

A Feminist Companion to

John

Volume II

edited by

Amy-Jill Levine

with Marianne Blickenstaff



SHEFFIELD ACADEMIC PRESS
A Continuum imprint
LONDON • NEW YORK

GENDER MATTERS IN JOHN

Colleen Conway

Introduction

In the last 25 years, the women characters in the Fourth Gospel have captured the attention of Johannine scholars, feminist and otherwise.¹ One of the first articles to examine the role of women in the gospel came from Raymond Brown, who was searching for a new way to address the debate about women's ordination in the Roman Catholic Church. In keeping with his understanding of the gospel in general, he reflected on the role of women in terms of a reconstructed historical community. On that basis, he argued that 'this seems to have been a community where in the things that really matter in the following of Christ there was no difference between male and female'.² Following in Brown's footsteps, the majority of subsequent work would read the Johannine women in terms of 'equality' with male disciples and/or as representatives of women in a historical Johannine community.³ Indeed, his statement has

1. The following essay draws in part on work done for my doctoral dissertation, 'Men and Women in the Gospel of John', published as *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).

2. Raymond E. Brown, 'Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel', *TS* 36 (1975), pp. 688-99 (693). The article later appeared as an appendix to *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 183-98. In relation to women's ordination, Brown's point is that all are equal in terms of discipleship, and whether one is ordained should not matter much in this wider view. Thus he notes, 'It may be useful to remind ourselves that it remains more important to be baptized than to be ordained, more important to be a Christian than to be a priest, bishop or pope' (p. 694 n. 16).

3. Sandra M. Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church', *BTB* 12 (1982), pp. 35-45; S.J. Nortjea, 'The Role of Women in the Fourth Gospel', *NeoT* 20 (1986), pp. 21-28; John Rena, 'Women in the Gospel of John', *Église et Théologie* 17 (1986), pp. 131-47; Turid Karlsen Seim, 'Roles of Women in the Gospel of John', in Lars Hartman and Birger Olsson (eds.), *Aspects on the Johannine Literature* (ConB, 18; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiskell, 1987), pp. 56-73; Martinus C. de Boer, 'John 4.27 - Women (and Men) in the Gospel and the Community of John', in George J. Brooke (ed.), *Women in the Biblical Tradition* (Studies in

become almost a refrain in studies of women in the Fourth Gospel, so that 18 years after Brown, Martinus de Boer concludes his look at Johannine women with the view that 'the Gospel is interested in the gender of women characters only in order finally to persuade its resistant readers, both women and men, that the "sexual aspect" does not *really* matter all that much, if at all, for discipleship and its tasks'.⁴

What these articles accomplished was to call attention to what now seems obvious: the fourth evangelist is doing something distinct with the presentation of women characters. Moreover, especially the work by Sandra Schneiders and Turid Karlsen Seim made valuable contributions to the recognition and recovery of strong images of woman in the New Testament. But as the comments of both Brown and Martinus de Boer indicate, at the same time the uniqueness of the presentation of women was recognized, scholars frequently downplayed the significance of gender. Indeed, the result of the 'equality' reading has too often been that difference between men and women in the gospel is denied and the relevance of gender representation is dismissed. From such studies, one might gather that what really matters in this gospel is something other than its remarkable depiction of women and certainly something other than gender.⁵ And yet there is much to suggest that gender identity does play a critical role in shaping meaning in the Gospel of John.

The clearest example of gender as an explicit concern in the narrative is found in the disciples' unvoiced question in Jn 4.27. The disciples are astonished that Jesus is talking to a woman but reluctant to ask him why he is doing so. Here, a consciousness of gender identity that lies beneath the narrative bubbles to the surface. Other aspects of the gospel that suggest this consciousness about gender is not an isolated case include Jesus' repeated use of the direct address 'Woman' in his encounters with

Women and Religion, 31; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), pp. 208-30; Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen, 'Jesus and Women in the Gospel of John', *Direction* 19 (1990), pp. 53-64.

4. De Boer, 'John 4.27', pp. 230-31.

5. Even feminist scholar Sandra Schneiders has denied the relevance of gender identity in the texts, albeit in reaction to restrictions placed on women and supposedly validated by New Testament texts. She states, 'The sex of believers is not an issue in the New Testament and we should not allow ourselves, either as believers or as scholars, to be manipulated into acting as if it is' (see 'Women in the Fourth Gospel', pp. 35-45). In contrast, Seim's work takes seriously the possible relevance of gender identity, especially in the Fourth Gospel: 'May it be that asking for the roles of women genuinely coincides with an explicit interest of the Gospel of John itself, very visible on its textual surface? In my view, the latter is the case' (Seim, 'Roles of Women', p. 56).

female characters, including his own mother (2.4; 4.21; 19.26; 20.15; cf. also 8.10).⁶ More implicitly, attention is called to the gender identity especially of woman characters by the use of allusions. For example, the scene at the well in ch. 4 recalls the betrothal scenes of the patriarchs, and Mary Magdalene's search for Jesus contains echoes of the Song of Songs (see below). But most significantly, as I will demonstrate, there are several cases in which men and women characters appear to be deliberately contrasted. In three cases, men and women characters are placed in contrast to one another by means of narrative structure and content—the Samaritan woman with Nicodemus, Mary of Bethany with Judas, and Mary Magdalene with the two male disciples at the tomb. Another contrast, Martha with Peter, depends not on structure, but on the reader's familiarity with Petrine tradition.

All of these contrasts have been recognized in various degrees in earlier scholarship, but to my knowledge no one has considered their cumulative effect nor studied such contrasts with a view toward understanding the way gender functions in this gospel. At a basic level, the contrasts suggest that equality may not be the most helpful way of perceiving the role that gender identity plays. Moreover, the fact that one can identify male and female contrasts and yet still not discover something so blatant as a male/female dualism indicates that gender representation may be complex and multi-faceted in this narrative, just as it is in life.

