

A Feminist Companion to

John

Volume II

edited by

Amy-Jill Levine

with Marianne Blickenstaff



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WOMEN IN THE JOHANNINE COMMUNITY:
AN EXERCISE IN HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

Adele Reinhartz

Introduction

In their recent study of the Jesus movement, Ekkehard and Wolfgang Stegemann state categorically that 'significant socio-historical information about the situation of women in the Johannine community is not to be derived from texts' about women in the Fourth Gospel.¹ If by 'information' is meant 'hard facts' — 'facts' attested by multiple literary and material sources — then one can only agree with the Stegemanns' pessimistic assessment. Indeed, because the Fourth Gospel makes no explicit reference to the Johannine community at all, one might question the possibility of deriving any sociohistorical information whatsoever from this gospel.

In the historiography of the Jesus movement and early Christianity, however, 'information' often has a much less definitive character. The meager literary evidence is probed from all angles and mined for any hints at all of extra-textual reality. Complex strategies and methods are developed and applied precisely for the purposes of wresting 'information' — hypotheses, speculations, constructions — from texts that seem rather uninterested in history as we would understand it in our own time. In this paper, I will argue that the Fourth Gospel, far from being silent about the situation of women in the Johannine community, is actually a rich resource. The representation of women in the Gospel of John can tell us much not only about the situation of women in the Johannine community but also about the situation of the community as a whole within the broader religious and cultural context of Asia Minor in the late first century.

This claim is neither revolutionary nor iconoclastic. In reading the Fourth Gospel for the sociohistorical situation of women in the

1. Ekkehard W. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of its First Century* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 388.

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Johannine community I follow along a path that has been cleared by others before me over the last quarter century or more. Among those who preceded me are Raymond E. Brown, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Sandra Schneiders and Mary Rose D'Angelo. These scholars' studies of the women in the Gospel of John share the assumption that the text tells two stories simultaneously: the story of Jesus in early first-century Palestine and the story, that is, the history and experience, of the Johannine community in late first-century Asia Minor. For Brown, the prominence of female characters testifies to the central role of women in the Johannine community and to women's social parity with men.² Fiorenza examines closely the language used to describe the Johannine women and concludes that the representation of female characters not only reflects women's participation but also attributes formal leadership roles, such as deacon and apostle, to women in the Johannine community.³ Schneiders suggests that women, like men, functioned as the representatives of the community's faith and as witnesses to the gospel.⁴ D'Angelo explores the role of women in housechurches and as charismatic prophets. She notes that while gender was not an issue in the conflict between the Johannine group and the Jewish community, there was considerable tension within the Johannine community itself over the role of women.⁵

These scholars implicitly read the Gospel of John as both a story of Jesus and a story of the Johannine community. In this paper, I take this approach a step further by reading the pericopae depicting women in their interactions with Jesus rather strictly, perhaps even mechanically, as a direct reflection of the experience of women in the Johannine community. In doing so, I take my cue from J.L. Martyn, who argued that the gospel narrative allows one to discern the history of the community. In his book, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, Martyn

2. Raymond E. Brown, 'Roles of Women in the Gospel of John', *TS* 36 (1975), pp. 688-99; reprinted in *idem*, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 83-198.

3. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist-Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1984), pp. 323-33.

4. Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), pp. 93-114.

5. Mary Rose D'Angelo, '(Re)Presentations of Women in the Gospels: John and Mark', in Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (eds.), *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 129-49. See also, in the same volume, D'Angelo's 'Reconstructing "Real" Women from Gospel Literature: The Case of Mary Magdalene', pp. 105-28.

applies this strategy to John 9. Martyn reads this chapter on two levels: as the story of the man born blind and also as the story of a Christian preacher engaged in a controversy with the Jewish leadership of his time.⁶ The key point in Martyn's argument concerns 9.22, according to which the blind man's parents evaded the Jews' interrogation out of fear, 'for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the messiah would be put out of the synagogue'. Martyn argues that the fear of the blind man's parents reflects a specific experience of the Johannine community, namely, its expulsion from the synagogue on account of its faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. Elsewhere I have expressed in detail my reservations about this theory on the basis of historical, literary and theological considerations. That the Jewish community possessed the mechanisms for expelling non-conformists is doubtful. From a literary perspective, other passages within the gospel present a rather different model for the relationship between the Johannine and Jewish communities. From a theological point of view, the attempt to account for, or to excuse, the anti-Jewish rhetoric of the gospel by calling it a response to expulsion is merely another way of casting responsibility back upon the Jews themselves.⁷ These considerations raise some questions that have yet to be addressed within the mainstream of Johannine scholarship.

The two-level reading strategy itself is also problematic. On the one hand it seems eminently plausible in that it follows the basic insight that the gospel reflects 'what ancient authors and audiences took as plausible, unremarkable and the givens of ordinary social life'.⁸ On closer inspection, however, the strategy seems flawed in several ways. First, there is no indication within the gospel itself that it is meant to be read as anything but a story of Jesus, set within the context of the story of the cosmos.⁹ When the narrator stresses that his story is true, he refers to its status as a true story of Jesus. John 19.35 declares that the testimony of the

6. J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2nd edn, 1979). The approach was also taken up by R.E. Brown in his *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*.

