark, at "more than three hundred denarii." A denarius was apparently an average day's pay for a laborer in the vineyards (Matt 22:2, 9-13). It was a great personal sacrifice for Mary, undoubtedly expressive of her supreme devotion to Jesus.

Worthy of note also was Mary's use of her tresses to wipe His feet (John 12:3; cf. Luke 7:37ff). In the eyes of the Jews this was a shocking act, since respectable women kept their hair

---

<sup>60</sup>Leon Morris, p. 538.

<sup>61</sup>For a discussion of the problem of identifying the various women named "Mary" Magdalene and the sinful woman of Luke 7:37ff., see the discussion in the 5BC 764-67, and the article on "Mary" in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*.

<sup>62</sup>The Greek for "pound," *ultra*, is evidently the equivalent to the Latin *libra*, consisting of about 12 ounces.

<sup>63</sup>*Muron* means "ointment" or "perfume." *Nardos* is evidently a transliteration of *nrd* (cf., Cant 1:12; 4:13, where the LXX has *nardos*), and refers here to the oil extracted from the root of the nard plant. The origin and meaning of the adjective *pistikos* is uncertain. Several plausible suggestions have been offered: (a) that it is equivalent to *pistēs* meaning "genuine" (see Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* xii.43 [26]); (b) that it is to be derived from *pinō* (drink), and means "liquid" (Liddell-Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 1408); (c) that it is a scribal corruption of *spikatoi* (Latin, *spicatum*), the name of an unguent; (d) that it is a transliteration of *pysthq'* which denotes the pistachio nut, the oil of which was used for perfumes.

<sup>64</sup>See Luke 7:46; Ps 23:5; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, pp. 492ff.

<sup>65</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 415.

<sup>66</sup>There is no reason to think that the Gospel accounts are mutually exclusive. She could well have poured the ointment on both Jesus' head and His feet. Ellen White in DA 559 declares, "Breaking her box of ointment, she poured its contents upon the head and feet of Jesus; then, as she knelt weeping, moistening them with her tears, she wiped His feet with her long, flowing hair."

<sup>67</sup>It has been suggested that the nard came from an herb grown in the high pasture land of the Himalayas. This would explain its great cost (Madeleine J. and J. Lane Miller, *Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, p. 204).

bound and covered. Mary's behavior suggested that she was a woman of loose morals. (The hair of a woman suspected of adultery was let down by the priest.)<sup>68</sup> But Jesus could read the motives of her heart and saw her gesture as an expression of deep gratitude for His kindness and affection. "She has done a beautiful thing to me," He declared (Matt 26:10; Mark 14:6, RSV). And He predicted that wherever the gospel story would be told in future generations, her act of love would be remembered.

One of the striking differences between Jesus and the Jewish rabbis of His day was in His acceptance of women as followers.<sup>69</sup> Such a course of action was certainly unprecedented in the first century.<sup>70</sup> According to Luke's Gospel, as Jesus traveled through the cities and villages proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, He was accompanied by two groups—the 12 disciples, and a band of Galilean women (Luke 8:1-3). Not only are these women represented as itinerating with Him but are said to have used their means to support Him and His followers. Moule has rightly observed:

"It is difficult enough for anyone, even a consummate master of imaginative writing, to create a picture of a deeply pure, good person moving about in an impure environment, without making him a prig or a prude or a sort of 'plaster saint.' How comes it that through all the Gospel traditions without exception, there comes a remarkably firmly-drawn portrait of an attractive young man moving freely about among women of all sorts, including the decidedly disreputable, without a trace of sentimentality, unnaturalness, or prudery and yet at every point, maintaining a simple integrity of character?"<sup>71</sup>

The identity and marital status of most of the women in the group with Jesus are not revealed. Only three of them are named: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. In addition to these Luke refers to "many others." Since *gunē* in Greek can mean "wife," as well as "woman," and in view of the Palestinian custom of early marriages for women, William E. Phipps argues that these women must have been married.<sup>72</sup> He further suggests that some of them probably were the wives of the 12 disciples, but there is no evidence for this.

Luke informs us that some of these women had been healed "of evil spirits and infirmities" (Luke 8:2, RSV). Among these was Mary Magdalene. Not only did the women accompany Jesus and His disciples on their preaching tour, they also showed their love and devotion by using their financial resources in supporting this band of missionaries (vs. 3;<sup>73</sup> cf. Mark 15:41).

By accepting support from women Jesus departed from rabbinical teaching. It was an accepted rule that a rabbi not be waited on by a woman.<sup>74</sup> But Jesus disregarded such rules. One writer conjectures that the seamless tunic, woven from top to bottom" (John 19:23-24, RSV), "may well have been the gift of one of . . . [the] affluent women."<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup>Sotah 1:5, Danby ed., pp. 293ff.

<sup>69</sup>Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, p. 61.

<sup>70</sup>Joachim Jeremias, pp. 375ff.