Thus, in what follows, I focus on four instances of character contrast to draw out some fundamental differences in characterization of particular Johannine men in relation to particular Johannine women. Based on this discussion, I argue that gender does matter in this gospel and suggest at least two levels at which it may function. These levels are the same two levels that the narrative repeatedly calls us to distinguish: the heavenly and the earthly, that which is above and that which is below. In the Fourth Gospel, gender categories stand in for different ideological interests depending on the level at which they are operating.

Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman

That Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman are set in contrast is certainly not a new observation.⁷ Indeed, this is perhaps the most explicit

6. See also Seim, 'the common use of γύναι...shows a common emphasis on femaleness in these passages' ('Roles of Women', p. 60).

7. E.g., Marla J. Selvidge, 'Nicodemus and the Woman with Five Husbands', *Proceedings: Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society* 2 (1982), pp. 63-75; Mary Margaret Pazdan,

example of a male/female contrast evident in the gospel. The fact that these two characters are placed nearly side by side invites comparison, as does their respective introductions to the narrative. Nicodemus is introduced by a proper name that is surrounded by epithets: ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων (lit. 'a man out of the Pharisees') and ἀρχὸν τῶν Ἰουδαίων (a leader of the Judeans) (Jn 3.1). There is no question that the reader is to understand Nicodemus as an authoritative figure, a leader among his people. In contrast, ch. 4 introduces γυνὴ ἐκ τῆς Σαμαρείας (a woman out of Samaria). The parallel structure of the phrases stresses both a gender contrast and an ethnic one. To be sure, the word ἄνθρωπος (person or man) need not be a direct contrast with γυνή (woman); ἀνὴρ (man) would have been a more effective choice. However, the use of ἄνθρωπος links Nicodemus to 2.23-25. Here the narrator points out that Jesus would not entrust himself to those who believed in him because of the signs he was doing. Moreover, he needed no one to testify to him about a person (or man, τοῦ ἀνθρώπου) because he himself knew what was in a person (τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ). That singular forms of ἄνθρωπος are used here immediately preceding Nicodemus's introduction as ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων suggests that he represents not only the Jewish authorities, but also one whom Jesus knows and distrusts.

The inclusion of a proper name, Nicodemus, points to the absence of one provided for the woman in ch. 4. On the one hand, having a proper name may be a way of accenting the supposedly high status of Nicodemus, compared to the woman. On the other hand, anonymity is a trait shared also by the Beloved Disciple, a character who certainly has high status in the eyes of the narrator. We also learn from the opening verses of both narratives that while Nicodemus came to Jesus by night (3.2), the woman meets Jesus in broad daylight (4.6). Perhaps we are to associate this contrast with the light/dark, day/night dualism that runs throughout the gospel. It may be too much to base such an association on the introduction of these two characters alone, but the potential link with this thematic opposition invites further comparison of their respective encounters with Jesus.

First, the conversations begin under different circumstances. Nicodemus seeks out Jesus and initiates the dialogue. Consistent with the idea that he is a religious authority, Nicodemus opens with a statement of what he and the people he represents know: Jesus is a teacher who has come from God. This knowledge is based on interpretive ability; he is able to read signs and know when God is present (οὐδεὶς γὰρ δύναται

'Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman: Contrasting Models of Discipleship', *BTB* 17 (1987), pp. 145-48.

ταῦτα τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἃ σὺ ποιεῖς, ἐὰν μὴ ἢ ὁ θεὸς μετ' αὐτοῦ, 3.2). As Thomas Brodie notes, Nicodemus 'seems to feel that he can speak to Jesus with some assurance of the things of God. There is therefore in his approach a certain tone of confidence'.⁸ On the other hand, the reader is again encouraged to consider that Jesus has very little confidence in Nicodemus. Like the use of ἄνθρωπος, the reference to signs recalls 2.23-25, which casts suspicion on those who believe in Jesus because of his signs. Nicodemus speaks as one who believes because of signs, but, as we have seen, this also implies that he speaks as one whom Jesus does not trust. This is seen already in Jesus' initial response to Nicodemus. Much of the Fourth Gospel is devoted to Jesus' efforts to convince people that he has, in fact, come from God. Seemingly, Nicodemus's words are accurate. Yet Jesus does not affirm his claim, but instead gives an enigmatic response: 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above' (3.3). Rather than clarifying matters for Nicodemus, Jesus throws him into confusion.

The conversation with the Samaritan woman opens in quite a different way. First, the setting at the well recalls similar stories from the Hebrew Bible: the wives of Isaac, Jacob and Moses are all found at a well. From the reader's perspective, familiarity with these betrothal scenes would tend to highlight the male/female relationship between Jesus and the woman.⁹ This initial attention to gender will persist throughout the scene, as Jesus speaks of the woman's marital history (4.16-18) and the disciples question the interaction (4.27). In this way, it becomes clear that the gender identity of the characters is not coincidental to the story, but one of its major components.¹⁰

Compared to Nicodemus, the woman enters the scene with little fanfare. There are no suggestive epithets surrounding her name; we know

8. Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 196.

9. Scholars who have interpreted the text using the betrothal type-scene as a major hermeneutical key include Calum M. Carmichael, 'Marriage and the Samaritan Woman', *NTS* 26 (1980), pp. 332-46, and Lyle Eslinger, 'The Wooing of the Woman at the Well: Jesus, the Reader and Reader-Response Criticism', *Journal of Literature and Theology* 1 (1987), pp. 167-83.

