

Yet, given a wider view of the narrative, it soon becomes clear that even in this heavily dualistic gospel, we do not have something so clear as an opposition between male and female. There are instances when male characters are favorably depicted. The most impressive example is found in the man born blind (ch. 9). He is not placed in opposition to a female character, but instead does battle with Jesus' opposition. Likewise, in spite of the contrast with Mary Magdalene in ch. 20, the Beloved Disciple is certainly intended to embody positive values in the narrative. So if gender is not clearly part of the dualism of the gospel, what can be said about the gender contrasts discussed above and can anything be said about the function of gender in general in the gospel?

The Earthly and Heavenly Dimensions of Gender in the Gospel of John

As suggested earlier, gender representations function in at least two levels in this narrative, what I have called the heavenly realm and the earthly realm. First, at the earthly level, the use of gender contrasts outlined above implies a critique of and challenge to traditional institutional authorities. The contrasts between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman and between Martha and Peter are perhaps most telling in this regard. Nicodemus represents the established Jewish authorities, and Peter the emerging establishment of the church. Against their claims to authority are placed the images of an anonymous foreign woman (the Samaritan woman) and beloved female followers of Jesus (Martha and Mary Magdalene).

Similar ideas about the role of Johannine women have been posited in various ways by recent interpreters. In his study of Johannine women, Brown suggests that they may represent a critique of ecclesial authority. Noting especially Martha's confession in the narrative he argues:

at a time when the twelve apostles were becoming dominant in the memory of the ministry of Jesus and of church origins, John portrays Simon Peter as only one of a number of heroes and heroines and thus hints that ecclesiastical authority is not the sole criterion for judging importance in the following of Jesus.³⁹

39. Brown, 'Roles of Women', pp. 693-94. Here it is clear that Brown does not see the women as surpassing the men, as I have argued, but standing alongside them. Indeed, he takes pains to make the point that what he calls the substitution of Martha for Peter 'was not meant to denigrate Peter or deny him a role of ecclesiastical authority' (p. 693). Still, it seems to me that the addition of ch. 21 points to the fact that Peter's role in the gospel proper is diminished and demanded attention from early redactors of the gospel.

Pushing the point a bit further than Brown, John Rena asks:

Is the prominence of women part of a Johannine effort to limit or to control the influence of the Twelve? Or, to put the issue in a broader frame of reference, is John worried about authority figures?... I think that John uses the women, who are obviously not members of the Twelve if one knows traditions about the life of Jesus, as part of a subtle polemic against anything that threatens the Lordship of Christ, the Son of God. There is at least an implicit warning that human authority can threaten the unity of the one shepherd with His one flock.⁴⁰

When we compare the presentation of women with such male characters as Peter, Nicodemus and Pilate (the latter has not been discussed here, but clearly represents Roman authority), the idea of a critique of institutional authority in general grows even more plausible. Further supporting this notion is that, aside from Jesus, the two most favorably depicted men in the gospel are anonymous (like the Samaritan woman and the mother of Jesus) and unaffiliated. Perhaps especially this latter aspect holds them in common with the women characters and enables them to hold more positive roles.

On the surface, this implicit critique of traditional authority has great potential for feminist interpretations of the gospel. It is no wonder that the Fourth Gospel has been a favorite among feminist biblical scholars. Yet there is also a disturbing side to this understanding of the function of gender contrasts. The very recognition of an implied critique depends on a presupposition that women stand outside the bounds of recognized structures of authority. Along this line, note how Rena is able to move from the idea that prominent women characters function to limit the influence of the twelve male disciples to a notion that their depiction warns against *human* authority in general. Apparently, women in prominent roles (narrative or otherwise) do not constitute a threatening human authority! In other words, what initially appears as a subverted gender hierarchy turns out to reinforce the dominant view that woman cannot possibly represent any real human authority. They can be portrayed in prominent narrative positions because everyone knows they would never actually hold such roles.

And there are more difficulties. Before we become enamored by this use of gender categories to challenge earthly authoritative structures, I suggest we look at what happens with gender at another level in this narrative. The men and women of this gospel have another story to tell, and it is not one of subversion but rather reinscription of a familiar gender myth—that of the universal male subject.

40. Rena, 'Women', p. 146.

As I have argued throughout this study, Johannine women are distinct in this gospel because of the outcomes of their interactions with Jesus. It is the nature of Jesus' interactions with women that sets the women apart. Alongside this, I would like to place another of the gospel's most distinctive features – the characterization of Jesus. Scholars have long noted that throughout the narrative Jesus is shown to be in complete control of the unfolding events. This aspect of Jesus has understandably been attributed to his divine status. Nevertheless, it seems highly significant that in the Hellenistic world, mastery over self and over others was an essential, defining characteristic for masculinity.⁴¹ Thus, that Jesus will not be overcome by emotion (12.27), that soldiers fall to the ground before him (18.6), that Pilate has no control over Jesus (19.11), and that Jesus determines his own death (10.18; 19.30) are certainly indicative of his divinity, but are also (perhaps not coincidentally) consistent with the characteristic of the ideal male figure.

