

3.2 Women in Luke-Acts

As noted in the previous section, women are visible in a significant way as disciples of depicts women significantly as disciples of the Jesus/Christ movement in Luke-Acts. They frequently are mentioned from the very beginning of the narrative (e.g. Elizabeth, Mary, Anna etc) and they appear in healing scenes and parables alongside and/or parallel to men and male examples. Whether this necessarily implied that there was an ethics/ attitude of gender equality in the Christ-movement is a question intensively under debate in feminist as well as mainstream New Testament scholarship (with Luise Schottroff at the more optimistic end of the range and E.W.Stegemann/W.Stegemann and C.VanderStichele at the more pessimistic end).

What certainly has to be kept in mind is the fact that all the societies of the Mediterranean world of the first century were patriarchal. By this is not yet stated that women were absolutely disadvantaged but the world was clearly divided into two spheres according gender lines – and it was clear beyond doubt that in principle the public sphere was men's sphere whereas the private sphere was women's sphere. This principle ideal however does not sufficiently explain what it implied in actual everyday life of men and women. Greek, Roman, and Jewish society were not organized according precisely the same principles. There were significant differences in the legal status of women and children as well as other social and cultural peculiarities on which each group at times commented on, and this not always in a flattering way. The Greeks regarded the Romans on a popular level as uneducated and rough people. Moreover economic factors have to be taken into account when looking at the situation of men and women in societies around the Mediterranean in the first century CE. The situation for impoverished people, men or women would make them transgressors of culturally desirable gender boundaries by sheer necessity of survival whereas a very well to do widow could have had more power and public status than a lower class man, not mention slaves ! So even in a patriarchal world things are not as clear as one might think and issues of power and domination not as clear cut as one might wish. Nevertheless women and children were generally speaking in more vulnerable positions than men in these societies. Economically they were more dependent on male support than the other way round and legally disadvantaged in most situations one can imagine. Thus, when Luke emphasizes the reversal aspect of Jesus announcement of the Kingdom of God and at the same time pays more attention to women in his gospel as well as in Acts this may be an indication that the reversal proclaimed somehow also affects the gender issue. It seems that in mentioning women at prominent stages of the narrative, Luke-Acts demonstrates some awareness that women and children were among those most disadvantaged, and thus specifically addressed by a message of change initiated by the coming of the Messiah. This is not yet to say that Luke-Acts has a gender egalitarian agenda. It would be anachronistic to describe the narrative of Luke-Acts or the early Jesus-movement or Jesus as being aware of issues of gender hierarchy as such.

A number of issues need to be highlighted when looking at the topic of women in Luke-Acts: the pairings of men and women in Luke-Acts; special references to women among Jesus' disciples; women as a role models of service (which is taken up as a role model for men and so in some sense taken away from women cf. section 3.1 above); women in leadership roles.

The Pairings of Men and Women in the Narrative of Luke

The Gospel of Luke shows a characteristic which is not found in any of the other Gospels and which, unlike other themes, is also not coherently pursued in the Book of Acts. Throughout the Gospel the narrator in many passages presents a man and a woman, either

as addressed, actively involved in what is going on or as being present. Below find a list of such male/female pairs in Luke:

- The Annunciation to Zechariah (1:8-23) and the Annunciation to Mary (1:26-38)
- Mary's Magnificat (1:46-55) parallels Zechariah's Benedictus (1:68-79).
- Simeon praises God for seeing the arrival of salvation (2:25-35), Anna praises God (2:36-38).
- Jesus heals a man who was possessed (4:31-37) and Simon's mother-in-law (4:38-39).
- The healing of the centurion's slave (7:1-10) is followed by the raising of the widow's son (7:11-17).
- Jesus chose twelve apostles from his disciples (6:12-16) and women also accompanied Jesus (8:1-3).
- The healing of the Gerasene demoniac is matched by the raising of Jairus' daughter (8:40-42a, 49-56) and the healing of the woman with the issue of blood (8:42b-48).
- Jesus offered Jonah as a sign to his generation (11:30) and the Queen of the South (11:31).
- The Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven are paired; the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed which a man took... (13:18-19) and like leaven which a woman took... (13:20-21).
- The healing of the woman on a Sabbath, bent double with a spirit of infirmity (13:10-17) is paired by the healing of the man with dropsy on a Sabbath (14:1-6).
- The parable of the man with the lost sheep (15:3-7) is paralleled by the parable of the woman with the lost coin (15:8-10).
- Of two men in bed, one will be taken and the other left (17:34) and of two women grinding together, one will be taken and the other left (17:35).
- The parable of the Widow and the Judge (18:1-8)
- A woman and a man recognized Peter (22:54-62)
- A great multitude of people and of women follows Jesus carrying the cross (23:27)
- All his acquaintances and the women who had followed him stood at a distance (23:49)
- The women tell all the others what they were told by the 'two men' (24:10)
- The disciples in Jerusalem together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus (Acts 1:14)

Although the sequence of scenes where we clearly can identify pairs in the narrative cannot be found in the Book of Acts it is still present in the opening of the sequel to the Gospel. It is not clear what the purpose of these pairings is, but it could be an indication that the

narrator wanted to demonstrate explicitly that the message of the kingdom is addressed to both men and women, and as such is an inclusive message.