10. Contra de Boer, who argues that the gender identity of the woman is insignificant to the story, beyond lending a degree of verisimilitude to the account. Men did not draw water in ancient Palestine, and Jesus needs to be at a well so that he has an opportunity to discourse about living water, a symbol of revelation (de Boer, 'John 4.27', pp. 214-15 nn. 19, 21). Yet there are many narrative settings that could suitably evoke a discussion about living water (cf. 7.37-38). The point is that this one does call attention to gender.

only that she is a Samaritan woman. Moreover, she comes not seeking Jesus, but for the mundane task of filling her bucket at the well. It is Jesus who initiates the conversation with his request for water (4.9). When the woman does speak, it is not to encourage the conversation but to question its appropriateness. As Lyle Eslinger argues, her opening question points out the political and sexual difficulties of the encounter: 'Jesus is a Jew, she is a Samaritan; he is a man, she is a woman.'¹¹ The narrator goes on to explain the nature of the problem: Judeans do not share things in common with Samaritans (4.9). This comment calls explicit attention only to ethnic differences, but, as we have seen, the issue of gender is already beneath the surface of the text and will also emerge as problematic, at least from the disciples' point of view (4.27). Yet, Jesus' reply ('If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water') broaches neither of these differences, but instead turns the conversation to the woman's lack of knowledge about him and about God (4.10). Thus, in both the Nicodemus passage and the story of the Samaritan woman, knowledge of God and Jesus is a primary issue. However, whereas Nicodemus claims this knowledge from the beginning, the woman engages in a series of questions that eventually culminate in the self-revelation of Jesus (4.26).

With respect to the nature and content of the two conversations there are similarities, but also striking differences. They have in common a pattern that runs throughout the Gospel of John: a dialogue that takes place on at least two levels simultaneously and is peppered with double entendres and enigmatic expressions from Jesus. In the course of these conversations, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman both misunderstand Jesus, but they respond to him in different ways. Nicodemus soon shifts from his confident opening statement to confused questioning. The Samaritan woman begins with challenging the appropriateness of the dialogue, but plunges in anyway and sustains a lengthy conversation with Jesus, even after he dismisses her (4.16).

It is this very dismissal that provides the catalyst for the conversation to continue. Whatever Jesus' enigmatic statement regarding the woman's five husbands and her current non-husband may mean, the effect of his statement on the woman is most significant.¹² She perceives him to be a

11. Eslinger, 'Wooing', p. 176.

12. The statement clearly does not mean that the woman is a loose woman, or an unrepentant sinner, as she has so often been understood. There is no indication of judgment in the text, nor does the word 'sin' ever occur. Another common reading, that the five husbands symbolize the five false gods of the Samaritans, is also

prophet and immediately engages him in a theological conversation, first concerning proper worship and then the coming of the Messiah. As a result of her initiative, the way is cleared for Jesus openly to confess his messianic identity ἐγώ εἰμι ('I am') with words reminiscent of the Exodus theophany, 'I am, the one who is speaking to you' (4.26, cf. Exod. 3.14).

At the very moment of this dramatic revelation, their conversation is interrupted by the return of the disciples to the well. No sooner does Jesus reveal his identity through speech than the disciples, entering the scene, are amazed that he is speaking with a woman, though they will not ask 'why he is speaking to her' (4.27). That attention is given to gender precisely at this point in the story highlights the association of women and the self-revelation of Jesus. The answer to the disciples' unvoiced question is clear to the reader – Jesus has been speaking with the woman in order to reveal himself as the Messiah. This is true for the Samaritan woman; it will also be true for Martha and Mary Magdalene.

Here we come to one of the most significant differences in the conversations with Nicodemus and the woman, namely, Jesus' response to the two characters. As we have noted, both of these characters engage in a confusing, multi-leveled conversation with Jesus. Both demonstrate misunderstanding. Yet with Nicodemus, Jesus effectively closes off conversation and scoffs at his status as 'teacher of Israel'. On this point, Adele Reinhartz aptly observes, 'Decisive is not Nicodemus' persistent misunderstanding of Jesus' words but rather the accusatory tone of Jesus' comments to Nicodemus. Rather than inviting him to believe, Jesus upbraids Nicodemus...' ¹³ Reinhartz's observation is even more striking when placed beside Jesus' response to the woman. Despite her misunderstanding, their conversation continues, this time on the woman's initiative. Especially in the second half of their discussion, Jesus entertains her theological inquiries and eventually comes to a point of revelation.

As a result, the woman who initially expresses doubt about Jesus' communication with her emerges as a successful missionary figure, leading her people to a knowledge of Jesus as the savior of the world. Nicodemus, who initially expresses confidence in his knowledge about Jesus, fades from the scene as a confused man at best. He remains

problematic. First, the idols mentioned in 2 Kgs 17.29-32 amount to seven not five. Second, the question under discussion in John 4 is not whom to worship, but where to worship (4.20-21).

13. Adele Reinhartz, 'The Gospel of John', in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures* (2 vols.; New York, Crossroad, 1994), II, pp. 561-600 (570).

ignorant to the point of drawing a reprimand from Jesus. He resurfaces twice more in the narrative, at one point making a half-hearted attempt to speak up on Jesus' behalf (7.50), and later bringing a hundred pounds of embalming spices to Jesus' tomb (19.39). Neither one of these appearances is unambiguous. Scholars have read both scenes in completely opposite ways, either depicting Nicodemus as an emerging Christian,¹⁴ or as one incapable of full commitment and belief.¹⁵ Jouette Bassler is most on target in her observation that Nicodemus remains an ambiguous character throughout the gospel, and each appearance only adds to this ambiguity.¹⁶ In contrast, the Samaritan woman does not reappear after ch. 4. Her role as successful evangelist is complete, so much so that the villagers can claim their own knowledge of the savior of the world (4.42).

Martha and Peter

As noted in the introduction, the contrast between Martha and Peter is of a different nature than that of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman or of the others to be discussed below. This more subtle pattern depends on a knowledge of synoptic or synoptic-like tradition to be effective. There is much in the gospel to suggest that the evangelist had such knowledge, and it is not too much to expect the gospel's ancient audience did as well.¹⁷ To point out the contrast between Martha and Peter, we begin with Martha's conversation with Jesus in ch. 11.

