



Women and their Place in Judaism, Jesus' Movement, and Early Christian Communities



The Historical Jesus and Women

To what extent is it possible to separate the attitudes of 'the historical Jesus' towards women from those belonging to the individual evangelists (Mark, Matthew, Luke, John)?



The Historical Jesus and Women

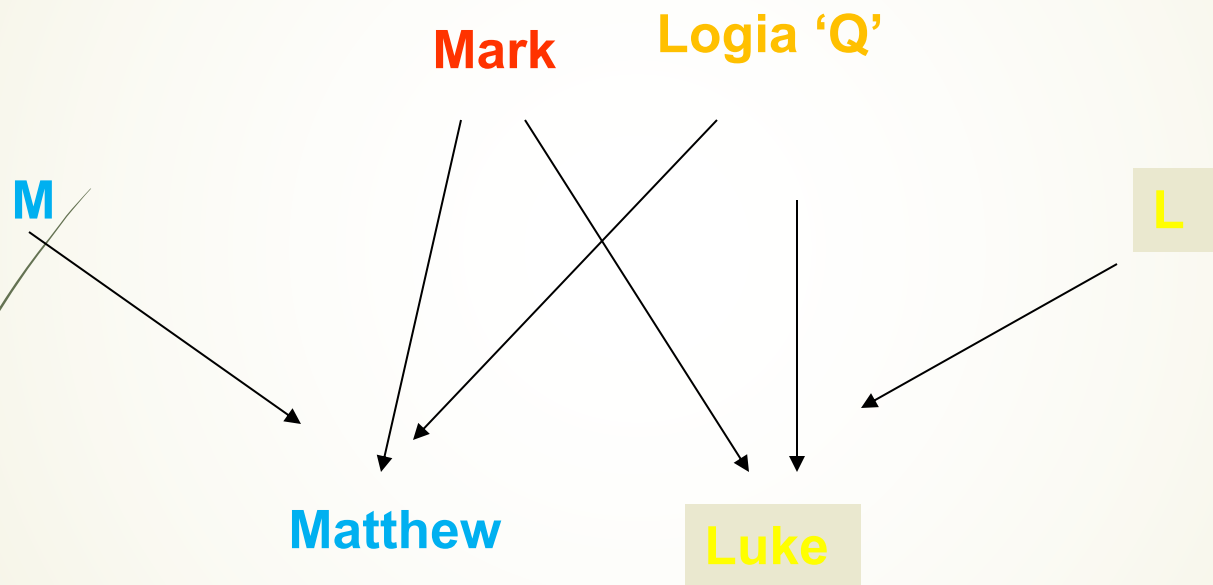
- ▶ One cannot regard the canonical gospels as purely objective and reliable sources about Jesus' life and teaching.
- ▶ The various portrayals of women were (also) shaped by situations that emerged within the communities of the individual authors.



The Search for Jesus' Authentic Sayings: Criteria

- ▶ **Multiple attestation:** sayings or events found in more than one gospel are more likely to stem from independent sources.
- ▶ **Embarrassment:** sayings or events that did not 'fit' the viewpoint of the authors would have been omitted or altered; any that remain must be original, as they would hardly have been invented.
- ▶ **Dissimilarity:** traditions that were not key issues for Judaism or the Early Church may be original, because why, otherwise, would they have been invented?
- ▶ **Coherence:** is a saying/event consistent with others that are accepted as authentic?

Synoptic Gospels: Literary Relationships



Jesus' Teaching to/about the Marginalized

- All Synoptic sources are in agreement that Jesus showed concern for the marginalized in society.
- He speaks sympathetically of widows but condemns the Pharisees for taking their property (Mark 12:40). He commends a widow for her gift of two coins in the Temple treasury (Mark 12:41-44).

'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not"; but later changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?' They [chief priests and elders] said, 'The first'. Jesus said to them, 'Truly, I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him' (Matthew 21:28-32).

Jesus' Parables

- Main characters in Jesus' parables are mostly male, but he draws on women's roles and experiences for parabolic illustrations: childbirth, widows, baking bread.

