

Women in the Gospel of Mark:  
Ancient Representations and Contemporary Implications

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## ABSTRACT

### WOMEN IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK:

#### ANCIENT REPRESENTATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

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This is the moment when Spanish-speaking churches in the United States will make a difference as we confront New Testament passages that encourage machismo. In this study, the reader will discover various women who were pioneers when confronted with Christian peers accustomed to leaving them aside, even though they were paving the way for a new expression of the gospel.

How women are treated in the New Testament is one of the problems in many churches across the world. The recurrent question is, What did the early Christians think of women? Was there a space for them to express their points of view? Did Jesus (a leader among the Jewish people) improve their position within the community? Why is the role women played in the early Christian community important? How can it shape our world view today?

These are complex questions that church authorities give problematic answers to. There are myths to be demolished because these myths result in an exclusive ministry for men. This study focuses on the role of women in the earliest Gospel, that of Mark. How

women are represented in Mark, how Mark's Jesus interacts with them, and what the implications are of such interaction for the roles of women in contemporary church life are the main questions addressed.

My hope is that this study will inspire Christian men to treat women as they are presented in the Gospel of Mark, where women are treated as equals to men. The space given to them in this book demonstrates that women's testimonies were just as important as the testimony of men for the author of this earliest Gospel and the Jesus whose teaching and example he relays.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my wife Maggie, and my children, Andrea and David, who have spent years listening, waiting and revising what “daddy” wrote.

I am grateful for their patience in hearing me speak day after day about the Gospel of Mark around our dining table. They witnessed how I changed my perspective, one book at a time.

I also want to dedicate this book to all of the people in churches across the world that will find in these pages the necessary courage to face the challenge confronting women who belong to the body of Christ.

I have been preaching on this subject for some time at my local church in Greenwich, Connecticut, U.S.A. I saw first-hand how women began to see themselves treated differently after their husbands and sons, as well as women, were confronted by the stories narrated in the pages of this marvelous Book of Mark. There is so much work to do in the Body of Christ in relation to these ancient Women.

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## 1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the problems in many churches across the world is how women are treated in that church environment, based on the New Testament. The recurrent questions are, what kinds of leadership role, if any, were women able to occupy in the early Christians churches? Based on the Gospels, how did Jesus see the roles of his female followers in relation to the roles of his male followers? The answers to these and other questions, have shaped important aspects of church life and the world views of many Christians.

The answers authorities within churches give to such questions are often problematic. There are myths to be demolished, because these myths provide the foundation for an exclusive ministry for men. In order to make this study manageable, I will focus it on the roles of women in the earliest Gospel, that of Mark. How are women represented in Mark, how does Mark's Jesus interact with them, and what are the implications of such interaction for the roles of women in contemporary church life.

While visiting different churches in Latin American countries, where Spanish is the primary language, I have confirmed the appearance of women in a second place after men. Women are relegated to less important positions because of a wrong approach to the New Testament, the Gospels in particular. It does not mean that they should have a specific function to match the opposite sex, but rather that it is about validating human beings who have been mistreated and undervalued over time.

The churches that I have visited belong to the same denomination. There are organizations who are defined by the way they interpret certain passages of Scripture, which in the end is to the detriment of women. I have been in different satellite churches



of that denomination, which teach exactly what the central church has as doctrine. I have been in different councils, with different beliefs, and all of them have relegated women to tasks that the Church considers less important. However, these same women suffer in silence the discrimination of their male peers. They let off steam by preaching about important women in the Old Testament, as in the New Testament, but always teaching that they were subject to an authority superior to them. Women are not free to challenge doctrine, much less venture to study and preach passages that would dispel many legitimate doubts that they have in relation to what is authority.

The problem of many churches in Latin America is to relegate, nullify or even curtail the ministry of many women who could be a blessing to the churches. I have been in church offices, in which the majority are male pastors, and the job of women is relegated to being a mere secretary, carrying out the tasks of a church. However, they cannot even speak up if they see anything problematic in the renewal of credentials, for example or if they analyze a passage of Scripture that they see differently. They are not allowed to make decisions.

We are literally being bombarded by well-intentioned male Christians, who continue to mistreat women. The Gospels and the words ascribed to Jesus are used to curtail the ministry of women. There are countless occasions in which the value of these faithful followers is diminished. Yes, of course, they can fill the church with service, but they are women. Privileges are only for men and women must wait their time, as “dogs” or “puppies” as Mark’s tales of the Syrophoenician woman (7:24-29; see also Matt. 15:21-28) is sometimes used to suggest. Some male interpreters get tangled in labyrinths deciphering the differences between the words used for “dog” in the Gospels (κύων,

κυνάριον) to teach that “little dogs” are those whose rightful place is inside the home. This is too strange and is taught to many Christian women.

There are thousands of Christian women who, in their hearts at least, do not accept these roles. There are other women who decide to wait on a man's authority to be able to act. The influence of the male church is powerful among them. The male disciples' comment about the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:23, is amazing. That woman “cry out after us.” The disciples were raised that way, however, although Jesus had been raised the same way, he did not hesitate to put the woman in her rightful place. We can see however, Jesus's own women disciples supporting his ministry (see esp. Luke 8:1-3) and were the first to know of his resurrection (Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12). There are people, mostly male, who still latch onto the “fear” or “amazement” of these women followers of Jesus, especially at his resurrection. New Testament scholar Janine E. Luttick in her book titled *Jairus's Daughter and the Female Body in Mark* notes, however: “The women's response is visceral”<sup>1</sup> Mary Ann Beavis mentions that their silence, “does not necessarily indicate absolute silence.”<sup>2</sup> As Adela Yarbro Collins says, it is simply an expression of urgency.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Janine E. Luttick, *Jairus's Daughter and the Female Body in Mark* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), pp. 55-57. Describing the types of bodies that appear in the Gospel of Mark, explain the verb “amazed” in Mark 16: 5 (ἐχθαμβέομαι) citing Francis Molony, which is used to indicate an attitude of astonishment and not fear. It is not a terror that prevented them from moving their lips, in fact they told what they had seen. This verb is used to highlight that they were joyfully surprised.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), p. 246. This author tells us that the women's fear was a natural form of response to a supernatural experience. When Jesus instructs the leper in Mark 1:44 not to tell anyone what happened, it is understood that the leper did tell the priest what happened.