Martha's first words to Jesus express her strong belief that Jesus could have prevented her brother's death (v. 21). The statement may also convey anger or regret that Jesus did not arrive sooner, but her next comment makes clear that Martha's overriding emotion is confidence in Jesus. She immediately voices hope in the fact that Jesus is now present, and that whatever he asks of God, God will give to him (οἶδα ὅτι ὅσα ἂν αἰτήσῃ τὸν θεὸν δώσει σοι ὁ θεός, 11.22). Thus, once more a character speaks of what she knows of Jesus. Unlike Nicodemus, however, Martha

14. So Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (HTKNT; 3 vols.; New York: Crossroad, 1990), I, pp. 364-65.

15. Cf. e.g., R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 135-136.

16. Jouette Bassler, 'Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel', *JB* 108 (1989), pp. 635-46.

17. Notice, for example, the way Lazarus is introduced by recalling Mary and Martha, and especially Mary's act of anointing before it has been related in the narrative (11.1-2; cf. 12.1-8). The equivalent of the synoptic Gethsemane scene also seems to presuppose a knowledge of the tradition (12.27).

speaks only for herself; she is not representative of a larger group. Notably, her statement foreshadows Jesus' own teaching to his disciples about asking and receiving from God (14.13-14; 15.7, 16; 16.23-24). Thus, like Nicodemus's opening claim her words are accurate.

As with earlier conversations, this one continues with an enigmatic pronouncement by Jesus: 'Your brother will rise again' (11.23). Martha responds with another statement about what she 'knows', this time not about Jesus, but about her understanding of resurrection of the dead and the end-time (11.24). In this way her statement resonates with that of the Samaritan woman in 4.25: 'I know that the Messiah is coming (who is called Christ), when that one comes he will announce to us all things.' In both cases, the women's knowledge of their own religious traditions provides Jesus the opportunity for self-revelation. Moreover, in both cases, the women's knowledge is limited and indicates a level of misunderstanding of Jesus. The Samaritan woman does not realize that the Messiah is standing before her, and Martha does not understand that Jesus' presence makes resurrection a present reality. The women's limited knowledge leads to explicit revelations by him, something decidedly absent in the conversation with Nicodemus. In ch. 11, as in ch. 4, Jesus responds with an 'I am' statement, in this case, 'I am the resurrection and the life' (11.25).

Yet what is most striking about the conversation between Jesus and Martha are not his words of revelation, but her words of confession. In the face of Jesus' direct question, 'Do you believe?' (11.26), Martha offers the fullest confession of Jesus voiced by an individual character in the narrative: 'Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world' (11.27). With this confession, she embodies the stated aim of the entire narrative, 'These things have been written in order that you might come to (or continue to) believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God' (20.31). Finally, Martha's confession concludes the dialogue; it is allowed to stand on its own with no further word from Jesus. The only other place where this occurs is with the confession of the Samaritan villagers (4.42). The confessions of Nathanael (1.49), Peter (6.69) and Thomas (20.28) are all followed by some sort of reprimand by Jesus, and even the profession of faith by the formerly blind man (9.38) is followed by a statement of judgment by Jesus.

Most telling about the presentation of Martha is the way her portrayal recasts the synoptic tradition. Anyone familiar with this tradition cannot help but hear words associated with Simon Peter ('You are the Christ', Mk 8.29 and parallels). That Martha voices this confession in the Gospel of John hints at a deliberate displacement of Simon Peter. If this is the

case, it makes Peter's own unfamiliar confession in 6.69, 'you are the Holy One of God', all the more striking. We turn then to Peter's character and the nature of his presentation in the narrative.

From the time of Peter's introduction to the narrative, one hears echoes of familiar Petrine tradition, but they are muted or altered in a variety of ways. Consider, for example, Peter's initial appearance. First, the name Simon Peter appears before the character himself does; it serves as a means of identifying his apparently lesser-known brother, Andrew. On the one hand, this confirms Simon Peter's familiarity in the tradition. On the other hand, that Andrew enters the narrative first, having encountered Jesus before Peter, may be an early indication of Peter's diminished status in this gospel. When Simon Peter does enter the narrative he plays a completely passive role. Andrew finds him (εὕρίσκει οὗτος πρῶτον τὸν ἀδελφὸν ἰδίον Σίμωνα) and tells him of his find (εὕρηκαμεν τὸν Μεσσίαν, ὃ ἐστὶν μεθερμηνευόμενον χριστός, 1.41). Peter is then brought to Jesus, who looks at him, identifies him and renames him. However, unlike the Matthean version of Peter's renaming, which follows his confession at Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16.16-18), Peter here says nothing to elicit his new name. Furthermore, whereas the Matthean Jesus makes clear that 'rock' (Πέτρος) is indicative of Peter's foundational role in the church, the Johannine Jesus offers no interpretation at all. In short, the whole episode seems to bear little significance for the narrative.

Finally, Peter is the only disciple who does not speak and attribute some sort of title to Jesus in this opening chapter. John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God (vv. 29, 36), Andrew witnesses to Peter that Jesus is the Messiah (1.41), Philip refers to the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth (1.45), and Nathanael confesses that Jesus is Son of God and King of Israel (1.49). Amid this cluster of confessions and titles, Peter's silence stands out. He will have a confession to offer, but it is reserved for a later time and when it occurs it is not without complication.

The passage in which Peter's confession appears comes at the end of an extended controversy between Jesus and the Jewish authorities involving Jesus' claim to be 'the bread of life' (cf. 6.35-59). Throughout the gospel, Jesus' words and actions are frequently the cause of division (cf. 7.40-44; 9.16; 11.45-46), and in this passage the division occurs among his own disciples. Following Jesus' discourse, many of the disciples complain exactly like his opponents (γογγύζουσιν περὶ τούτου οἱ μαθηταί, 6.61, cf. 6.41). Jesus is not surprised at their reaction, since, consistent with his character, he 'knew from the beginning who were the ones who did not believe and who was the one that would betray him' (6.64).

This context of unbelief and betrayal sets the tone for Peter's words to Jesus. Upon the desertion of many of his disciples (6.66), Jesus asks the Twelve directly, 'You do not also wish to leave, do you?' This is the first time the Twelve have been distinguished in the gospel, and Peter clearly responds as their representative: he repeatedly uses the first person plural in 6.68-69. When Jesus replies, it is not to Peter alone, but to the Twelve (6.70). Therefore, Peter's first words in the gospel should be examined especially in light of how Peter functions as spokesman for the twelve male disciples.