Special References to Women among Jesus' Disciples

At some points in the narrative women are explicitly mentioned in significant roles within the movement. In Lk 8.1-3 we find the names of three women, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna in conjunction with 'many others' obviously travelling with him. Although from the perspective of a hermeneutics of suspicion, some and not only feminist interpreters propose that unless stated otherwise even where women are not explicitly mentioned they nevertheless are present even if only male grammatical form are used. That women are explicitly mentioned here makes the passage all the more significant ! Since this is one of the summary statements in the Gospel which serve as a transition or bridge, although being a relatively independent and concise narrative statement, a prolonged situation or an event happening repeatedly within an indefinite period of time is described here. This means that Luke here refers to a ongoing company not merely to a one-off fellowship ! The twelve and the women were travelling together, thus we can infer from this that they were present wherever disciples are mentioned. The disciples are present as a mixed group.

Of what status the women mentioned here were and what their actual function was is less clear. We can conclude with some certainty that Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward certainly was of a class of considerable wealth, close to the elite of the Jewish society. But as for the other two we do not know. Mary Magdalene has no man mentioned in the context of her name. The fact that she is named after the village she comes from indicates that she joined the movement probably as a single woman. Susanna is as anonymous as the 'many others' mentioned. In Lk 23. 49 women are again mentioned explicitly, here at the cross, but none of them is identified by name. Only in the scene at the empty tomb we find again women mentioned by name. Thus Mary Magdalene and Joanna are mentioned again, this time together with Mary, mother of James, and 'the other women who were with them' who play a prominent role as the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, although dismissed by the male disciples. Except for Mary Magdalene, the names of the women are not identical with the women described as present in the other Gospels (Mk 16.1 Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome; Mt 28.1 Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary). Thus all the synoptics as well as John attribute a primary role to Mary Magdalene as she is always mentioned first – and she is mentioned consistently as being present at the cross and the empty tomb – first witness to resurrection! In addition at the beginning of Acts we suddenly find Mary, Jesus' mother again (Acts 1.14 ff). Although she played such a vital role in the birth narratives she appears in a scene in the Gospel which does not depict here in a positive light (Lk 8.19-21).

In order to get a clearer picture about the role of women as depicted in the narrative of Luke-a

Acts we need look in more detail at the transition passage Lk 8.1-3. Scholars are involved in critically discussion what is actually meant by they 'provided for them with all their resources'. The Greek term used here *diakonein* in its primary meaning refers to an activity as 'go-between', as an agent at someone's service; it can further refer to the performance of obligations and duties without further specifications; it is used for the function of waiting at table or for meeting an immediate need of someone. Some scholars have argued (Tannehill) that the term here most likely refers to traditional female duties, that is, providing food, and being involved in table service. Whilst this need not be excluded it also need not be limited to such specific functions as the wide range of meaning of the word demonstrates. In a movement where hospitality and table-fellowship are of exemplary significance as expressions of the anticipation of the kingdom of God these functions become even more significant than in everyday life, although this is not to argue that this traditionally female role has any negative connotations in societies of antiquity. Moreover it should be noted that in

passages where Jesus elaborates on the issue of hierarchies in the kingdom he actually describes the most noble possible service in terms of waiting at table (Lk 22.26-27). The one who 'serves', the servant (*diakonos*) is the exemplary disciple! To describe these women in such terms, with the same word that Jesus uses for himself and his ministry moves them very close to Jesus, and can be seen as an allusion to the narratives about discipleship which follow in chapters 9 and 10. The important question here is not so much whether the activity assigned to these women is that traditionally assigned to them, or whether gender boundaries are relativized, but the fact that what they do *diakonein* renders exemplary disciples, examples not only for women but also for men in the movement. The fact that Jesus remembers the disciples that leadership in this movement is different from leadership 'in this world' demonstrates that these women, similar to other women mentioned in Luke-Acts refer to an exercise of leadership which challenges the hierarchical perceptions of leadership 'of this world', promoting an alternative leadership pattern (cf. also Lk 9.46-48).

For women who were not members of the elite (which means for more than 90% of the population of Judaea and Galilee as well the Roman Empire cf. Carter 2006) the keeping of gender patterns, as well as other principles of appropriate behaviour was not that easy, most likely not even a priority. Struggling to survive on a daily basis renders codes of appropriate conduct something relative compared to other concerns. Poverty relativizes. The parables with women as characters – give us some indication to the social situation of most women around Jesus and most likely also in the Jesus-movement: they were not elite women.

In Lk 15.8-10 the woman who is looking for the one silver coin/drachme demonstrates the value this one coin for someone of her social class – it was the equivalent to bread for a day. In the parable Lk 18.1-8 the widow who troubles the judge claims justice against her opponents, not because she is an awkward person but because she is in urgent need of financial support! The reference to prostitutes as participating in table-fellowship is an indication of poverty as well. In contexts of extreme poverty and no economic support by a male relative all that was left to guarantee survival for women was prostitution.

We find women prominently mentioned in Luke-Acts. Whether the narrator thereby specifically promoted a renewal of the gender roles within the Jesus-movement, and the role of women as leaders in particular cannot be ascertained. But it can also hardly be advocated, as has been done recently, that the narrator of Luke-Acts tried to reverse a tendency to promote women by restricting them to traditional roles. What in my view can be ascertained is a tendency to accept women in significant roles within the movement.

Essential Readings

- ** 3.2 Corley, Kathleen E. 'Women and Meals in the Gospel of Luke' in Corley K. Private Women, Public Meals. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 1993, pp. 108-146.
- ** 3.3 Arlandson, James, 'Women and Class in Luke-Acts', Arlandson J. *Women, Class and Society in Early Christianity*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, pp.120-150.
- ** 3.4 Smith Dennis E., 'The Philopsophical Banquet: Meal Symbolism in Luke' in Smith D.E., *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2003, pp.47-65.

Further Readings

Tannehill, Robert C., *Luke*. Nashville, TN: Abdingdon Press 1996, pp. 138-140.