7. See especially my 'The Johannine Community and its Jewish Neighbors: A Reappraisal', in Fernando F. Segovia (ed.), *What Is John?: Literary and Social Readings* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), II, pp. 111-38.

8. Ross Shepard Kraemer, 'Jewish Women and Christian Origins: Some Caveats', in R.S. Kraemer and M.R. D'Angelo (eds.), *Women and Christian Origins*, pp. 35-49.

9. On the various narrative levels in the Fourth Gospel, see Adele Reinhartz, *The Word in the World: The Cosmological Tale in the Fourth Gospel* (SBLMS, 45; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), and *idem*, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

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one who witnessed the emission of water and blood from the wound in Jesus' side 'is true and he knows that he tells the truth'. John 21.24 makes a similar point in its reference to the implied author of the gospel as a whole: 'This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.' Second, the two-level reading strategy is circular, for it reads the text as a reflection of the history of the community and then uses that history as a way of accounting for the features of the text itself. For example, proponents of the expulsion theory argue that the hostile remarks Jesus makes about and to the Jews, as in 8.44, where he declares that their father is the devil, are a response to the trauma of expulsion and express the ongoing hostility between the Johannine and Jewish communities.

These arguments, however, do not militate against the use of the two-level reading. Rather, they emphasize the need for both caution and humility. They remind us that as we engage in the historical enterprise of constructing the Johannine community and the roles of women within it, we must not lose sight of the hypothetical nature of our results. The very existence of a Johannine community, while it is obvious to Johannine scholars and has taken on a solid reality, is itself hypothetical. The letters of John seem to demand the existence of such a community, as does our understanding of the Fourth Gospel as being addressed to a specific audience. But the absence of external evidence for a specifically Johannine community must not be forgotten. It is all too easy to attribute historical reality, complete with floor plan, demographic statistics and detailed chronology, to what is only a constructed model, and a highly speculative one at that.

Keeping these cautions in mind, I will proceed with a two-level reading of the Fourth Gospel's stories featuring women. I do not expect to uncover the historical realities of women's lives in the Johannine community, if indeed there was such an entity. Rather, I view this enterprise as an exercise in historical imagination. A two-level reading will provide some raw materials with which to construct one or more models for the role of women that may prompt a rethinking not only of the gender roles in this hypothetical community but also of the structure and social situation of the community as a whole.

In applying this strategy, I take the following steps. I begin with the narratives in which women have central roles. In examining these passages, I will focus primarily on the structure of relationships in which the women figures act. I will then move to a second-level reading by positing that this structure is plausible within the extra-textual experience of a community. Next, I will make a rather mechanical set of identifications that remain constant throughout the analysis. It must be

emphasized that these are not the only possible or plausible identifications. I restrict myself to this set in order to illustrate simply and clearly the potential inherent in this method for sociohistorical investigation of the role of women within the hypothetical community. In this study, therefore, I will make the following assumptions: (a) that the Beloved Disciple represents the leader of the community; (b) that the disciples and the other believers who travel with Jesus represent the core of the Johannine community; (c) that other characters represent particular religious or ethnic communities, such as the Jews, the Samaritans or the Gentiles; (d) that those who are sympathetic to Jesus may be seen as being in some sort of positive relationship with the Johannine community, as members, sympathizers or hangers on (those who are shown as not believing would be in conflict with the Johannine community); (e) that the unaffiliated crowds represent the unaffiliated population among whom the Johannine community lives; (f) that Jesus represents, or rather is himself the content of Christian faith, the gospel that is preached within and by the community and encountered in a variety of ways, including the activity of the paraclete, the testimony of witnesses and other disciples, and through reading the gospel itself (cf. 20.30-31).

I now turn to a two-level reading of each of the female characters in the gospel. In each case I will address two questions. First, what does such a reading suggest with respect to the women's roles within the Johannine community? Second, what might such a reading contribute to our construction of the community as a whole?

The Mother of Jesus (2.1-11)

The mother of Jesus appears in two pericopae: the wedding at Cana (2.1-11) and Jesus' crucifixion (19.25-27). At the wedding, she notices that the wine has run out. She points this out to her son Jesus, thereby implying her confidence that he is capable of remedying the situation. He responds with a mild rebuke that sets a distance between them: 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come' (2.4). Jesus' mother seems unperturbed at this apparent refusal to comply with her implied request. She goes ahead and instructs the servants that they should do whatever he tells them to do. Contrary to expectations, Jesus now sets about addressing the problem by instructing the servants to fill the water jars, present for the Jewish rite of handwashing before the meal, and then to draw out the wine that has miraculously replaced the water. The quality of the wine is confirmed by the chief steward, who remarks, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now' (2.10). This sign demonstrates Jesus' glory, and the disciples

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believe in him. Jesus' mother, the rest of the family and the disciples then depart Cana for Capernaum.