His response to Jesus takes the form of a question: 'Lord, to whom shall we go?' (6.68a) followed by a two-part confession: 'You have words of eternal life, and we have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God'. The first part of the confession recollects both Jesus' earlier reference to 'the words which I have spoken' (6.63), and the idea of eternal life that is woven throughout the discourse in ch. 6. It thus stands as an affirmation of the person and teaching of Jesus. The second part of the confession is more difficult to interpret.

As is often noted, the title 'Holy One of God' occurs only here in John's Gospel and is found elsewhere in the New Testament only in Mk 1.24 and its Lukan parallel, 4.34. In the latter instances, the title is voiced by an unclean spirit whom Jesus quickly rebukes and silences. On the basis of this occurrence, some hear in the Johannine text an echo of the synoptic association of Peter's character with the demonic (Mk 8.33; Mt. 16.23), especially since Jesus goes on to speak about a devil (6.70).¹⁸ Of course, the narrator takes pains to point out that Jesus is referring to Judas with this reference (v. 71), but there remains a hint of ambiguity about Peter's confession for other reasons as well.

First, the title that Peter uses for Jesus is not clearly messianic.¹⁹ To be sure, this in itself does not imply that Peter's words should be taken negatively. In Bultmann's view, that 'Holy One of God' has 'no recognizable tradition at all as a messianic title' is precisely its virtue. As such, the title expresses 'the newness which is proper to every authentic confession'.²⁰ Nevertheless, if the evangelist is drawing on traditions about

18. For example, Graydon F. Snyder argues that the title brings a 'strange twist to the scene' that 'appears as a sly attack on the validity of Peter's confession' ('John 13.16 and the Anti-Petrinism of the Johannine Tradition', *BibRes* 16 [1971], pp. 5-15).

19. Even those who argue for its messianic interpretation admit that evidence for such a reading is lacking. Cf. C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2nd edn, 1978), p. 207. Schnackenburg argues that even though the title is not messianic it must refer to Jesus' messiahship based on its association with the synoptic confession of Peter in the history of tradition (*St. John*, III, p. 76).

20. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 449.

the Twelve in this narrative, why does he not adopt the traditional version of Peter's confession?²¹ Even more pressing, why does the confession normally attributed to Peter, 'You are the Christ', appear later in the story on the lips of Martha? As we have seen, Martha's confession is in effect the articulation of the Johannine credo (cf. 20.21). Next to this, Schneiders is right to assert that Peter's statement 'lacks the fullness of Johannine faith'.²²

Since Peter is serving a representative function in this passage, we cannot simply claim that Peter, a man, is displaced by Martha, a woman. Still, the gender contrast may be present at another level. The Twelve traditionally stand for a group of male disciples gathered in a privileged position around Jesus, a notion confirmed in the Fourth Gospel by Jesus' talk of election in 6.70. Yet, in this instance, the confession of an individual woman surpasses the corporate confession of a group of men.

Again, the response of Jesus to Peter's words supports the point more than the use of the title itself. Recall that Martha's confession stands on its own; it closes the conversation with Jesus in a climactic fashion (11.27). In contrast, Jesus replies to Peter's confession with a sobering pronouncement. Granted, the first part of the conversation appears to confirm the appropriateness of Peter's words, 'Did I not choose you, the Twelve?' (6.70). The reader is invited to consider that these, indeed, are Jesus' chosen followers. As such, they stand in a place of privilege compared to those who seemingly were not permitted by the Father to come to Jesus (6.65). However, the second part of Jesus' response, 'and one of you is a devil', immediately dispels any notion that inclusion among the Twelve is equivalent to faithful discipleship. Indeed, these final words of Jesus cast a shadow over the conversation, so that no matter how we understand Peter's confession, an element of suspicion lingers around the Twelve.²³ As Haenchen puts it, 'The confession of the twelve is depicted here basically in its dubiousness...'²⁴

There is not space to fill out the characterization of Peter as it unfolds in the rest of the gospel. Suffice it to say that it is arguably a downward

21. The various attempts to conform Peter's words to a more traditional confession reflected in the manuscript tradition confirm the problematic nature of the confession.

22. Schneiders, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel', p. 41.

23. Gail O'Day, 'John', in L. Keck et al., *The New Interpreters Bible* (12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), IX, pp. 493-865 (611): 'Instead of embracing Peter's confession... Jesus raises again the question of election and choice'. Ernst Haenchen, *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John 1-6* (2 vols.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), I, p. 308.

24. Haenchen, *John*, I, p. 308.

progressi
repeated
first prot
rected b
necessa
must re
attemp
interfe
three t
high p
(assu
shado

And
wit
Ma
Jes
th
E
o
c
f

progression from this point. Peter may have the best of intentions, but he repeatedly misses the mark in his interactions with Jesus. In ch. 13, he first protests Jesus' proposal to wash his feet, and then, when he is corrected by Jesus, he overcompensates by demanding more than what is necessary. At the farewell meal, Peter has no direct access to Jesus but must rely on the Beloved Disciple as an intermediary. In ch. 18, he rashly attempts a violent defense in the garden, which Jesus interprets as interference with his mission (18.11). Next, Peter denies his discipleship three times, at the same time that Jesus is defending himself before the high priest. We will see him below in his final scene of the gospel proper (assuming ch. 21 is a later addition), where once more he is overshadowed by the Beloved Disciple and also by Mary Magdalene.