<sup>3</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; ed. Harold W. Attridge: Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 179. She argues

We cannot deny the important role of discipleship that women represent in the Gospel of Mark. Peter's mother-in-law, the Syrophoenician, the woman with the flow of blood, the daughter of Jairus, etc. (all discussed in detail below) are examples of discipleship even greater than the male disciples. The women were in charge of carrying the news of the resurrection. That task was for real disciples. In other word, were reserved for those who saw the resurrection despite the pain. Later, the male disciples took ownership of that truth; they were the ones who took credit for the report of that appearance. Paul the apostle, in the book of Acts says that Jesus appeared to many disciples after his death (1 Cor. 13:31); however, Paul omits mention of the women in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. If it were not for centuries of partiality in reading the gospels, we would see these brave women as taking the gospel to every creature (as in Mark 16:15).

Mary Ann Beavis, speaking about the authorship of the Gospel of Mark, quite rightly dares to say that the author of this Gospel, whom Christian tradition claimed was Mark, is actually unknown. We do not know who its true author was. That author may have been a woman, which is why she would have remained anonymous.<sup>4</sup>

Genesis 2-3 represents humanity's first sin as bringing devastating results to male/female relationships. Unity and harmony gave way to the separation and domination of one sex over the other. In subsequent biblical narratives, it plays out as declarations of divorce, adultery, polygamy, rape, and other atrocities against women. Hence, the ultimate significance of Jesus fully including women in this new community. He was accused of

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that the context of the healing of the leper is to show authorities God's power to heal and not a command to remain silent.

<sup>4</sup> Beavis, *Mark*, p. 6.

blasphemy, of associating with the wrong people, especially women (see esp. Matt 21:31-32; Luke 7:36-50; John 4:27). In other words, his behavior was unconventional. However, for the female disciples who had been included in this new community, they were strengthened in these teachings and became faithful witnesses of the faith they proclaimed, not like the male disciples who “all deserted him and fled” at his arrest (Mark 14:50). The inclusion of women in Jesus' ministry cannot be forgotten and relegated as something unimportant, because Jesus' attitude toward them created such an impression as to cause them to recognize him as the coming Messiah (see esp. John 4:25; 11:27).

The Gospel of Luke, which was probably written in the late first century, tells us that Mary Magdalene, Johanna, and many other women traveled with Jesus and helped him in his ministry (8:1-3). This was truly revolutionary because women were customarily relegated to the background, whether in Jewish or pagan society. These women not only left their homes to follow Jesus. Perhaps some of them had a husband who understood the new community that Jesus was expanding. If they were willing to follow Jesus it was because there was a man behind who supported them in this enterprise. Or perhaps some of them were widowed or divorced, but their mission was to follow and support the ministry of Jesus. Jesus knew about their social limitations. But he still put aside the temptation of not accepting women in his ministry as his disciples. Although Mark presents women as symbols or figures of the emerging church, as we shall see, the surprise of the male disciples in John when they find Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman is notable (4:7). And in Mark when a woman anoints Jesus symbolically as Messiah and its criticized by the male disciples for “wasting” the ointment, Jesus defends her powerfully, beginning

with the words “Let her alone; why do you trouble her?” (14:3-9; see also Matt 26:6-13; John 12:1-8).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Further on the roles of women in the Gospels, see Jaime Clark-Soles, *Women in the Bible* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020) p. 189. She mentions that “there are more women in Jesus’ life and ministry than one might realize.”

## 2. THEME AND SIGNIFICANCE

My thesis is that the Gospel of Mark provides a valuable resource for churches wishing to right this wrong. In the Gospel of Mark, we see women with the same abilities to analyze Jesus's teaching as men and who have a discipleship role to play that is no less than that of men. An example of this is the Syrophoenician woman, mentioned above, who confronts Jesus about the comments of his disciples. The Gospel of Matthew, in its version of events, states that Jesus did not respond a word to this woman and his male disciples urged him to "Send her away" (15:23). This reflects an environment in which it was the custom to push women aside. It was taught by the priestly establishment in authority, and the disciples (and some would say even Jesus himself) were still learning to embrace the full implications of the new family that Jesus presented to them.

Leading feminist New Testament scholar Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes that Luke-Acts "is generally held to be one of the biblical writings which is most affirming of women."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, she chooses to title her own book, *But she Said*, deliberately echoing the theological argument that the Syrophoenician makes to Jesus (7:28)<sup>2</sup> an argument Mark represents Jesus as being convinced by: "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter" (7:29). Mark does not hesitate to present us with a woman who gets the better of Jesus in a verbal contest—the only person, male or female, in this Gospel to do so. Contrast the fact that Luke drops the Syrophoenician woman episode

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, pp. 11-13.

altogether in his rewriting of Mark, apparently uncomfortable with a woman who challenges Jesus to live up the implications of his own teachings.