Within the Johannine story, Jesus' mother emerges as a figure of prophetic knowledge and authority. Her authority with respect to Jesus is expressed in her knowledge of him and her confidence in his abilities. This knowledge and confidence form the basis of the authority she has with respect to the servants, and her ability to initiate events will reveal Jesus' glory publicly and become a basis for belief. In addition, she specifies the response that is needed in order to bring about these revelatory events, namely, obedience to Jesus' word. The water will not turn into wine and reveal Jesus' glory unless the servants obey Jesus by filling the water jars and drawing out the wine. The call to obedience is reinforced elsewhere in the gospel, as in 14.21, in which Jesus declares that 'they who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them'.

Although the narrator defines her as Jesus' mother, Jesus himself does not refer to her in this way, but calls her 'woman'. This label draws attention away from her unique role as the one who gave birth to him, a role that is not narrated or stressed in this gospel. While it might appear to draw attention in particular to her gender as woman, a quick glance at the places in which Jesus calls other women in this fashion indicates that in fact it draws attention to a revelation he is about to grant them. In 4.21, Jesus declares to the Samaritan woman, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem,' and so reveals an important element of future faith. In 20.15, Jesus asks Mary Magdalene, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?' as a prelude to revealing himself to her as the risen Lord. This pattern suggests that in 2.4 the use of the vocative 'Woman' signals the revelation of Jesus' glory that will come about through the miracle that Jesus' mother has initiated by her request and her confidence that he will comply. At the same time, the narrator's references to her as Jesus' mother stress the generational element, that is, the fact that she is a generation older than Jesus. Finally, Jesus' mother is closely associated with Jesus, his disciples and his brothers, all of whom travel to Cana for the wedding and then to Capernaum afterwards.

If we transpose this picture to the story of a community, the mother emerges as a woman at its core. She is not necessarily a unique figure, but rather may signal the presence or prominence of elder wise women in the community.¹⁰ She has prophetic powers that stem from a

10. That women elders (or elderly women) had a valued role in some first-century

profound knowledge of and faith in Jesus. She exercises leadership insofar as she teaches the importance of obedience and thereby facilitates the sort of events that will strengthen the faith of those who participate in and witness them.

Some of these same elements emerge in the second passage in which she appears, 19.25-27. The narrator tells us that the mother of Jesus, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene were present at the foot of the cross. Just before he dies, Jesus gives his mother into the care of the Beloved Disciple and declares that she is now his mother while he is now her son. On one level, this act suggests that the Beloved Disciple replaces Jesus as his mother's son and that he must now care for her – take her into his home – as Jesus would have done had he remained in this world. But on a second-level reading, this scene reinforces the image of Jesus' mother as representing elder female leadership at the core of the community. This role should be understood not as a reference to age *per se*, but rather as a generational designation. Jesus' mother is in effect Jesus' brother and hence of the same generation.¹¹

The suggestion that the mother of Jesus represents elder wise women in the community is supported by her anonymity in the two passages in which she appears. That the mother remains anonymous is often overlooked by readers who freely supply the name 'Mary' based on the gospels of Matthew and Luke.¹² David Beck has argued that from a literary point of view the anonymity of this woman, as well as of other significant characters in the gospel, facilitates the readers' identification

communities is suggested by a number of texts. A fragmentary text from the Dead Sea, 4Q502, apparently refers to an assembly of male and female leaders (*zekanim* and *zekanot*). See Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar (eds. and trans.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*. II. Q272-11Q31 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998), pp. 995-97. For an analysis, see Joseph Baumgarten, '4Q502, Marriage or Golden Age Ritual?', *JJS* 34 (1983), pp. 125-35. See also Philo, *Vit. Cont.* 68, which refers to women elders among the Therapeutae, and *Hypothetica* 11.13, which may refer to older women among the Essenes. 1 Tim. 5.9-15 implies that early Christian communities may also have included orders of older widows.

11. This move may also suggest that the true heirs of Jesus' revelation are not Jesus' brothers, whom one might have expected to have been entrusted with their mother's care, but rather the Beloved Disciple, that is, the founder of the Johannine community. This may be one way for the community to legitimate its own authority as the authentic locus of ongoing Christian revelation, in opposition or contrast to other Christian communities. Many thanks to Amy-Jill Levine for this suggestion (oral communication, 17 Nov, 2000).

12. This error is committed by the Stegemanns (*Jesus Movement*, p. 388), who incorrectly indicate that Jesus' mother is explicitly named Mary in the Fourth Gospel.

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with these figures and thereby invites readers to place themselves within the narrative.¹³ My own analysis of anonymity in Hebrew narrative from Genesis through 2 Kings suggests that anonymity of significant characters draws attention to the social roles by which they are identified. In the case of Jesus' mother, it is difficult to argue that her anonymity invites identification precisely because the social role that defines her is a unique one to which no reader can aspire. But if she is understood as representing wise female elders, then the 'mother' designation could underscore this generational difference between herself and the male leaders represented by the Beloved Disciple.

