

The Presentation of Women in the Gospel of Luke



'The Gospel for the Marginalized'

- Jesus' sermon of liberation in Luke 4:16-30.
- Many passages describe or refer to women (42 passages, including 23 from Luke's own source - L).
- Luke displays a particular interest in widows (*almanah*); cf. Luke 2:37; 4:25-26; 7:12; 18:3; 20:47; 21:2-3.
- Luke's 'pairing motif':
 - a man plants a mustard seed, a woman bakes bread (13:18-21)
 - a man searches for lost sheep, a woman searches for a lost coin (15:4-10).
 - Jesus heals a widow's only son (7:12) and Jairus' only daughter (8:42).

Luke's Special Source(s)

- Parts of the birth narrative (chs 1-2).
- The raising of the widow's son at Nain (7:12-17).
- The penitent prostitute who anoints Jesus' feet (7:36-50).
- Galilean women followers of Jesus (8:1-3).
- Martha and Mary (10:38-42).
- A woman crying out in the crowd (11:27-28).
- The 'daughter of Abraham' (13:10-17).
- The parable of the sweeping woman (15:8-10).
- The parable of the persistent widow (18:1-8).
- Daughters of Jerusalem (23:27-32).
- Women at the cross (23:49).
- Women preparing burial spices (23:56).

Luke's Infancy Narratives: Mary, Elizabeth, Anna



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- **Elizabeth:** a 'righteous' but barren woman (cf. Sarah, Rachel, Hannah): her barrenness is a 'disgrace among men' (1:25). She acts as a prophet: 'Blessed are you among women; and blessed is the fruit of your womb' (1:42).
- **Mary:** communicates with Gabriel; a model female believer: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word' (1:38). Her *Magnificat* is a song of deliverance praising God for liberating the people on the margins (cf. I Sam. 2:1-10).
- **Anna:** a 'prophet' and widow, who fasts and prays in the Temple: 'At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem' (2:38)

The Penitent Sinner (7:36-50)

- A woman (prostitute) anoints Jesus' feet at the house of Simon the Pharisee.
- The focus is on her 'emotional extravagance': 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him - that she is a sinner' (7:39).
- Her act embodies her devotion: 'Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love' (7:47).

Galilean Women Followers (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 for them out of their resources’.

Galilean Women Followers (8:1-3)

- The wives of disciples or widows?
- They 'provide *for them*' (*diakoneô*; cf. Mark 15:40-51): a role of service to Jesus and the male disciples? Does it denote domestic activity? Note the use of *diakonia* for eucharistic table service in Rom.11:13; I Cor. 12:5; Acts 6:1, 4.
- They may have been wealthy benefactors who paid for the resources required by the group (cf. Acts 3:50; 15:24; 17:4, 12; 25:13) - a glimpse into Luke's own community?

Mary and Martha (10:38-42)

Martha is 'distracted with much serving' (*diakonia*) (10:40)

Mary sits at Jesus' feet listening to his teaching.

'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; only this is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her' (10:41-42).

- **Untypical roles:** a woman being taught at home by a rabbi; a woman serving meals to men (Ben Witherington).
- Preaching of the word in a house church (Martha) and passive listening (Mary): Jesus praises the more subordinate role (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza).
- **Serving and listening epitomize belief and discipleship:** 'While service to others is important, hearing the word for oneself is the essential ingredient of discipleship' (Adele Reinhartz).
'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it' (11:28)

Mary and Martha



'Mary and Martha', Vermeer,
1654-56



'Mary and Martha', Velazquez,
1618

Women at the Cross and the Empty Tomb

- 'All his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance and saw these things' (23:49).
- Two angels say to the women at the tomb: 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be crucified and on the third day rise again' (24:4-5).
 - No commission, but they are reminded of Jesus' own words to them (cf. 8:1-3) and are called to be obedient to his word (cf. 11:28).
 - Their testimony is instigated by themselves but denigrated as an 'idle tale' (24:11) by the male disciples.
 - Their importance lies in their ability to hear and be obedient to the word.

Feminist Interpretations of Luke: Jane Schaberg

- Luke is a 'dangerous text': the high number of references to women is misleading from the perspective of looking for an 'egalitarian' dimension to Luke's Gospel, for they are portrayed as 'models of subordinate service, excluded from the power centre of the movement and from significant responsibilities'.
- Gender roles are divinely ordained: women are included but also segregated (separate male and female groups).

Feminist Interpretations of Luke: Jane Schaberg

- Women are 'nurturers of men....prayerful, quiet, grateful women, supportive of male leadership, forgoing the prophetic ministry' ('Luke', *The Women's Bible Commentary*).
- Women are never called disciples. Compare the declaration about the cost of discipleship: 'Truly, I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife.... for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more' (18:28-30).
- Women are often linked to the home (1:26-28, 40-56; 15:8-10); they represent the 'hearing community' (cf. 9:1-6; 10:1-16; 24:47-49).

Feminist Interpretations of Luke: Turid Karlsen Seim

- One should avoid the simplification of reading Luke's Gospel either in terms of hostility or friendliness to women.
- The Gospel cannot be reduced 'either to a feminist treasure chamber or to a chamber of horrors for women's theology' (*The Double Message*, page 249).

Feminist Interpretations of Luke:

Turid Karlsen Seim

Luke transmits a 'double message':

- a) the narrative reflects the establishment of structures that impose silence on women and promote leadership in male terms;
- b) important traditions are recorded about the role of the Galilean women as disciples in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

'The women are brought to silence, but at the same time they continue to speak through the story. There is an ironic twist to the double message: the women from Galilee were indeed capable and qualified, but the men suspected and rejected them' ('Luke', *Searching the Scriptures*, page 761)

Luke's Second Volume: The Evidence of Acts

- Less interest in women in Acts.
- Women speak 15 times in the Gospel, but only 5 times in Acts.
- Priscilla is recognized as a missionary (18:18) and teacher.
- The primary female role in Acts is mother to the community: women provide home, hospitality and material aid to believers.