'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' (Matthew 13:33).

- Three measures of flour: echo of Sarah kneading bread for the heavenly messengers (Genesis 18:6)?





Jesus' Parables

- ▶ Jesus draws images from everyday Palestinian life; women and their activities are bound to figure occasionally as points of comparison with the kingdom of God.
- ▶ The parables offer a message about the nature and significance of the kingdom of God, not about the status of women. (It is the effect of the leaven and the kneading of the dough, not the subject of the parable, that are of primary importance.)



Jesus' Parables

Traditional roles for women (kneading bread, carrying grain, grinding meal) are not reversed. If anything, gender roles are reinforced rather than challenged.

Jesus' Teaching on Adultery

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell (Matt. 5:27-29).



Jesus' Teaching on Divorce

Mark 10:2-10

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'It is lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her' [Deut. 24:1-4]. But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female.' For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her'; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'

Matthew 5:31-32 (cf. 19:9)

It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity (*porneia*), causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.



Jesus' Healing Ministry

- ▶ In Matthew 8-9 there are ten miracle stories about lepers, Gentiles, women, demoniacs, tax collectors, sinners.
- ▶ Peter's mother-in-law rises from her bed and serves (*diakoneô*) Jesus (Mark 1:31; cf. Matt. 8:15): an indication of her domestic role or of full discipleship?



Jesus' Healing Ministry

- ▶ Healing of the woman with a haemorrhage (Mark 5:24-34; Matt. 9:20-22) and its relationship with the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:35-43; Matt. 9:18-19, 23-26): the setting is a public place, a woman defiled by impurity (cf. Leviticus 15:25-30) dares to touch Jesus.
- ▶ Healing is a sign of the fruitfulness of faith: 'Take heart daughter; your faith has made you well' (9:22).

The Syrophoenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30) / The Canaanite Woman (Matt. 15:21-28)

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that you may go - the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

- ▶ Jesus crosses ethnic and gender boundaries.
- ▶ During his ministry Jesus limits his mission to Israel, but the healing of the Gentile woman's daughter is taken as a demonstration that the mission will be extended to the Gentiles.
- ▶ She is not perturbed by the unflattering image of Gentiles as 'dogs'; rather she adopts his language and challenges Jesus' position.



Women as Disciples of Jesus

- ▶ The crowds of 5000 and 4000 did not include 'the women and children' (Matt. 14:21; 15:38).
- ▶ Jesus teaches Mary, who sat at his feet (Luke 10:39): 'Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her' (10:42).
- ▶ Could first-century Jewish women have been followers of an itinerant Galilean teacher?



Women as Disciples of Jesus

Luke 8:1-3

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities; Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided (*diakoneô*) for them out of their resources.

Mark 15:40-41

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow (*akoloutheô*) him, and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.



Women as Disciples of Jesus



The Anointing of Jesus

- ▶ In Luke (7:36-50) the event occurs early in Jesus' ministry: a penitent sinner lets down her hair, wets Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and then anoints his feet. She is characterized as one displaying repentance and devotion.
- ▶ In Mark (14:3-9), Matthew (26:6-13) and John (12:1-8) this event (or a similar one) takes place shortly before his death (according to Mark and Matthew, in the house of Simon of leper in Bethany: according to John, by Mary of Bethany).



The Anointing of Jesus

- ▶ A woman pours an expensive ointment over Jesus' head (John: feet), to symbolize the anointing of a king.
- ▶ The male disciples comment on the wastefulness of the act.
- ▶ 'Wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her' (Mark 14:9).

Women in the Passion and Resurrection Narratives

- ▶ Gospel traditions record that women were among the witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion, burial, empty tomb, and resurrection appearances.
- ▶ Women followed Jesus to Jerusalem, saw him being crucified, witnessed the place of his burial, prepared the ointments for his body (Mark 15:40-41; Matt. 26:61; Luke 23:49).