The Samaritan Woman (4.1-42)

The second woman who appears in this gospel is the Samaritan woman (Jn 4.1-44). Like Jesus' mother, she is unnamed, though we learn, from Jesus' insight into her background, that she (apparently) has had several husbands and that she is not married to her current partner.¹⁴ The Samaritan woman meets Jesus at the well in Sychar, or, from the context, just outside of the city (cf. 4.8, 28). She is surprised when he asks her for water, for, according to the narrator, 'Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans' (4.9). An intense theological discussion ensues, during which Jesus promises an imminent transformation in spirituality, when worship will not occur on Mount Gerizim or on Mount Zion, but all will worship God 'in spirit and in truth' (4.23). During this encounter, the Samaritan woman begins to suspect that Jesus is the Messiah (4.25). She goes back into the city to testify to her fellow Samaritans (4.28). That she has undergone a fundamental change through this encounter is indicated by the fact that she left her water jug behind; as one who possesses the water of eternal life, she no longer needs the tools associated with the tasks of everyday life, including drawing water from the well.

The Samaritans invite Jesus to stay with them and declare that their faith is now no longer based on her testimony. The woman's role as an apostle is confirmed by the conversation between Jesus and the disciples

13. David R. Beck, 'The Narrative Function of Anonymity in Fourth Gospel Characterization', in Adele Berlin and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (eds.), *Characterization in Biblical Literature* (Semeia, 63; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 143-58.

14. The Samaritan woman's five husbands have at times been interpreted symbolically or allegorically, for example, as the five books of Moses, or as the five gods that the Assyrians introduced in the course of their conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. None of these interpretations is convincing, however. For a brief discussion, see R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols.; AB, 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), I, p. 171.

that interrupts the narration of her departure for the city and the Samaritans' approach to Jesus. The disciples have brought Jesus some food from the city, presumably the Samaritan city to which the woman has returned. He engages them in discourse about the harvest, in which he declares:

The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps'. I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor (4.36-38).

The conversation is obscure, that is, it is difficult to determine who the reaper is and exactly what the harvest is, and most problematic, how is it that 'one sows and another reaps' (4.37). Nevertheless, the context identifies the Samaritan woman as someone who has sown the divine word in her community.

Like Jesus' mother, the Samaritan woman remains anonymous. In her case, anonymity draws attention to her identification as a Samaritan. This woman is defined by an ethnic-religious marker, in contrast to the named women, Mary and Martha of Bethany and Mary Magdalene, who are never referred to as Jews though they are. This observation suggests that she is unique precisely as the only non-Jewish apostle and witness. Her anonymity may imply the presence of non-Jewish women in the community, and it allows us to credit them with success in leading others of their group to the Johannine understanding of Christology.

That the disciples remark upon the fact that Jesus speaks with a woman may suggest some tensions within the community regarding the role of women, but these are silenced by Jesus — the paraclete? the leadership? — himself. It is also significant that she, like Jesus' mother, is called 'woman'. In 4.21 Jesus declares, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.' The declaration serves to draw attention not so much to her gender but to the revelatory content of Jesus' message to her. This implies that she is capable of receiving, and potentially understanding, such revelation. On a second-level reading, Jesus' address marks her as a recipient of divine revelation.

The age of the woman in this case is not known; the references to her husbands indicate that she is an adult; the allusion to the biblical betrothal motif ('boy meets girl at well') implies that she is of the same generation as Jesus.¹⁵ The fact that she encounters Jesus at a well near

15. For a detailed analysis of John 4 against the background of biblical betrothal stories, see Lyle Eslinger, 'The Wooing of the Woman at the Well', *Journal of Literature and Theology* 1 (1987), pp. 167-83.

but not within the geographical boundaries of her community may imply that she has gained her knowledge of and commitment to this message while she was away from the community, and that she then returned in order to preach to them.

Mary and Martha (11.1-44; 12.1-8)

The siblings Mary, Martha and Lazarus of Bethany are believers in and followers of Jesus, and are loved by him. When Lazarus falls mortally ill, his sisters call on Jesus to heal him. Jesus delays, however, and arrives in Bethany only after Lazarus has died. Jesus finds the sisters in mourning, in the company of many Jews. He converses first with Martha and then with Mary. Martha engages Jesus in a discussion of resurrection, during which he promises eternal life to those who believe. Martha then confesses Jesus to be the Messiah and Son of God (11.27). This is followed by a separate conversation between Jesus and Mary. Mary kneels at Jesus' feet and repeats the accusation, but he does not respond to her directly. This instead leads into the miracle itself, the rolling away of the stone from the tomb and Jesus' calling Lazarus out to renewed life. Shortly before the Passover, Jesus and his disciples, and perhaps others, were hosted for dinner by the Bethany siblings. Martha serves; Mary anoints Jesus' feet with a pound of expensive perfume made of pure nard. This act, criticized by Judas as a waste of money, is interpreted by Jesus as a prophecy of and preparation for his imminent death and burial.

On a second-level reading, the Bethany siblings represent a household of believers in the Johannine form of Christianity. Their identification as siblings does not necessarily denote a familial relationship as such but could refer to close partners in the work of the church.¹⁶ In her confession, Martha articulates the faith of the community. For this reason Schüssler Fiorenza refers to her as a spokesperson of the Johannine community.¹⁷ This role is underscored by the note that Martha served (*διακονεῖν*) at the table, hinting at the role of women as deacons who formally 'serve' the community. Before the raising of Lazarus, Mary kneels at Jesus' feet, implying the utter commitment of at least some women to Johannine Christology. Mary's anointing Jesus may represent the activity of women prophets in the community.