If we can explain the place of women in the attractive Gospel of Mark, maybe we can clarify many years of wrong approaches or perhaps initiate a new vision for women based on this book. There is an abysmal difference between many contemporary church realities and the fact that women are treated so well in this Gospel of Mark, especially by Jesus. Apparently, this is the new community, the new way that a leader is presented. Now, the patriarchal and hierarchical way of looking at women in the community is reversed by Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

The different women who appear in Marks' Gospel are women who are not intimidated by social class. Perhaps this is because the leader among them (Jesus) himself a peasant and hence a marginalized person in society gave them the necessary space to be able to express themselves and come to request his help in the need they were going through. So did the disciples who are most often named. However, these women dared to give a service that never stopped until the death of her leader and after that too.<sup>4</sup>

In order to adequately study the roles of women in Mark, I will first need to situate Mark in its original historical context. I will focus on the date, and briefly, the authorship of the book and circumstances that surround the Gospel of Mark. The external evidence

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel* (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2004) p. 199. Women are included and have the same status as men. The hierarchical way to see the family, meaning husband, wife, and children, is reversed by Jesus. Miller argues that Jesus subverts patriarchy.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, 22

(second-century church tradition) identifies Mark, the follower of Peter, or his interpreter, as the one who wrote this book of Mark.<sup>5</sup>

Augustine, one of the most influential of the church fathers, was the first to claim that Mark was a follower of Matthew and that his stories followed the pattern of Matthew. Perhaps that is the reason why Mark appears after Matthew in our Bibles.<sup>6</sup> The overwhelming majority of modern scholars, however, argue that Mark's was the earliest Gospel. As such, it possesses a unique authority. The women who appear in Mark themselves possess a unique authority. They are imposing women, full of vitality and decisiveness, asking Jesus to perform miracles, for example, in their family or communities and accompanying him on his final journey to Jerusalem.

This model of Mark's representation of women can challenge the dominant thought in contemporary churches and the exclusiveness it grants to males. The kind of thought that subordinates Christian women to Christian men has permeated the thinking of the church, and therefore we are the witnesses of abuse by men. These ideas have been legalized and institutionalized across much of the Christian world.

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Gospel of Mark" in Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe and Jaqueline E. Lapsey eds, *The Women's Bible Commentary* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Twentieth Anniversary Edition; Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2012), p. 478. The Gospel is attributed to Mark, although in the traditional view of its authorship, it was Peter who told Mark the details. Malbon argues that the authorship of the Gospel is not as important as the authority.

<sup>6</sup> Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen Moore quote Augustine's statement that "Mark followed him Mathew like a slave and seems his summarizer." "The Lives of Mark" in *Mark and Method. New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Anderson and Moore (Second Edition; Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2008), p. 3.



The different women who appear in Mark's Gospel are women who are not intimidated by social class. Perhaps this is because the leader among them (Jesus), himself a peasant and hence a marginalized person in his society, gave them the necessary space to be able to express themselves and come to request his help in the need they were going through. The disciples who are most often named, are not a model to follow. However, these women dared to give a service that they never stopped until the death of her leader and after that too.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the Gospel, when the male apostles have fled and are hiding, it is the women followers who go to the tomb to perform one last service for Jesus (to anoint his body), and are therefore in a position to be the first followers to receive the good news of his resurrection.

As I said before, women have been relegated to the background. That is the teaching even of the churches of the 21st century with which I am most familiar. These churches typically point to women as the cause of humanity's fall into sin, as a result of which they must carry that stigma of "sinful woman" for life. Most of the misinterpretation comes from the Genesis account and the misinterpreted letters of the apostle Paul. Is it simply convenient for male church authorities to maintain this second status for women? In the Gospel known as Mark, chapter 16:8 has been used as a "workhorse" to suppress the work of women in the church of Christ; they left the tomb afraid and frightened, it is said even though the very survival of the testimony of the empty tomb, and hence the Christian message itself, was a result of the courage of these women. For too many church leaders to this day, echoing Luke 24:11 ("But these words [of the women who had been at the

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<sup>7</sup> Miller, p. 22

tomb] seemed to them [the apostles] to be an idle tale, and they did not believe them”), the testimony of women is not valid.

### 3. AN INTRODUCTION TO MARK

The Gospel of Mark is recognized among most scholars and students of the Bible as the first Gospel written during the first century. Without going into details of the different arguments that are proposed for the date, we may say that either immediately before or very soon after the year 70 C.E. is the commonly accepted date.<sup>1</sup> Since the nineteenth century, this Gospel has been recognized by most scholars as the first of the Synoptic Gospels.

Even though conservative scholarship on this Gospel still tends to identify its author as the “John whose other name was Mark” mentioned in Acts (12:13; 13:5,13; 15:37-39; see also I Peter 5:13) even in terms of that hypothesis it is not accurate to say that he was ignorant of Jewish traditions. He was at the house where people waited for the return of Peter the apostle who had been imprisoned. The people who were at the house, certainly knew Jewish and Gentile customs, and our author, if we assume he was John Mark the son of Mary, would know them as well.<sup>2</sup>

The external evidence (second-century church tradition) identifies Mark, the follower of Peter, or his interpreter, as the one who wrote this book of Mark<sup>3</sup>. This is the

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<sup>1</sup> Collins, *Mark*, pp. 11-14. As do most scholars, Collins, especially singles out the discourse in Mark 13 about the Jerusalem temple’s destruction by the Roman which occurred in 70 C.E. as the basis for starting to consider the date of composition.

