

Jesus' Attitudes to Women in the Context of First-Century Judaism

1. Introduction

Scholarship on the quest for the historical Jesus stresses that caution must be displayed when reading the canonical gospels as objective sources of the life and teaching of Jesus. Individual evangelists may have been influenced in their portrayals of women by situations from within their own communities. Note the use of certain criteria in the search for authentic sayings of Jesus (dissimilarity, coherence, Semitic origin).

2. Jesus' Teaching

Jesus' concern with the marginalized in society is widely attested (e.g., his statement in Matt. 21:32 about prostitutes and tax-collectors entering the kingdom of God before chief priests and elders). He speaks sympathetically about widows, condemns those who take their property (Mark 12:40), and commends a poor widow for her generous gift (12:41-4).

It is often noted that, in his parables, Jesus draws on women's experiences and highlights their exemplary actions. See, for example, the parable of the yeast in Matt. 13:33: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened'. Three measures of flour (cf. Gen. 18:6) was a large amount of dough for a person to knead.

Some aspects of Jesus' teaching implicitly consider the status of women; e.g., statements about adultery and divorce (5:27-32; cf. 19:2-12).

3. Healing Ministry

In Matt. 8-9 ten miracle stories focus on outcasts: lepers, Gentiles, women, demoniacs, tax collectors and sinners. Note the example of Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31), who rises from her bed and 'serves' Jesus (1:31; Matt. 8:15). The healing of the woman with a haemorrhage (Mark 5:24-34; Matt. 9:20-22) is juxtaposed with (Matthew), or followed by (Mark), the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:35-43; Matt. 9:18-19, 23-26). A woman, defiled due to her impurity (see Lev. 15:25-30), touches Jesus and manifests faith in action. Note also the narrative about the Syro-Phoenician (Mark 7:24-30) or Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28); the woman's supplication is commended, as is her faith in Jesus' power to heal her demon-possessed daughter.

4. Women as Disciples

Did Jesus teach women alongside men? Matthew states that the numbers of five and four thousand did not include 'the women and children' who were present (14:21; 15:38). Did any women belong to the narrower group of disciples? Luke 8:1-3 describes Jesus travelling through towns and villages with his disciples, and that certain women whom he healed went with them, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna. They are said to have supported him financially (*diakoneō*). Cf. Mark 15:40-4: 'There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, who - when he was in Galilee - followed him and ministered to him' (15:40-41). The verb 'to follow' (*akolouthēō*) is often employed for full discipleship (e.g., Mark 2:14; Matt. 8:19-22).

5. Women in the Passion and Resurrection Narratives

Gospel traditions record that women were among the witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion, burial, empty tomb and resurrection (Mark 15:40-41; Matt. 27:61; Luke 23:49). In Mark's gospel, the disciples' disappearance from the scene coincides with the (re)emergence of women, the faithful group of followers to be found at the cross (standing at a distance) and who have been Jesus' followers since his early days in Galilee (15:40). These women seek no status for themselves and demonstrate perseverance in faith.

Members of the same group are the first to find the tomb empty (cf. Mark 16:1-8; Matt. 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1, 11-18).

6. Accusations of Anti-Judaism?

Does the description of Jesus as 'a reformer of Jewish patriarchal society' (Ben Witherington) not reflect certain anti-Jewish tendencies?

Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem at the Time of Jesus* (1969): 'Judaism had a very low opinion of women...she is kept as far as possible shut away from the outer world, submissive to the power of her father or her husband, and where she is inferior to men from a religious point of view'.

Cf. also Ben Witherington, 'Women', *Anchor Bible Dictionary*: 'The Palestinian Jewish culture was one of the most patriarchal in the Mediterranean crescent. The home and family were basically the only spheres where women could play significant roles in early Judaism..... There is no evidence that prior to Jesus' ministry Jewish women were allowed to be disciples of a great teacher, much less travel with such a teacher, or to instruct anyone other than children. In such a restrictive context, Jesus' relationship to women must have seemed radical indeed' (VI, 957). In *Women in the Earliest Churches*, Witherington states: 'Jewish women would have seen the new religious roles allowed to them in Christianity as being in stark contrast to what had been the case in the Jewish synagogue or at home' (p. 114).

Is there not a tendency in such statements to perpetuate the stereotyped images of Judaism as a religion of slavery contrasted with the liberating gospel preached by Jesus? Are not women, Amy-Jill Levine comments, 'constructed as the yeast which ferments the stale domestic beer of Judaism and the good, imported brew of Christianity'? ('Second Temple Judaism', 307).

Judith Plaskow draws attention to three rules concerning the formation of the anti-Jewish myth in general:

- i) as antithesis which sets up dualistic structures, in which Judaism is identified with the negative (sexism) and Christianity with the positive (feminism);
- ii) as scapegoat in which Jews are blamed for all the evil in the world;
- iii) as prologue, in the sense that Judaism is to be identified with the religion of the OT, 'an empty relic', because God's promises have been fulfilled in Christianity.

Attempts are made to demonstrate a) that many aspects of Second Temple Judaism had a more positive assessment of women, their status and activity; b) the Jewishness of Jesus' attitude to women; c) excessive emphasis has been placed on Jesus' egalitarian attitude. Tendency in Christian works dealing with attitudes to women to focus only of the most negative statements about Jewish women's lives in the first century (i.e. exemption from fixed prayers, not allowed to study Scripture, women viewed by the rabbis as dirty, chatterboxes and greedy). Attention must be paid not only to rabbinic texts, but also to the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus and Philo. Note also that rabbinic texts are the product of post-70 Judaism (2nd-3rd centuries CE at the earliest) and do not necessarily reflect the Jewish attitudes current in Jesus' time.

What about the numerous Jewish texts that contain positive images and attitudes to Jewish women? Contemporary scholars often claim that Jewish men were able to divorce their wives at a whim, but no mention is made in such studies of the *ketubah*, the marriage contract, which was intended to protect a married woman's rights. Similarly, Jesus' statement to his opponents about casting the first stone (the woman caught in adultery) strikingly resembles a saying attributed to Rabbi Akiba: 'Only when the man is himself free from guilt, will the waters be an effective test of his wife's guilt or innocence'. This opinion is based on Hosea 4:14 (see Sifre Naso 21; b. Sotah 47b). Jewish texts also record the histories of women who held leadership roles, prophetic functions, public duties (cf. Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (1982). Note also inscriptional evidence from diaspora synagogues.

Can Jesus be described as a feminist or a reformer of Jewish patriarchy? Did he debate with the Pharisees on the question of gender, did he clearly seek to abolish certain laws? An attempt must also be made to treat the NT traditions as an important source for the history of Jewish women in the first century CE.

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