Mary of Bethany and Judas

Another place in the gospel where a woman appears in direct contrast with a man is the supper scene at the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. There Mary performs a sign-act, the anointing of Jesus' feet, which Jesus then interprets for those gathered around him. That Mary anoints the feet of Jesus is unusual, since typically the head is anointed with oil. Even more remarkable is the fact that she then wipes off (ἐξέμαξεν) the oil with her hair (12.3). The story appears to be a conflation of the tradition reflected in Lk. 7.38, which depicts a woman who bathes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and then kisses and anoints his feet with ointment. Notably, the verb 'wiped' reappears in the next chapter where Jesus first washes the feet of his disciples then wipes them (ἐκμάσσειν) with a towel (13.5). In ch. 13, Jesus' act is meant as an example of the proper attitude of service for discipleship (vv. 14-15). Thus, on one level, Mary's act of devotion anticipates the lesson of Jesus. She demonstrates, in the most extravagant fashion, the qualities of a good disciple.²⁵

Juxtaposed to the depiction of Mary in v. 3 is the introduction of Judas in v. 4. He is explicitly described as one of Jesus' disciples, a character indicator immediately qualified by the phrase 'the one about to betray him'. This is the second time in the narrative that Judas has been mentioned, and both times have emphasized his dissonant identity as a disciple and betrayer (cf. 6.71). In 12.5-6, Judas is further characterized as an embezzler who masks his greed with a false concern for the poor. Moreover, it is Judas in particular, rather than the more general 'some' in

25. See Robert Kysar, *John* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament; Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1986), p. 183; O'Day, 'John', p. 701.

Mk 14.4 or 'disciples' in Mt. 26.8, who protests Mary's action. According to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, this focus on Judas 'emphasizes the evangelistic intention to portray the true female disciple, Mary of Bethany, as the alternative to the unfaithful male disciple, Judas, who was one the Twelve'.²⁶ Significant once more is Jesus' response to these two characters. Judas receives a harsh rebuke, 'Leave her alone!' while Mary earns a defense in the form of interpretation: Jesus perceives her actions in relation to his own impending death (12.7). In this way, Mary appears as one who is keenly in tune with his coming hour. In contrast, Judas will soon slide into the night to betray Jesus (13.30) and then stand alongside the soldiers who come to arrest him (18.5).

Mary Magdalene, Peter and the Beloved Disciple

With this we come to the last of the contrasts, Mary Magdalene with the two disciples at the tomb. As was the case with 'diptych' of the scenes featuring Nicodemus and the Samaritan women, the structure of the narrative in 20.1-18 encourages the reader to see a contrast between the woman and the two men. The passage consists of two stories woven together by the presence of Mary Magdalene. One is the story of Peter and the Beloved Disciple at the empty tomb (vv. 3-10); the other is the encounter of Mary Magdalene and Jesus at the tomb (vv. 1-2; 11-18). Mary's story surrounds that of the disciples, creating an interpretive framework for their own experience at the tomb. As a whole, the passage provides yet another example of the juxtaposition of male and female characters in the Fourth Gospel.

As in earlier passages with women, the gender identity of Mary is accentuated both with the use of γύναι ('woman', 20.13, 15) and through biblical allusion. M. Cambre has called attention to the way the Song of Song 3.1-4 echoes through the garden story: the night atmosphere, the triple searching, the question addressed to the watchman (שומר) from the verb 'to keep' in Hebrew, also used for keeper of a garden, and the language of a woman taking hold of her lover.²⁷ The biblical love song in the background of this text highlights all the more the gender identities of both Mary and Jesus. In doing so, it contributes to the sense of intimacy in the passage.

In the opening verses of the narrative, Mary Magdalene comes alone

26. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'A Feminist Interpretation for Liberation: Martha and Mary: Lk. 10.38-42', *Religion and Intellectual Life* 3 (1986), pp. 21-36 (32).

27. M. Cambre, 'L'influence du Cantique des Cantique sur le Nouveau Testament', *RevThom* 62 (1962), pp. 5-26.

to the tomb, early in the morning, and discovers that the stone covering its entrance has been rolled away. She does not stay to investigate but hurries to report to the two most prominent male disciples in the gospel what the evidence clearly suggests – the body of Jesus has been removed. It is Mary's articulation of the problem, 'They have taken the Lord from the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him' (v. 2), which provides the catalyst for the events detailed in vv. 3-10.²⁸ Upon hearing Mary's report, Peter and the Beloved Disciple set out running to the tomb. This is the second time that Peter and the Beloved Disciple are paired together, and, as in 13.23-25, a contrast appears to be drawn between the two. The narrator makes the point three times that the Beloved Disciple arrives at the tomb ahead of Peter (vv. 4, 6, 8). This suggests that being ahead of Peter is especially relevant to the character of the Beloved Disciple. Yet, the narrator also takes pains to mention that despite arriving ahead of Peter, the disciple does not enter the tomb, but from the entrance observes the linen grave wrappings (v. 5). Perhaps this is an attempt to balance the presentation of the two disciples by giving them an equal share in the discovery of the tomb, though of course, both of them are dependent upon Mary's initial discovery.

It is Peter who enters the tomb first. He sees the linen wrappings, as did the Beloved Disciple, but also the carefully folded σουδάριον (linen cloths), something the disciple had not seen from outside (20.7). Only then does the Beloved Disciple enter and the narrator reports, 'and he saw and believed' (καὶ εἶδεν καὶ ἐπίστευσεν, 20.8). This verse has been crucial for viewing the Beloved Disciple as the disciple *par excellence*. Based on the two verbs, many interpreters assume that in the Fourth Gospel, the Beloved Disciple is the first to believe in the resurrection. Despite its popularity, this interpretation is not without difficulties, as is evident by the extent to which commentators feel compelled to defend the faithfulness of the Beloved Disciple.²⁹

The most obvious problem is that nowhere does the text state what it

28. O'Day, 'John', p. 840.

29. Schnackenburg states the case most emphatically: 'To what kind of belief [did the disciple come]? According to the context, undoubtedly to the full faith in the resurrection of Jesus; any kind of diminution, with a view to v. 9 is ruled out. The point of the story lies in the clear and strong faith of the beloved disciple' (*St. John*, III, p. 312). Similarly Barrett claims, '[The beloved disciple] is the first to believe in the resurrection; he holds, in this sense, a primacy of faith' (*St. John*, p. 561). B. Lindars contrasts the faith of the Beloved Disciple with the skepticism of Thomas: 'The Disciple has reached Resurrection faith without an appearance of Jesus... His kind of faith will be commended by Jesus himself in verse 29 (*Gospel of John* [London: Oliphants, 1978], p. 602).