<sup>2</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8 A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 19. Marcus presents the argument of many critical scholars who are skeptical about the authorship of John Mark.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Gospel of Mark” in Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe and Jaqueline E. Lapsey eds, *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Twentieth Anniversary Edition; Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2012) p. 478.

testimony of Papias who was quoted by Eusebius in the fourth century. Papias in turn quotes an old man named John who is sometimes identified with the author of the Gospel who bears his name. Although the credibility of this appeal is disputed, Papias's description of the author is immediately identified with John Mark who appears in the Book of Acts:

And the Presbyter (or elder) used to say this, “Mark became Peter’s interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord’s oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them.”<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, many authors have tended to dispense with, or not to consider, the testimony of Papias, regarding it as useless.<sup>5</sup> Other authors prefer not to obsess with this problems and ask other questions. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, for example, in her feminist commentary on Mark argues that the authorship of the Gospel is not as important as its authority.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> New Testament Commentary, Brigham Young University:  
<https://www.byunewtestamentcommentary.com/can-we-trust-the-ancient-tradition-that-peter-was-the-source-for-marks-gospel/>

<sup>5</sup> An attitude with deep roots in critical scholarship on Mark: see, e.g., Werner George Kümmel, *Introduction to The New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), p. 96. Kümmel argues that the comment in Papias is false and the beginning of a complicated, and contradictory, historical tradition. He cites Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Jerome.

<sup>6</sup> Malbon, “Gospel of Mark,” p. 478

Next, I will devote space to considering the different opinions regarding the place of composition of the gospel. The traditional position on where the Gospel of Mark was written also influences views on who wrote the document. Three possible places have been presented in which this Gospel was written: Galilee, Rome, and Syria. If we follow the tradition of Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis, who attributes the Gospel to John Mark, we will notice that it is always linked to Peter and Rome. It is believed to be Rome because after Peter's death, according to second-century tradition, John Mark collected and preserved the traditions about Jesus told by Peter. In addition to this, Rome under Nero was a place of persecution, and the Latinisms used in the Gospel would also apparently point to Rome as the place of composition. However, this location has become unlikely. Christians were persecuted not only in Rome, but in different places. The Latin language was used beyond Italy, and it is not plausible to indicate that just because Latinisms appear in this document, we are on the Italian peninsula. Adela Yarbro Collins notes that these arguments are not decisive in considering Rome as the place of production of this Gospel.<sup>7</sup>

The next place is Syria, a place of composition chosen by Joel Marcus, among others. Marcus devotes several pages to setting forth his arguments. For Marcus, Syria is a Gentile place, there is Pauline influence, and there is proximity to the events of the Jewish revolt that feature so prominently in Mark 13. He argues that it is difficult to find another option with more force than Syria.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Collins, *Mark*, pp. 11-15.

<sup>8</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8 A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 36.

The next place is Galilee. Hendrika Roskam in her book *The Purpose of the Gospel of Mark in Its Historical and Social Context* leans towards Galilee because many of the scenes recorded in the Gospel occurred there. Roskam sees a strongly localized community in Galilee that can be identified as the Markan community. The evidence, in Roskam's opinion, provides a solid basis for saying with certainty that the place is Galilee.<sup>9</sup> Other scholars would, however, object that had the Gospel of Mark been composed in Galilee, we would not expect it to be written in Greek.

While none of these places is definitive as a location where the Gospel was written, Luttick argues that it was undoubtedly produced in a context of persecution.<sup>10</sup>

In what follows, the main body of my dissertation, I will focus on each of the main women, or group of women, in Mark's Gospel in turn.

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<sup>9</sup> Hendrika Nicoline Roskam, *The Purpose of the Gospel of Mark in its Historical and Social Context* (Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 95-114

<sup>10</sup> Luttick, p. 84

#### 4. PETER'S MOTHER-IN-LAW

This is the first woman mentioned by the Evangelist Mark. A nameless woman, it is only mentioned that she was Peter's mother-in-law, but that she attracted the attention of Jesus because the disciples talk to him about her. What did they tell him? Was it that she was looking for Jesus? Was this, her only opportunity to live? Were the disciples trying to see if Jesus really healed the people?

Nevertheless, that attention was not because she had to serve them or help them with their own tasks, perhaps Peter's wife could do that, if we assume that she was there. Jesus did not heal her because he had no one to help him. Deborah Krause notes that the words with which the episode ends, "and she began to serve them" (1:31) risks being interpreted as though Jesus appeared "just in time for supper." an interpretation Krause has encountered in her own church.<sup>1</sup> But that is not what the story says, as we shall see.

This unnamed woman somehow shows us Jesus' treatment of the opposite sex. We know that Mark's intention is to talk about the miracle of healing. We cannot judge unfairly, of patriarchalism and machismo, without mentioning that Simon, Andrew his brother, James and John mentioned that Peter's mother-in-law was bedridden. The house belonged to Peter and Andrew, and they told Jesus about Peter's mother-in-law, who was sick. "Immediately they tell him of her" (1:30) is a phrase that appears only in the book of Mark and makes us understand that it was the men who mentioned that she was ill. I want to highlight this incident because many commentators see men as macho, misogynist, who

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Krause in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 39 n 4.

are always against women. Although this was true of many men who lived in the first century, it is not an attitude reflected in this passage of Mark.

Apparently, Peter's wife was not in the group of those assembled in the house of Peter and Andrew. She is not mentioned, however, she is tacitly implied in the term “mother-in-law” (1:30). Much has been speculated about this. Was Peter divorced? (1 Corinthians 9:5, written around 55 C.E., represents him as currently married.) And if he was divorced, why is his mother-in-law with him?

One of the Pharisees' questions in Mark 10:2 was designed to tempt Jesus as to whether it was lawful to give a divorce certificate. In the house, the disciples later asked about the same thing again, (10:10). Although they had heard Jesus' answer to the Pharisees, they wanted to make sure of the answer. This group of Pharisees achieved the goal of making the disciples doubt.