Women in the Passion and Resurrection Narratives

- Women are the first to find the empty tomb (Mark 16:1-8; Matt. 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1, 11-18).
- According to Mark (16:8) they flee; according to Matthew (28:7) they follow instructions to proclaim the news of the resurrection.

Jesus, Women, and Judaism

‘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’ (Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 1969).

The rabbis arose every morning to thank God that he had not made them a Gentile, a slave or a woman (Tosefta Berakot 7:18; b. Menahot 43b).

‘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’ (Ben Witherington, ‘Women’, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* VI:957).



Accusations of Anti-Judaism

- Does the modern construct of Jesus as a reformer of Jewish patriarchal society carry anti-Jewish connotations?
- Many feminist scholars challenge the assumption that Jesus was a proto-feminist. They seek to correct the claim that Jesus reversed earlier Jewish codes that made women subordinate beings.



Judith Plaskow: The Pillars of the Anti- Jewish Myth

- Antithesis: the setting up of dualistic structures in which Judaism represents the negative (= sexism) and Christianity stands for the positive (= feminism).
- Scapegoat: Jews are blamed for all evil.
- Prologue: Judaism is the 'empty relic', while God's promises are fulfilled in Christianity.



Jesus and Jewish Women

- ▶ Should Jesus be set apart so clearly from his Jewish contemporaries in terms of his attitude to women?
- ▶ Is the claim that women had no rights (inheritance, marriage, divorce) too generalized?
- ▶ Are statements about Jewish views on purity regulations, Torah study, women as disciples, based only on a *selection* of Jewish (rabbinic) texts?

(Jewish)
Feminist
Responses

1. Many aspects of late Second Temple Judaism had a positive view of the status and activity of women.
2. Emphasis on the *Jewishness* of Jesus' attitude to women.
3. Excessive emphasis has been placed on Jesus' egalitarian attitude.

Reassessment of First-Century Judaism

- ▶ Attention must be paid not only to rabbinic texts, but also to the evidence of the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus and Philo.
- ▶ Rabbinic texts were codified in the 2nd-3rd centuries CE (at the earliest).
- ▶ Jewish women in the Roman Empire (Palestine and the Diaspora) were given more freedom in religious contexts (synagogue and Temple), legal rights (divorce) and social context (communal meals).

Reassessment of First-Century Judaism

The marriage contract (*ketubah*) was designed to protect the rights of women.

The documents of Babbatha (100-125 CE):

The bride had the right to end her marriage and receive the payment of the *ketubah*.



Women in First-Century Judaism

Evidence that Jewish women were among the followers of messianic and prophetic claimants (e.g., Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.505, includes women among the followers of the Zealot Simon bar Gioras).

6000 men, women and children followed a charismatic prophet to the Temple in 70 CE (*Jewish War* 6.283).

Pharisees were influential among Jewish aristocratic women (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.401-15).

Women in First-Century Judaism

- ▶ Jewish women in leadership roles and public functions: evidence from Diaspora synagogues that women were 'elders' and 'leaders' (see Bernadette Broton, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*, 1982).
- ▶ 'Rufina, a Jewess, leader of the synagogue (*archisynagōgos*), built this tomb for her slaves'.

Greek inscription, Smyrna in Asia Minor, early second century CE





The Jewishness of Jesus

‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her’ (John 8:7).

‘Only when the man is himself free from guilt, will the waters be an effective test of his wife’s guilt or innocence’ (Rabbi Akiba, in Sifra Naso 21; b. Sotah 47b).



Jesus as a Reformer of Jewish Patriarchy?

- ▶ Is the term 'feminist' anachronistic with reference to Jesus, given that he is not depicted as debating with his Jewish contemporaries on the question of gender?
- ▶ The emphasis is on his concern for the marginalized. Jesus criticized the class and status distinctions of his culture, but not gender distinctions.
- ▶ Did Jesus lead an anti-patriarchal movement or a 'discipleship of equals' (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*).
- ▶ The NT writings must be viewed as an important source for the status and role of women in late Second Temple Judaism.