That a large number of Jews come to console the sisters in their mourning suggests that they consider the Bethany siblings to be part of

16. Or, or even, in the case of the sisters Mary and Martha, to intimate friends, though this seems unlikely from the context. D'Angelo, 'Reconstructing "Real" Women', p. 108.

17. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, p. 349.

their own community, in contrast to the impression that some of the hostile rhetoric in other parts of the gospel might suggest. These neighbors clearly know about the connection between the family and Jesus, since they too express the view that Jesus could have come earlier and so healed Lazarus. But this connection does not seem to bother them or render them anything but curious. It is also notable that Martha and Mary do not engage in any evangelizing activity in this story. The fact that some witnesses to the raising of Lazarus become believers while others go to the authorities is not related to any direct effort on the sisters' part. John 11 therefore implies the existence of followers who do not live in a closed community but who live among others, most likely of their own ethnic and religious background. Such living arrangements would allow for proselytism but would not require it. The absence of hostility may indicate the possibility that the Jewish community, in some places at least, did not exclude those who professed faith in Jesus as messiah. That Mary and Martha continue to practice their forms of religiosity raises the question of whether or not converts to the Johannine form of Christianity relinquished their previous faith practices and affiliations. Because the Bethany sisters, like the Samaritan woman, continued to live within their communities of ethnic and religious origin, we may speculate that believers were not required to give up their previous lifestyles and practices upon affiliating with the Johannine community.

The portrayal of Mary and Martha within John 11 raises the possibility that the hostility between the followers of Jesus and the Jews that is fundamental to the plot and rhetoric of the gospel was not part of the historical experience of the Johannine community. Perhaps Jewish believers in Jesus, like the Bethany siblings, lived their lives fully supported socially within the Jewish community. This construction is plausible if we understand first-century Judaism as focused more on praxis than on belief; as long as the Jews within the Johannine community continued to live, worship and die as Jews, then perhaps their specific christological beliefs may not have been of grave concern to the Jews around them.

Mary Magdalene (20.1-18)

Early on the morning of the third day after Jesus' death, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb only to find that the stone that had sealed the tomb's opening has been removed and Jesus' body gone. Mary runs to report this distressing fact to Simon Peter and the other disciples. Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple hasten to the tomb, enter, and see that it is empty, but they do not understand what has happened. They depart,

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leaving Mary once again alone. Mary, continuing to weep, looks into the tomb, where she sees two angels in white who ask her why she is weeping. She replies, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him' (20.13). She then turns around and sees Jesus. She does not recognize him but believes him to be the gardener. He too asks why she is weeping, and she asks whether he has removed the body, and if so, if he could tell her where it is so that she can claim it. Jesus then calls her by name, and she responds, 'Rabbouni', 'my teacher' (20.16). Jesus warns her not to touch (or hold onto) him, because 'I have not yet ascended to the Father'. She should instead go to the disciples and tell them that 'I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God' (20.17). She complies, and so departs from the narrative.

Mary Magdalene's devotion to Jesus is clear. She stands at the foot of the cross, is apparently the first or initially the only person who has the idea of visiting the tomb, and she is concerned about the fate of Jesus' body. The erotic overtones of the passages also speak to a close relationship.¹⁸ Her receiving the first vision of the risen Lord and being given a message to carry to the other disciples speak to her role as witness and 'apostle to the apostles'. In asking Mary, 'Whom are you seeking?' Jesus evokes the call of the first disciples in 1.38 and thus establishes continuity between them and Mary.¹⁹ In identifying her by name, Jesus is acting out the role of the good shepherd who calls his own sheep (10.26). Mary's recognition of Jesus as 'Rabbouni' indicates that she is a member of his flock (10.27) and demonstrates that she is a true disciple who recognizes the resurrected Jesus as teacher.²⁰

On a second-level reading, this portrayal supports the possibility that women participated in the Johannine community and that their knowledge, understanding and devotion were valued by the community. But the story also implies that despite her special role, Mary Magdalene was not among the leadership. That she runs to the disciples with the news of the empty tomb implies that she ascribes to them an understanding and authority superior to her own. This ascription is undermined to some extent by the rest of the story, but the structure of her relationship with

18. For a detailed analysis of Jn 20.1-18, see Adele Reinhartz, 'To Love the Lord: An Intertextual Reading of John 20', in Fiona Black, Roland Boer, Christian Kelm and Erin Runions (eds.), *The Labour of Reading: Desire, Alienation, and Biblical Interpretation* (SBLSS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 56-69.

19. Gail O'Day, 'John', in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 293-304 (301).

20. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, p. 333.

the disciples is not altered. After seeing and interacting with the risen Jesus, she reports his words to the disciples but she does not become one of them. These elements complicate the attempt to see Mary Magdalene as representative of women in the inner circle of community leadership.