The language of the gospel tends to confirm the masculine image of Jesus and God, with its heavy use of Father/Son language. Nor is this image counteracted by the presence of Wisdom imagery in the gospel, despite the desire to reclaim 'Jesus Sophia' as somehow reflecting a feminine aspect of Jesus.⁴² Rather than conveying a feminine aspect of the divine, it is more the case that the masculine Logos/Jesus has displaced the feminine image of Sophia.⁴³ As Fiorenza observes:

By introducing the 'father-son' language in the very beginning and using it throughout the Gospel, the whole book reinscribes the metaphorical gram-

41. Recent work on the construction of sex and gender in the first-century Mediterranean culture has convincingly argued that these qualities, far more than one's physical body, were decisive in defining one's manliness. Cf. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); and John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

42. Cf. e.g., Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus* (JSNTSup, 71; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

43. So Norman R. Petersen, *The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light: Language and Characterization in the Fourth Gospel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), pp. 110-19. Similarly, see Amy-Jill Levine on Q: 'Since Sophia is a conventional motif in Wisdom literature, her direct association with Jesus may be less a "feminizing" of the teacher than a "masculinizing" of the mythical source of that teaching ('Who's Catering the Q Affair? Feminist Observations on Q Paraenesis', *Semeia* 50 [1990], pp. 145-61 [155]). For an alternative view see Judith Lieu, who argues that wisdom imagery need not carry a gender connotation in every case merely because it is sometimes described that way ('Scripture and the Feminine in John', in Athalya Brenner [ed.], *A Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], pp. 225-40 [228-29]).

matical masculinity of the expressions 'logos' and 'son' as congruent with the biological masculine sex of the historic person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Fourth Gospel thereby not only dissolves the tension between the grammatical feminine gender of Sophia and the 'naturalized' gender of Jesus but also marginalizes and 'silences' the traditions of G*d as represented by Divine Woman Wisdom.⁴⁴

Finally, as we have seen, the gender identities of both the women and Jesus are highlighted in a number of ways in his various encounters with them. In effect, women gain prominence in this narrative through their proper response to one who represents the ideal male subject. In this way, characters who are presented as a challenge to the constraints of earthly gender configurations meet them again at a cosmic level. Although feminist studies have noted the remarkable independence of Johannine women from male relationships, the women are celebrated for their recognition of and devotion to the ultimate male figures in the narrative—the Father and Son.

This configuration of gender relations appears to be the opposite of what one reads in Paul. From his perspective, freedom from the constraints of gender identity occurs precisely (and perhaps only) at the spiritual level. In Christ, there is no male and female (Gal. 3.28). In the Gospel of John, women appear free from traditional gender categories in the social realm, but the customary relationship between male and female is reinscribed in the spiritual realm. In the end, however, this is not surprising. The Israelites already had a long history of describing the relationship between God and God's people in gender-specific categories. Israel was to be a devoted wife to her husband Yahweh, or a faithful daughter to her father. Similar language was carried into Rabbinic literature as the rabbis described their own relationship with God. The point is that men are to be 'women' to God, that is, they are to be in a subordinate, dependent, but also intimate, relationship with God. In the Gospel of John, women themselves become examples of the proper relationship with the divine. They are 'women' to God and as such are cast in the most favorable light.

Perhaps the most provocative support of this notion is found in the enigmatic characterization of the Beloved Disciple, typically understood as the 'ideal' disciple. While grammatically male, his characterization in many ways resembles that of the Johannine women, for example, the intimate scene in 13.23, the sharp contrast with Judas that the disciple shares with Mary, as well as his identity as 'beloved' (cf. 11.5, which

44. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 153.

includes Lazarus, but comes to expression primarily through Jesus' interaction with Martha and Mary). It may be no coincidence that in the end, the disciple stands with the women at the foot of the cross (19.25-26). He, in fact, may represent the same sort of 'feminized' male that one encounters in Rabbinic literature.⁴⁵

To conclude, let me suggest once more that gender does matter in the Gospel of John. The repetitive contrast of women and men in this gospel suggests that conveying 'equality' was not a primary factor in the presentation of these characters. Instead, the function of gender may have more to do with representing the proper relationship between humanity and the divine. If this is the case, the resulting discourse presents a complex picture of gender relations, effective in different ways at different levels of the narrative. From a feminist perspective, it becomes crucial to take seriously this complexity. Rather than searching for simple answers, we must recognize that gender representations and relations function in ambiguous and multifaceted ways in this gospel, just as they do in life.

45. See Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), and Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) for discussion of the construction of gender in Rabbinic literature.