is the disciple saw and believed. The narrator simply assumes the reader will be able to supply the object for these verbs. Second, the verses immediately following the statement contradict the view that the disciple came to resurrection faith. Verse 9 implies that neither disciple knew what to make of the empty tomb because 'they did not yet understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead'. Although interpreters do their best to find a way around this statement, it seems likely that it means what it says.³⁰ The uneventful conclusion in v. 10 confirms this, as the disciples simply return to their homes. Indeed, those who argue that the Beloved Disciple came to faith in the resurrection must explain why he did not communicate his understanding to anyone else, not even to Peter. At best, going home is an understated response for a disciple who has just seen evidence of Jesus' resurrection. In this regard, Paul Minear notes, 'Nowhere else in the New Testament is it suggested that faith in the risen Lord produced such indifference, as if nothing at all happened to change things'.³¹ Indeed, one could argue that the behavior of the disciples is more in keeping with Jesus' prediction, 'You will be scattered to your homes' (16.32), than with the response of one who has come to the full knowledge of resurrection faith. Finally, if the Beloved Disciple came to such faith in this scene, there would be little point for the next scene with Mary.

Minear has taken these problems seriously and argues, as did Augustine long before him, that what the Beloved Disciple actually saw and believed was that Mary spoke the truth; the body of Jesus was no longer there. Indeed, according to Minear, the basic function of the episode in vv. 3-10 is to corroborate Mary's discovery of Jesus' missing body.³² This explanation has the advantage of making sense of several narrative elements. First, it links the introduction of the story, in which Mary announces that the tomb is empty, with the disciples' experience at the tomb. It also explains vv. 9-10. Because neither of the disciples knew the

30. Schnackenburg blames clumsy editorial work (*St. John*, III, p. 313); Lindars suggests that although the disciple has come to faith 'the substance of his faith has still not been formulated' (*Gospel of John*, p. 602). Does this mean he believes something, but he does not know what?

31. Paul S. Minear, "'We Don't Know Where...'" *John 20.2*, *Int* 30 (1976), pp. 125-39 (127).

32. Minear, "'We Don't Know Where'", p. 127. Augustine first points out the mistaken reading that the disciple believed in the resurrection, and then comments: 'What, therefore, did he see? What did he believe? He saw, of course, the empty sepulcher' (*St. Augustine: Tractates on the Gospel of John 112-24* (trans. John W. Rettig; Fathers of the Church, 92; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), pp. 54-55).

scripture, they could not understand what the tomb signified; they could only confirm what Mary had already told them.

Against the argument that 'believe' (πιστεύω) must carry more theological weight than this³³ is a similar use of the verb in Luke's resurrection narrative. In Luke 24, the women who discover the empty tomb also return to the male disciples and report their discovery, including the message from the two men in dazzling clothes. Their words are deemed to be nonsense by the disciples and the narrator reports 'and they did not believe them' (καὶ ἠπίσταντο αὐταῖς, 24.11). Here, the verb does not carry any theological significance; it merely points to the lack of credibility granted to the women by the men. Only Peter races to the tomb to investigate their story (Lk. 24.12). In the Gospel of John, upon hearing the woman's report, both Peter and the Beloved Disciple race to the tomb, and the narrator confirms that they do believe her words, though her report does not yet include news of the resurrected Lord. In short, when viewed next to the Lukan account, the verb 'believe' need not be viewed theologically. Instead, the overall effect of John's version is to elevate the position of Mary as a credible witness.

In sum, a major function of the scene with Peter and the Beloved Disciple in 20.3-10 is to confirm Mary's report. The scene also displays an interest in balancing the presentation of the two male disciples. Both have their share in observing the empty tomb, and like Mary Magdalene, neither of them understands its implications. Most significantly, vv. 3-10 prepare for the next scene between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. Although the Beloved Disciple confirms the truth of the empty tomb, this does not resolve Mary's major concern, namely, the whereabouts of Jesus' body. We thus move to the third scene, which shifts the focus once more to Mary.

Mary's reintroduction to the narrative stands in contrast to the departure of the disciples. They return to their homes, but Mary remains weeping outside the tomb. This action is an essential aspect of her role. Four times attention is called to her weeping, twice by the narrator, once by the angels and once by Jesus himself (vv. 11a, 11b, 13, 15). The reader is supposed to notice her tears. It may be that the reader is also to notice how their presence fulfills the prediction that Jesus made before his death: 'Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn...' (16.20). In fact, Mary is the only character of the gospel who weeps and mourns when she 'no longer sees' Jesus (cf. 16.19). As the story proceeds, the second half of Jesus' prediction will also be fulfilled: 'you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy' (16.20b; 16.22). It is perhaps no coincidence

33. O'Day, 'John', p. 841.

that a woman fulfills this prediction, given the fact that the metaphor of childbirth is used to describe the human emotions that will accompany his death and resurrection (16.21).

Through her tears, Mary looks for herself to see what the tomb holds. Unlike the disciples, she sees two angels sitting at the head and feet of where Jesus had lain. Their question, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' (20.13) allows Mary to articulate once more the problem that is the driving force behind the narrative. This time she expresses the dilemma in a more personal way: 'They have taken my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him' (v. 13; cf. v. 2). The angels address Mary as 'woman' (γύναι), recalling earlier occurrences of this vocative in 2.4, 4.21 and 19.26. Its use here as an address is not surprising (as it is, for instance, when Jesus uses it to refer to his mother, 2.4; 19.26), but it nevertheless calls attention to Mary's gender. In this way, the ensuing conversation between Mary Magdalene and Jesus is situated in the context of earlier conversations between Jesus and women characters. This will be reinforced by Jesus' own use of 'woman' in v. 15.