Women in the Johannine Community

A second-level reading of the pericopae featuring women provides a basis for speculating about women's roles in the Johannine community. The prominence of women in the gospel suggests that women were included within the community, and that most of them were Jewish. It is noteworthy, though not decisive, that the gospel's only non-Jewish woman is a Samaritan; the absence of Gentile women may imply their absence from the community at the time the gospel reached its final form.

The positive tone of the passages and the respectful, even admiring, attitude that the Fourth Evangelist conveys towards these women implies that they were respected and admired within the community itself. The specific roles that the women play may mirror the roles they may have held within the community, as teachers, spiritual leaders, prophets, apostles, theologians. Within the narrative, the women's authority for these roles is grounded in and derives from their direct encounters with Jesus and their profound acceptance and understanding of his message, identity and significance for humankind. Within the community, their roles imply that they are in possession of the paraclete—the Spirit of truth—that Jesus promised to send to his followers (14.16; 16.7). The activity of the paraclete is to teach, to remind Jesus' followers of all that he had said (14.26), to testify on his behalf (15.26), and to prove the world wrong about sin, righteousness and judgment (16.8). The acts of these women within the narrative, and, on a second-level reading, within the Johannine community, fit into these definitions. For this reason, we may see them as vehicles through which the paraclete carries out his activities within the community. These factors imply that women were not only participants but also leaders in the community, at least in the sense that they helped to gather new members from outside and to impart knowledge to those within.

Yet the question remains: were women included in the formal leadership of the community? This question presumes that there existed a formal leadership, a point that not all scholars would accede. On the one hand, the scene in which Jesus washes the feet of his disciples is seen as accentuating the essential equality of all, master and servant alike (13.16). On the other hand, the portrayal of the Beloved Disciple and Peter implies a competition between two men for leadership, or at least

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some tension between which Peter as mediator of the two disciples as disciples belonging to the closest association in the community is

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some tension between them on this point. This is apparent in John 13, in which Peter asks Jesus for the identity of his betrayer through the mediation of the Beloved Disciple (13.24), and in 20.3-9, in which the two disciples apparently race each other to the empty tomb. These two disciples belong to a group that travels with Jesus and appears to be his closest associates. Their existence in the narrative implies that within the community itself an inner circle takes on formal leadership.

The portrayal of Jesus' mother in 19.25-27 implies that at least she, or the category of elder wise women whom she may represent, was included in the core of community leadership by virtue of her maternal relationship with Jesus and then the Beloved Disciple. Whether other women were similarly included is more difficult to ascertain. One way to address this question is to look at the gospel's understanding of discipleship, as it may be extrapolated from the usage of the term 'disciple' within the narrative. In doing so, however, a problem arises immediately, for the term μαθηταί, 'disciples', is used in two distinct ways. In some passages μαθηταί, as well as the related term ἀδελφοί (literally, 'brethren'; possibly meaning 'brothers and sisters', 20.17),²¹ seems to be understood broadly as referring to followers of and believers in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. This usage is apparent particularly in John 6, which describes the difficulty that 'many of his disciples' had with some of Jesus' teachings (6.60). The fact that Jesus' brothers urge him to travel to Judea 'so that your disciples may also see the works you are doing' (7.3) implies a following that extends beyond the people who customarily traveled with Jesus. The man born blind is reviled by the Pharisees as a disciple of Jesus because he believes in Jesus' healing abilities (9.27). A broad understanding of the term is also evident in 15.8, in which Jesus urges his listeners to bear much fruit and become his disciples. Because all of the women characters in the gospel are, or become, followers of Jesus, they can be called 'disciples' under this general definition.

Other passages in which the term 'disciple' occurs imply a more formal and specific usage referring to those followers who accompanied Jesus on his travels and were his most regular audience. This narrower usage is apparent in the stories describing the call of the first disciples (1.35-51) and in John 4, in which the disciples' role seems to be to provide Jesus with the necessities of life as they travel through the countryside. The restrictive use of the term is implied particularly in the

21. Cf. Sandra M. Schneiders, 'John 20.11-18: The Encounter of the Easter Jesus with Mary Magdalene – A Transformative Feminist Reading', in Segovia (ed.), *What Is John?': Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, I, pp. 155-68.

passages describing Jesus' final meal, his farewell discourses and his passion. In these sections, spanning John 13-21, Jesus is secluded with the disciples, and the settings imply that these are a small number of his closest associates. Nowhere is the precise number or identity of these disciples specified.²² This gap provides an opening for those who wish to argue that the women portrayed in such positive terms could have been included among this group within the narrative, and hence within the Johannine community as well.

Yet the Beloved Disciple's account contains too much ambiguity to allow for this case to be made as forcefully as I might like. No individual woman is explicitly designated as a disciple nor are women included among the group identified as such. The fact that Jesus' disciples marvel that he was talking with a woman in 4.27 suggests that no women were among them. No women are mentioned in John 6, in which the disciples follow Jesus from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other, nor in the foot-washing scene in John 13.