<sup>71</sup>C.F.D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, p. 63.

<sup>72</sup>William E. Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* p. 101.

<sup>73</sup>The imperfect tense of *diēkonoun* suggests that the ministering of these women was a continuous act. Although some good MSS read *antō*, (to him), the preferred reading is *antois*, (to them). See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on The Greek New Testament*, p. 144.

<sup>74</sup>Claude G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings*, pp. 217ff.

<sup>75</sup>Jewett, p. 97; Leipoldt, p. 32.

## Women at Golgotha and the Tomb

The Galilean women eventually followed Jesus on His last journey to Jerusalem, and remained loyal to Him to the very end (Matt 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:49-56). At Golgotha “the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance,” and at the risk of their lives witnessed the terrible death of their Lord. They observed Joseph of Arimathea remove the body of Jesus from the cross and place it in a new rock-hewn tomb (Luke 23:50-24:1).

Sunday morning they found the tomb empty, but were told by two angels that Jesus was alive. Thus they were eyewitnesses to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 15:1-4). They were the first to receive the message of the resurrection. They were chosen over the 12 apostles to be among the first witnesses.<sup>76</sup>

The angels reminded the women of what Jesus had predicted in Galilee regarding His betrayal, death by crucifixion, and resurrection. In the light of these words they were able to interpret the empty tomb “to the eleven and to all the rest” (Luke 24:8-9, RSV). Thus they became the first heralds of the resurrection.

## Women As Apostles

In the light of Jesus’ words recorded in John 6:44, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (RSV), we may well ask. Were these faithful women self-appointed disciples of Jesus? Or can it be said of them as truly as of the 12: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide” (John 15:16, RSV)?

Certainly without our Lord’s gracious call they could hardly have accompanied Jesus in His ministry as they did.<sup>77</sup>

But if Jesus was a champion of women, and even allowed them to accompany Him on His mission, why did he not choose one or more women as apostles?

To choose a woman as an apostle would have been unwise in view of the social and cultural environment of the first century. According to the book of Acts, one of the chief functions of the 12 was to be that of witnessing to Jesus Christ and His resurrection (Acts 1:8, 21-22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 10:39-42; 13:30-31). In a society where women were not allowed to bear public testimony, it would not have been prudent for Jesus to have chosen women for such a mission. This does not mean that our Lord was opposed to the testimony of women, but such testimony might have been easily dismissed because of Jewish prejudice. It was far more vital at this juncture to get a hearing for the testimony of His apostles concerning Christ than to carry on a crusade for the equality of women.

Theologically, one can see in the selection of the 12 apostles the nucleus of a new Israel.<sup>78</sup> Their selection was a symbolic act showing the continuity of Jesus’ disciples with ancient Israel.<sup>79</sup> Just as the 12 sons of Jacob became the representatives of God’s people in OT times, so the 12 apostles are representatives of the reborn people of God. Their appointment looks backward to the old Israel, as well as forward to the new Messianic community.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup>Cranfield, p. 464.

<sup>77</sup>Leipoldt, p. 27.

<sup>78</sup>M. E. Thrall, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood*, p. 94.

<sup>79</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 109.

<sup>80</sup>Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 2:326.

The latter becomes evident when one considers the eschatological role Jesus predicted concerning them: “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19:28, RSV; cf. Luke 22:30). Since in this prophetic role they correspond to the 12 patriarchs, it is natural that they would be men.<sup>81</sup>

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In contrast to the Rabbis, Jesus used many illustrations from the life experiences of women. He obviously did not regard them as second-rate human beings but in every respect as equal to men. When questioned regarding divorce, He set forth God’s ideal of marriage as an inviolable lifelong union of a man and a woman. He plainly condemned the trivial procedure by which men in His day divorced their wives. Marriage called for fidelity on the part of both partners, and He recognized no double standard of sexual morality.

Jesus’ own relation with women, and His treatment of them as equals, was revolutionary in His time. He freely associated with, and presented His message to, both men and women. Women were treated in every sense as on the same level with men.

He treated His own mother with respect and deference, and was concerned about providing for her future even as He hung on the cross. He departed from Jewish conventions and rules of propriety by conversing with women and teaching them publicly and privately. Many of His miracles were performed on behalf of women. More than once He risked ceremonial defilement to minister to them. Among His special friends were such women as Martha and Mary of Bethany. He graciously accepted Mary’s affectionate act of anointing, and described it as a beautiful expression of love.

Although He did not designate women as apostles, He did accept a group of Galilean women as followers, permitting them to accompany Him in His mission and accepting their financial support. While Jesus accepted the devotion and love of women, His association with them was always on a high spiritual plane.

Thus by His style of life, in opposition to the age in which He lived, and by His open acceptance of women and His respect for their personalities, Jesus definitely championed women’s right to honor and dignity.

---

<sup>81</sup>World council of Churches, *Concerning the Ordination of Women* (Geneva, 1964), p. 9.