Returning to Peter's mother -in-law we see how Mark wants to use this healing story. After many years having been part of the church, we can see another way of interpreting this passage. I mention it because Christians in certain churches want to avoid this kind of proselytism and look for other answers. If we accept that Mark had an agenda in mind, we can say that the Bible is full of shadows and types that point to Christ and then to the church. And this symbol is one of them. The woman in the Scriptures has always been represented as, or been a type, or figure of the Lord's church. Historical evidence suggests that the synagogue was composed not only of men, but certainly there were women who were part of it. In the years when Paul was a dissident, the letters he requested to persecute Christians in the synagogue included women (Acts 9:2). Bernadette J. Brooten, referring to women leaders in the synagogue, introduces us to a woman named Rufina who



was Head of the Synagogue, probably in the second century. This woman was a wealthy Jew who had the necessary monetary funds to build a tomb for the dispossessed. Brooten argues that it is not merely an honorary title, although there are people who present it in a different way and date the inscription later, in the third or even fourth century.<sup>2</sup>

And on this occasion, when Jesus left the synagogue, a feminine noun, *synagōgē*, the place where all those who believed in God according to the Law met, he leaves that congregation and enters Peter's house where there is another woman, but this woman is sick with a fever. The woman just needs a healing touch and is ready to serve. Although Hisako Kinukawa argues that Peter's mother-in-law is mentioned in a pejorative context, she fails to see the eagerness of the unnamed woman to see Jesus and ultimately to serve him.<sup>3</sup>

The service that this unnamed woman performs for Jesus is not reducible to the fact that he has arrived "just in time for the soup" as Debora Krause says. The Greek verb, *diakoneō*, used of her service, has connotations of Christian ministry elsewhere in the New Testament (Luke 10:40; Acts 6:4; Rom. 11:13; 15:31; 1 Cor. 12:5; 2 Cor. 4:1; 5:18). Implicitly, this service of *diakonia* extends until death, just as Jesus's own *diakonia* extends until his death (Mark 10:45). Therefore, this woman will serve until her own death. This is the model many Christians today aspire to follow without realizing that this brief miracle story in Mark has anything to do with it.

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<sup>2</sup> Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Synagogue* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1982), pp. 5-31. The author in her reconstruction of the office of Head of the Synagogue argues that women were part of that office.

<sup>3</sup> Hisako Kinukawa in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Levine, p. 172.

Many Christians in my tradition see the "synagogue" of Mark 1:39 as a feminine noun that brings together all those who believe in God. However, they see this woman (synagogue) as not accepting the teaching of Jesus, questioning miracles, and not receiving his new wine or teaching, nor accepting his authority. That is why Jesus "comes out" of this synagogue. This unnamed woman is willing to serve Jesus immediately, in contrast.

Simon's mother-in-law, an unnamed woman who receives healing through the word of Jesus (Mark 1:30-33), and immediately understands that she must provide a service of thanks to the wonderful person who had raised her from the sick bed. We do not know how long she suffered from this fever, perhaps it was from time to time, or perhaps it was something that she dragged along for years. The thing is, Jesus healed her, and she offered a *diakonia* service in return. Yes, it is true that "she served them" in that moment, but her service was not for half an hour or some other temporary period in thanks for receiving healing. She is most likely included among those women who "followed [Jesus] when he was in Galilee and ministered [the *diakonēō* verb once again] to him" and later followed him on the way to the cross (Mark 15:40-41) and never abandoned him, unlike the male disciples (14:50). Peter's house is the place where the miracle takes place, a private sphere where almost all the miracles happen for women, meanwhile men's miracles are portrayed in public setting.<sup>4</sup> Yet this woman followed Jesus very publicly on the road, assumedly, and later very publicly stood in witness and support as he suffered crucifixion.

This is a first example of the roles that women played in those earliest Christian communities. This approach can challenge the dominant thought in contemporary churches

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, p. 25, citing Joanna Dewey's argument contrasting the private sphere of the house with the public settings.

and the exclusiveness granted to males. Mark must be reevaluated as a model for inclusive discipleship, freeing the Church of the patriarchal and androcentric thinking that obscures the meaning of the gospel.

If converts in the synagogue were amazed and asked themselves about Jesus's new doctrine and authority (Mark 1:27), people in Latin America Churches do the same. The discipleship of Peter's mother-in-law can be a model for them. It can appeal to their community that is sick and sometimes "bedridden," because this condition will persist until the authority of women arrives. The service that the church and its leaders are in need of is not something temporary, it is not something without a commitment. Christianity needs the kind of discipleship Peter's mother-in-law taught us.

## 5. THE MOTHER OF JESUS

“There came then his mother...” (Mark 3:31)

“Whoever does the will of God, that is my...mother” (Mark 3:35)

“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...? (Mark 6:3)

Every time we study Jesus’s mother, we immediately separate her from the rest of the women, because she was the one who nurtured Jesus in his early days. It is difficult to speak of a woman whom Luke’s Gabriel refers to as "Blessed art thou among women" (1:42).

When Luke the evangelist wrote his Gospel, Mary enjoyed a privileged place in certain Christian circles. Mark’s presentation of Mary is less positive (3:20-21, 31-35). Mark wants to make us understand the new community that was formed between the nascent church and those who were left out of that community. Luke in contrast, together with Matthew, tries to present a woman who does not contradict her son; moreover, Jesus’s family appears to believe in his teachings.<sup>1</sup>

It has been argued by some scholars, that the negative presentation of Jesus’s mother and brothers has to do with Mark’s attitude toward Jerusalem church, which was led by James the brother of Jesus. However, even though James had already been killed by the time Mark wrote, Mark way wants to distance himself from that Torah observant church.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 31. Miller argues that Matthew 12:46-50 and Luke 8:19-21 are designed to toned down Mark’s negative presentation of Jesus’s mother.