The strongest female candidate for inclusion among the disciples is Mary Magdalene, who alone is granted the first vision of the risen lord and is commissioned to carry the message of resurrection to the others. Yet here too the matter is difficult to resolve. Alison Jasper, for example, argues that although Mary is commissioned as a messenger, she is no more than this. The message she takes to Jesus' brethren is addressed not to her but to them.²³ In Jasper's reading, Mary is a mere vehicle for the message; what is important from Jesus' perspective is not that she understand, but that the disciples hear and comprehend. Claudia Setzer points to a more straightforward exegetical basis for questioning whether Mary is a disciple. In 21.14 enumerates the risen Jesus' appearance in Galilee as the third of his encounters with his disciples. This enumeration implies, of course, that there were two previous visits. John 20 clearly recounts two such appearances — 20.19-23 and 20.26-29 — in which Jesus appears to a group of disciples in Jerusalem. One may therefore infer that the narrator does not consider 20.1-18 to be an account of an appearance to a disciple and hence that Mary is not among the group designated as disciples.²⁴

22. The 'Twelve' are mentioned only in 6.67, perhaps to distinguish Jesus' closest associates from the multitude of disciples who had abandoned him in the wake of his difficult teachings.

23. Alison Jasper, 'Interpretative Approaches to John 20.1-18: Mary at the Tomb of Jesus', *ST* 47 (1993), pp. 107-18 (113).

24. Claudia Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians: History and Polemics*, 30-150 C.E. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 268. It must be noted, however, that the Johannine narrative is not always consistent in its enumeration. John 4.54 refers to the

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To complicate matters, John 20 implies that there is considerable tension between Mary Magdalene and the group explicitly designated as disciples. Mary runs to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple immediately after discovering that the stone has been removed from the tomb. Although she has apparently not yet looked within the tomb, she reports that 'they' — some unnamed group — have taken the Lord (20.2). That she turns to them so quickly demonstrates her recognition of their authority, to which she is subordinate. Her report implies not only their 'need to know' but also the hope that they will be able to remedy the situation, that is, to find the body or explain its absence. The disciples disappoint her. Although they respond to her report with some urgency, they fail to understand, and they fail to remain. Without investigating further, they simply return home and leave Mary at the tomb without answers or help.

Mary's response to encountering the risen Lord both recalls and reverses this set of events. She now runs to the disciples again. Her second report reveals the location of Jesus' body, thereby solving the puzzle that the disciples could not answer earlier. Her prefatory comment, 'I have seen the Lord' (20.18), is not simply a description of a wondrous experience but her badge of authority as messenger.

Mary's exclusive knowledge of the risen Lord could have signaled a shift in the formal structures of authority. The narrative could have continued with a series of events that would have consolidated Mary's own authority based on the pivotal fact that Jesus provided her alone with the solution to the puzzle and acted through her to convey the solution to the disciples. He could have had the disciples rejoice at hearing the word, just as the noble father of the ill child in 4.53 rejoiced when his servants reported that his child was now well. Such a scenario would have fit in very well with the gospel's emphasis on belief through hearing the word as expressed by Jesus to Thomas: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe' (20.29). How delightful it would have been had Jesus conferred the Holy Spirit and its attendant authority over sin upon Mary, as the one who had remained at the tomb, sought him and believed.

But the narrative does not unfold in this way. Instead, the gospel is

healing of the nobleman's son as the 'second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee', though it would seem that in fact this healing was Jesus' third sign as narrated in the gospel. For this reason, the enumeration of Jesus' appearances may also be construed as inconsistent, in that it omits the appearance to Mary Magdalene. On the other hand, the present enumeration implies that the appearance to Mary did not count in the enumeration of appearances to disciples because she was not considered to be a disciple.

silent about the disciples' reception of Mary's proclamation. This silence dismantles Mary's authority that had been built up so carefully in 20.17-18 and instead restores the reader's attention, as well as the locus of authority, to the disciples through the three resurrection appearances they are granted and, even more so, through the elevation of Simon Peter to the role of shepherd of the flock (John 21). Mary appears no more.

Therefore, as a communication to the disciples, Mary's report is superfluous and abortive. This is not to undermine the importance of Mary to the narrative and to the implied author. After all, she is the first to see the risen Lord, and she is entrusted by him with a message to the disciples. Nevertheless, the text falls short of describing her as an important leader. A second-level reading would therefore refrain from identifying her with formal female leadership within the church.

The gospel's portrayal of women is fraught with ambiguity; arguments can be mounted both in favor of their inclusion among the disciples and for their exclusion from that group. Rather than choose one option or the other, we may consider the ambiguity significant itself. Perhaps ambiguity within the narrative is evidence of ambivalence within the Johannine community. We may speculate that the Fourth Gospel testifies to a struggle over the place of women within the community, particularly with respect to women of the same generation as the male leadership. At the same time, a second-level reading suggests that the community may have viewed at least some women as vehicles of revelation, prophecy and instruction.

A charitable and even more speculative view might suggest that the Fourth Evangelist, the implied author, may have been caught among several forces. One was received tradition, according to which the group of close disciples, perhaps numbering 12, did not include women. Another may have been the resistance of the community, which may have constrained him from using the term 'disciple' explicitly for women even in the broader sense of follower or believer. A third may have been his own inclination to include women in such leadership, as evidenced by his giving women such prominent roles in his narrative.²⁵

Nature of the Johannine Community

The portrayal of women in the Fourth Gospel has implications not just for the role of women in the Johannine community but also for the

25. My use of the masculine pronoun to refer to the Fourth Evangelist is deliberate; despite the prominence of women in this gospel compared to the synoptics, the predominant point of view is masculine. I see no basis on which to attribute female authorship or female-implied authorship to this gospel.