Upon answering the angels, Mary turns around and sees Jesus. That she does not recognize him adds drama to the story, much like the recognition story in Lk. 24.13-35 (cf. also Jn 21.7, 12). To the angels' question, Jesus adds one of his own: 'What are you seeking?' (v. 15). He also includes the address 'woman', which occurs here for the last time in the gospel. For the last time in the narrative, a woman will once again be privy to the self-revelation of Jesus, reminding the reader once more of the association between women and the self-revelation of Jesus. In this instance, revelation occurs through the naming of Mary by Jesus. It is widely recognized that when Jesus calls her by name, it recalls the description of 'his own' in ch. 10. The shepherd 'calls his own by name' (10.3). So it is with Mary, who upon hearing her name called, recognizes Jesus.

She responds to his call with only one word, ῥαββουνί (my rabbi). Probably too much has been read into her use of the title at this point, especially when viewed as an indication of her misunderstanding of the new relationship she is to have with Jesus.³⁴ Mary is simply using a familiar title and one that Jesus himself had deemed appropriate (13.13). Moreover, the mere fact that Jesus appears to her suggests that she has been given a privileged role in the narrative, regardless of her immediate level of understanding.

With this comes the most perplexing part of the exchange between

34. So Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, p. 687; cf. Brown, *Gospel According to John* (AB, 29A; New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 1010; Barrett, *St. John*, p. 565; Lindars, *Gospel of John*, p. 607.

Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and another instance of over-interpretation with respect to Mary's character. Jesus says to her, μή μου ἅπτου, 'do not touch me'. The phrase is enigmatic since there is no indication that Mary has done any such thing. Most interpreters place the focus on an implied misstep on Mary's part. She becomes, in effect, 'the clinging woman', trying to hold back her man, hoping he will remain his earthly self. According to this view, Mary's touch threatens to prevent Jesus from ascending and taking his place with the Father.³⁵ Alternatively, Minear suggests that Jesus' command 'counters her desire to place his body in a tomb. To restrain him in such a place would interfere with his mission, would place restrictions on his freedom of action'.³⁶ Whether Mary is understood as clinging to Jesus or trying to entomb him, the power that these interpretations attribute to her is truly remarkable. Although Jesus has been in complete control of his actions throughout the gospel, now the mere touch of a woman is enough to hold him down!

Since the narrative reports no action at all on Mary's part, the importance of the statement is likely to be found not in what Mary may or may not be doing, but in the state in which Jesus claims to be. For this reason, more convincing explanations of the verse come from those who explore what it says about Jesus' 'liminal' state rather than what it says about Mary.³⁷ Most helpful for our purposes is the work of Mary Rose D'Angelo, who argues,

John 20.17 is concerned to emphasize exactly what many of the interpreters desire to explain away or in the case of Bultmann to deny: that the state of Jesus is different when he encounters Mary from when he meets the disciples and Thomas and invites Thomas' touch.

This does not mean that Mary is granted only an inferior grade appearance but that 'the uniqueness of the appearance may award Mary a special status. Far from showing the inadequacy of Mary's faith, the

35. So also Mary Rose D'Angelo, who notes, 'the reading "do not cling" appeals to and reinforces a common societal definition of women: women's love is dependent and holds men back from their true call' ('A Critical Note: John 20.17 and the *Apocalypse of Moses* 21', *JTS* 41 [1990], pp. 529-36 [531]).

36. Minear, 'We Don't Know Where', p. 130.

37. Cf., e.g., Wayne Meeks, 'We can only observe that since the Fourth Evangelist's dramatic compression of exaltation and crucifixion motifs into one has left the traditional Easter appearances in a kind of limbo, this strange statement imparts to that limbo a sacred liminality. Jesus is no longer in the world, but not yet ascended; he belongs to the intermediate zone that violates these categories and renders him untouchable' ('The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91 [1972], pp. 141-73 [166]).

story tends to confer on her a unique privilege in this encounter'.³⁸

If we allow the verse to be read this way, it coincides well with Jesus' next words, which express the most remarkable aspect of the encounter between these two characters. In v. 17, Jesus commissions Mary to go to his brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God.' Without hesitation, Mary carries out her commission: she goes and announces to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord', and delivers his message to them. In doing so, she assumes the role of mediator and apostle for Jesus. It is her testimony that prepares the way for the disciples joyfully to witness an appearance of the resurrected Christ (vv. 19-29).

Finally, that Jesus asks Mary to communicate to the disciples accents the fact that he did not appear to Peter and the Beloved Disciple. In effect, these two are bypassed in favor of Mary. The structure of the narrative suggests a deliberate juxtaposition. Compared to Mary's experience at the tomb, the disciples' experience seems all the more lacking. They race to the tomb, find nothing but grave clothes, and return home no wiser than before, except that they are able to confirm what Mary told them. She, weeping and mourning the loss of Jesus, lingers at the tomb. Much like Martha and Mary of Bethany, her expressive devotion is rewarded. It is to her that the risen Jesus appears.

These four examples suggest a contrast that casts women in more favorable roles than their male counterparts, especially in terms of the outcomes of their interactions with Jesus. Far from being portrayed as equal to men in their discipleship, these women surpass the men in terms of the values of the narrative. With the men examined here, Jesus gives frequent correctives, the conversation turns to talk of the devil and betrayal, or conversations are abruptly cut off. The women, on the other hand, are repeatedly privy to statements of Jesus' self-revelation and emerge as both confessors of Jesus and witnesses to his death and resurrection. Thus, at least in these four instances, the text teases (entices?) us with the possibility of an implicit gender dualism in which women are positioned on top.

38. D'Angelo, 'John 20.17', p. 535. D'Angelo's observations, combined with those of Meeks (see n. 37) raise another intriguing possibility, namely, that women are present in this gospel particularly at times of transition or liminality. The mother of Jesus helps inaugurate Jesus' earthly ministry and is present again at the moment preceding his death. She is also associated with a wedding, as is the Samaritan woman through betrothal allusions. Martha and Mary of Bethany encounter Jesus during the transitional time of death and then resurrection. And finally, Mary Magdalene lingers at the tomb only to witness the most liminal moment of all, as Jesus ascends to the Father.