In the Gospel of John, we see Jesus' mother at the wedding, and a different relationship between mother and son (2:1-12). With regard to Mark, what we can argue is what Janine Luttick says in relation to bodies in the Gospel of Mark: the women, including Jesus' mother, are left outside the community that listened to Jesus.<sup>2</sup> The clear purpose is seen in the final words of Jesus in the pericope in which his mother and brothers come "to seize him": "For whoever does the will of God (by believing in me and following me) is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35 Amplified Bible).

The issue of breaking with one's own family as a requirement of discipleship was important to Mark. That Jesus's mother and brothers were "standing outside" is an important clue, since the disciples are no longer to be defined by the fact of belonging to a family according to blood, but by belonging to a new family (that of Jesus). This new definition outside of kinship ties leads Schüssler Fiorenza to say that "those who do the will of God come together in discipleship to form a new household."<sup>3</sup> The author of Mark appears to legitimize the break with relatives, because this facilitates the admission of another family into the community, a new type of society, those who are "sitting around him" (3:34).

This pericope reveals that the break with one's own family was a fact foundational for the first Christian communities and that the definition of Christianity in terms other than kinship began in the domestic space.

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<sup>2</sup> Luttick, *Jairus's Daughter and the Female Body*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 147.

This woman, the mother of Jesus, stayed outside the house: she preferred not to enter and not participate in what her son was teaching. Jesus knew his mother. He was not denying the kinship with his brothers, let alone with his mother. Jesus knew that his brothers did not understand or support his mission. Mark introduces the mother of Jesus as far from her son, a woman like all those who distrust or have doubts about the future of their son. She represents the community that stays “outside the house,” a community that not hear or comprehend the teachings, a community that only through parables can come to understand. There were others who were sitting around Jesus, eagerly listening to the teachings that this Rabbi was giving. That is the new community, those who are inside, those who want to be with Jesus even at the cost of separation from their biological families.

Jesus’s own biological family, meanwhile, are looking for him, wondering if he’s in his right mind, wondering if it’s the right time to teach such a things as he is teaching. They are like the man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue: “Have you come to destroy us?” (Mark 1:24). 3:31-35, in contrast, presents us with true discipleship, one that is not divided, that is always at the feet of the one who teaches, the community in a new society, a new family, those who are always “inside the house” and aware of what is happening in the surroundings. The true disciple is the one who does the will of God, he or she becomes a brother or mother of Jesus.

It is critical to understand what Mark’s Jesus say about God’s will, and his desire, to be surrounded by many people as he shares his teachings. If you do the will of God by sitting at the feet of Christ, you will immediately understand who he is calling, who is a relative of Jesus and who really seeks him. Mary the mother of Jesus, as Mark identifies

her, is out of the house, out of the Christian community, and out of communion with Jesus's spiritual brothers.

Jesus is teaching inside a house surrounded by his disciples and the people around him. If Mary and her other children were looking for Jesus, what did they want from him? Did they think he wasn't doing things right? Were they afraid of the crowd and, for that reason, did not want to support their son or brother? Mark presents Jesus' followers, disciples, and people around Christ as those who were inside the house. Jesus says that for those who are outside, all things were taught to them in parables. (4:11). All those who are inside the house are true disciples of Jesus, he calls them brothers, sisters, and mother. They are the ones who do the will of God.

## 6. JAIRUS'S DAUGHTER AND THE WOMAN WITH THE FLOW OF BLOOD

Intertwined in this pericope from Mark 5:21-43 are the healing stories of these two females, a woman and a girl. Both women share the number twelve. The woman has been tormented for twelve years and the other is twelve years old. It is true that their names do not appear as scholars regularly note.

Again, we can see the abysmal difference between those who believed in the person who performed the healings and those who were outside the house, both literally and metaphorically. The synagogue official represents many Jews who were in the synagogue but gave credit to Jesus' healings in this case, because of Jairus's own urgency to see his daughter healthy. These Jews who manifested faith in healing or ultimately faith in the person who performed these healings, endured the mockery and contempt of those who decided not to believe.

Scholarly comments on this passage are varied, but tend to focus on such topics as the twelve years, the authority of Jairus, that of Jesus, and Mark's so-called "sandwich technique," which inserts the story of the healed woman between the two halves of the story of the raised girl. My own discussion largely follows Janine Luttick's study of the passage.

The group of mourners who were crying, who were paid to do that, along with their mockery of Jesus and the fact that he was late, increases the element of suspense and expectation in the audience. Jairus is one of the few Jewish authorities who believes in Jesus, who fully trusts that he can perform the miracle. The condition of the woman whom Jesus heals on his way to Jairus's house is undoubtedly gynecological. The number of



physicians she has sought help from is notable, and scholars regularly remark on the poor reputation of ancient physicians. Luttick, however, draws our attention to the bodies in the story.<sup>1</sup> She argues that if we carefully read the roles that these bodies play, we will better understand how the father, the daughter, and the mother act, and also the role that Jesus plays in taking control of the home.