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nature and structure of the group itself. Most discussions of the community imply that it was self-contained, tightly knit and concentrated in a particular location, such as Ephesus, where it existed in a hostile relationship to the larger Jewish community. The theory that the Johannine group was closed and inward looking was convincingly argued by Wayne Meeks in his classic essay, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism'.²⁶ Meeks views the Johannine community as a group that had to defend and define itself over against other groups, including the non-believing Jews as well as other non-Johannine believers in Jesus as the Messiah. The story describes the progressive alienation of Jesus from the Jews. At the same time, those who do respond to Jesus' signs and words are drawn into intense intimacy with him and become similarly detached from the world. This pattern signals the insularity of the Johannine group, and its alienation from the Jewish community. Says Meeks:

Now their [the believers'] becoming detached from the world is, in the Gospel, identical with their being detached from Judaism. Those figures who want to 'believe' in Jesus but to remain within the Jewish community and the Jewish piety are damned with the most devastating dualistic epithets... But something [other than expulsion] is to be seen: coming to faith in Jesus is for the Johannine group a change in social location. Mere belief without joining the Johannine community, without making the decisive break with 'the world', particularly the world of Judaism, is a diabolic 'lie'.²⁷

For this group, faith in Jesus meant a removal from 'the world' and transfer to a closed community that saw itself as living in some sense beyond the bounds of this world. The Fourth Gospel not only describes the birth of that community but also reinforces the community's isolation.

But if we read the passages about women, a different impression emerges. A second-level reading suggests that at least in some cases—represented by the Samaritan woman, Mary and Martha—believers remained within their own communities, thereby creating a network of believers to whom the leaders of the community or other communities could travel. This possibility may also be intimated by Jesus' revelation to the Samaritan woman that the time is coming when worship will not be localized in a particular site such as Zion or Gerizim, but rather will focus on the Father in a way unmediated by sacred place.

Because the stories about women are relatively free of tension between

26. Wayne Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91 (1972), pp. 44-72.

27. Meeks, 'Man from Heaven', p. 70.

the Jews and the believers, we may speculate that at least in some situations, believers lived in a relatively easy relationship with Jews and other non-believers around them. This possibility provides an interesting perspective on Jesus' last prayer, in which he refers to those whom God had given him (Jn 17.6), thereby denoting the entire community in its diversity:

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong in the world, just as I do not belong in the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world (17.14-18).

In light of the observations above, this prayer may be read as a reference to the scattering of believers among 'the world', that is, within a variety of communities in which the majority perhaps does not agree with their views. The protection that believers require in such a situation may be physical; this is intimated by 16.2 where Jesus warns his disciples that they will be persecuted or even killed. But it is also possible that believers will need religious or spiritual protection as well. It may be that, from the point of view of the Johannine leadership, those believers who continue to live among their communities of origin are in danger of backsliding, an eventuality that would be seen as the work of the evil one and as a retreat from the truth.²⁸

Conclusions

A second-level reading of the stories about women in the Fourth Gospel challenges at least part of the consensus both about women in the Johannine community and about the nature of the community as a whole. With respect to women, this approach allows us to fill in some of their roles but also draws attention to the ambiguity of their situations. The

28. This possibility is suggested by a number of commentators. R. Alan Culpepper, for example, suggests that the gospel may be tacitly warning Johannine Christians against seeking to return to the Jewish fold, which, from the Johannine perspective, is incompatible with full faith in Jesus as the Messiah. See R. Alan Culpepper, 'The Gospel of John and the Jews', *RevExp* 84 (1987), pp. 273-88 (281). Reuven Kimelman raises the possibility that 'the whole charge [of exclusion and persecution] was concocted to persuade Christians to stay away from the synagogue by making them believe that they would be received with hostility'. Reuven Kimelman, 'Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity', in E.P. Sanders *et al.* (eds.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* (3 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), II, pp. 234-35.

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stories also suggest that the community itself may have been a more complex, or perhaps a more amorphous, more worldly and less beleaguered group than has emerged from other studies. Both of these areas warrant further study, perhaps drawing into the discussion external evidence for the structure of other early Christian communities.

It is well to remember at the conclusion of this brief study the warnings issued at the beginning, namely, that this exercise can only be speculative. First, the second-level readings proposed here are not definitive; each of the stories featuring women can be read, at both the first and second levels, in a variety of ways.²⁹ Second, the cautionary words regarding the very enterprise of reading the gospel for the history of the Johannine community still remain. Nevertheless, the exercise suggests that the Stegemanns may have been too hasty, or perhaps too rigid, when they dismissed these stories as providing no sociohistorical 'information' about the situation of women in the Johannine community.

29. I am grateful for the many excellent alternative readings proposed by the students in 'Feminist Interpretations of Scripture' (Professor Amy-Jill Levine, Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, TN), to whom I presented part of this material on 17 Nov. 2000.