Notable in the story is Jairus's attitude. This public figure, recognized by his title as synagogue official, changes when he arrives at the house. Here we see Jairus the head of a household and not the official of the synagogue; the public place changes to a domestic place, a house where his wife is and where his daughter is already dead. Jairus is no longer the one, however, who directs everything in the household. Jesus and not Jairus is the one who orders the crying women to leave the house, only permitting the parents and three of his disciples to be present. The one who takes control of the house is Jesus and not Jairus. The one who is prominent in the final verses of the pericope and the one who overcomes the adverse situation in Jairus's home is Jesus.<sup>2</sup> The mother appears only in verse 40 of this story, and she is always defined in a domestic environment. Most of the women who appear in the gospel are represented in a family context. As Luttick says, they appear in their domestic role.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luttick, *Jairus's Daughter and the Female Body*, p. 35. She notes, among other things, that many scholars refer to the girl without realizing that they are talking about a child woman who is transitioning to being an adult woman.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 215. Jesus is presented as the central figure in this story. Not only does he dominate the sphere of the house, but he is presented as the leader and father of the house. Jairus's does not show opposition to the authority of Jesus.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 204-205. The girl's mother is presented like almost all the women in the Gospel, in a family context: Mark 1:29-31; 3:31; 6:14-29; 7:24-31; 10:1-12; 12:18-22, 40-44; 31:12, 17-19. The exceptions are Mary Magdalene and Salome (Mark 15:40; 16:1). It has sometimes been

That is also the case with Peter's mother-in-law, the mother of Jesus, and Herodias. We cannot compare a woman's rights today to those in the first century CE; however, the mother's pain will always be the same. Having a daughter who is already dead, without movement, is something immensely painful. Apparently, the household was prepared for the girl's death, that death was already expected; as a poet says, it was "a death foretold." The women who were there to cry was not something that was arranged in minutes; they were hired to do this job<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the girl's father, Jairus, insists on her healing. For him she was never dead. This explain the urgency in the words of the leader of the synagogue. Commenting on the meaning of "head of the synagogue," Bernadette Brooten mentions that Jairus was "one" of the principals and not the only leader in the synagogue.<sup>5</sup> Upon arriving home, however, his title as principal of the synagogue disappears and his title as father of a girl appears. The mother is also introduced into the scene.

This leads us to think that Jairus was completely convinced that Jesus could do something for his daughter. He had to have heard of Jesus and recognized him as an authority. Luttick comments on the degree of respect there was for the person of Jesus. Although it was common to kneel before another person to show respect or even

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argued that the other Mary in these two verses is Mary the mother of Jesus (compare Mark 6:3 which includes James and Joses among the list of Mary's other sons).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>5</sup> Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Synagogue* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982), p. 16. She cites Acts 13:15 as evidence that there were different rulers in synagogues.

superiority, she argues the image of a father desperate for help, rather than a difference in rank or authority.<sup>6</sup>

The story of the woman with the issue of blood delays and put more suspense in the healing of this girl. The woman with the issue of blood decides to approach and touch the person she had heard performed miracles. Some commentators note that menstrual impurity is not mentioned in the pericope.<sup>7</sup> Approaching and touching his clothes, the woman feels that the source of her blood has dried up. Meanwhile, however, even as this woman is granted a new lease of life, the girl whom Jesus was on his way to heal has died.

Finally, Tal Ilan sheds further light on Jairus's response with reference to ancient attitudes on the birth of girls. For many, such a birth was a loss in the family. The birth of a boy, in contrast, was something desired. It was a misfortune to have a girl who "opened" the woman's womb. In the eyes of Ben Sira, for example, a daughter was a grievance to her father, especially if she was seen as a source of sexual temptation, and so he couldn't treat her with affection. Strikingly here, however, we see a father, who is a man of status, a synagogue official, interceding for his beloved daughter as though she were a son.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Luttick, *Jairus's Daughter and the Female Body in Mark*, p. 203-204. She presents us with the image of a devoted father.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Miller (*Women in Mark's Gospel*, p. 53) cites Joel Marcus, in particular, who notes that the woman is not confined, and argues that it was only at the end of the Second Temple period and in later Judaism that strict regulations regarding menstrual purity emerged.

<sup>8</sup> Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), pp. 45-46.

## 7. THE SISTERS OF JESUS

“Are his sisters not here with us?” (Mark 6:3)

It is overwhelming to review most studies of the Gospel of Mark and find absolutely nothing that enables a study of the sisters of Jesus. Most scholars only focus on the family in general. The majority of them have something to say about Jesus' brothers. However, there is an almost deathly silence around these sisters of Jesus. Some choose to claim that they were not blood sisters, but rather they were only half-sisters of Jesus, and that the brothers listed by name in 6:3 were only half-brothers, children of Joseph by another marriage. But Greek had term for “half-brother” and “half-sister”, “step-brother” and “step-sister,” cousin and the like, whereas the terms we encounter in 6:3 are *adelphoi*, “brothers,” and *adelphai*, “sisters,” clearly implying that these individuals were biological siblings of Jesus, children of the same mother. This make the Markan representation of these sisters of Jesus all the more important.

It is understood from Jesus's saying in the passage, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown and among their own kin and in their own house” (6:4), that the sisters, like the brothers (cf. 3:31), found Jesus to be a scandal or offense. They too cannot accept that Jesus performs miracles or teaches the Torah differently. They are being confronted in their spiritual home, the synagogue. They are among those who “took offense at him” (6:3). So, these sisters of Jesus suffered the offense of being partakers of the same blood as their brother. Apparently, Jesus' sisters were regular synagogue attendees (“...are not his sisters here with us?”—6:3).

In analyzing Jesus' saying about the honor of the prophet, Bultmann said that this saying is a classic example of the way in which an imaginary situation is created as a context for a saying of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> However, we cannot say that is imaginary that Jesus had sisters. Other passages in the New Testament testify that he had brothers (e.g., John 2:12; 7:3, 5, 10; Acts 1:14; 1 Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19), so why not sisters as well? We cannot look for symbology simply because a passage is difficult to interpret.

We learn from such passages as 1 Corinthians 15: 7, which tells us that Jesus appeared to his brother James after his resurrection, and Acts 1:14, which tells us that Jesus' brothers (plural), together with his mother, were gathered in prayer in the upper room along with the general company of believers after Jesus' ascension, awaiting the descent of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the disbelief in Jesus' claims exhibited by his biological family in both Mark and John was reversed after the resurrection. Unfortunately, there is no mention of Jesus' sisters in this later testimony—yet another example of how women are marginalized and subordinated to men in these ancient sources. But surely the sisters became believers as well, together with their brothers. Their post-resurrection story, however, is left entirely to our imaginations.

My intention in this passage is not to present the different opinions about family breakdown, alluding to parallels that show Jesus' teaching of the true family or new community that Jesus was forming. Although these women lived in Jesus' hometown, her brothers are mistakenly used to indicate superior ability. Furthermore, the sisters, unlike

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<sup>1</sup> See Collins, *Mark*, p. 289, who cites Bultmann's opinion is that this passage edits a pre-Markan story. She also cites Paul Achtemeier, who expresses a similar idea.

their brothers, are mentioned without name. Apparently, the people who were gathered there wanted to make them their own property, to use them: “They live with us, and so they must think like us,” is the implication. There is nothing more terrible than feeling like someone's property when we want to be free. This passage is taught in our Churches alluding to the submission of the sisters of Jesus. In many churches, they are here only as props, to confirm the prejudices of the people in the town. Mark tells us that Jesus continued his way, not defending his family, but rather, making it known that the townspeople had no faith (6:6).

## 8. HERODIAS AND HER DAUGHTER

This is a sad story. Herodias used her daughter as bait to obtain the head of John the Baptist as revenge. Herodias attempted to hide her bad behavior from her husband, who was apparently protecting John the Baptist by keeping him in prison. Herodias has been identified as the granddaughter of Herod the Great and mother of Salome. First, she married her uncle Herod Philip; later she married Herod Antipas, another uncle. For this unlawful and scandalous connection, John the Baptist faithfully reprovved both parties, which cost him his life (Mark 6:27).<sup>1</sup> When her husband Antipas was banished to Lyons, France, she shared his banishment with him. For historian Nikos Kokkinos, Phillip, the husband of Herodias died childless; furthermore, he sees that the story changed "immediately."<sup>2</sup> Regarding the daughter of Herodias, Kokkinos tells us that we do not know who this "Salome" was, who is confused in the popular imagination with the unnamed daughter of Herodias in Mark and Mathew. However, she must have been a young girl, born not earlier than the 20s CE.<sup>3</sup>

The reason for John the Baptist's imprisonment is due to political instability and the fact that Herodias expressly asked Herod to divorce his wife. This is why John the Baptist

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<sup>1</sup> Nikos Kokkinos, *The Herodian Dynasty, Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse* (London: Spink and Son, 2010), p. 353. Kokkinos argue that polygamy was permitted among the Jews and denounced only by the Essenes.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 264-269. This author argues (citing Josephus) that Phillip the Tetrarch had just died childless, but we ask: who was the father of Herodias's daughter?

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp 270, 310

was imprisoned. Herod divorced his wife. Herodias did not have children with her husband who had already died.

Some authors see this daughter of Herodias as the counterpart of Jezebel of old who also manipulated a weak king in his dealings with others. However, it is only a comparison, we cannot say that it was really that way. Joel Marcus makes a case that John is very similar to Elijah the prophet of old, who was zealous for God and his Law. However, it is not credible that Mark simply wants to present John the Baptist as identical with Elijah.<sup>4</sup> Although the Baptist dressed in camel's hair, we cannot make the two figures identical. John the Baptist has sometime been related to the sect of the Essenes, and as Kokkinos says, only this sect opposed and denounced polygamy. It is interesting that Jesus, who had all the moral power to denounce this type of behavior, appears silent. If John the Baptist knew, we assume Jesus did too. However, we watch him be silent, not participating in this story.

This passage is intercalated between the sending out of the twelve and their return to report their mission. It is argued that the arrest and death of John the Baptist points to the death of Jesus. Herodias looks for a way to kill John the Baptist, in the same way that the priests and scribes later look for a way to kill Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

Tal Ilan argues that in patriarchal societies the woman's name appears in connection with masculine names if she is of high lineage. This causes Miller to conclude that the provision of Herodias's name in the text is a result her high social status.<sup>6</sup> However, it was

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<sup>4</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 400.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 75



not the case in ancient Israel, where the names of many women are not connected in any way with those of men; for example, Deborah, Rebekah's nurse in Genesis 35:8; Deborah the judge of Israel; and many Christian women of the first century, some of whom Paul mentions by name in Romans 16:1-16. If Paul strove to teach that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28), the author of Mark had to know it. If we think of a proto-Mark story, it must have been floating around in the environment in which it was eventually written, although perhaps its message on gender relations wasn't as explicitly taught as Paul later did.

The banquet given by Herod on his birthday is the occasion on which the head of John the Baptist is requested. Here again many authors are inclined to think that there is a reminiscence of with Queen Esther, who was offered half the kingdom at a banquet offered by the king (Esther 2:18). However, there are very noticeable differences; the king and Esther are presented as good people, while Herod, Herodias and the daughter are the opposite. Marcus gives us a list of non-biblical parallels to the murders at banquets; this makes us doubt of the historicity of the Gospel of Mark's story.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 402. Among the parallel stories he mentions the Jewish book of Judith, Herodotus's *Histories*, Livy's *History of Rome*, and Plutarch's *Parallel Lives: Crassus*.

## 9. THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN AND HER DAUGHTER

This passage from Mark's Gospel (7:24-29) introduces us to the Syrophoenician woman and her daughter. This is another of the stories that Mark tells us to let us know that Jesus' mission was destined to reach Gentiles as well as Jews. This teacher preached the good news of the kingdom of God to the whole world, as noted in Mark 16:15 or, better yet, in verse 1 of this Gospel.

The region of Tyre was not Jewish. When Jesus tells the Syrophoenician woman, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," Joel Marcus, citing Gerd Theissen, argues that most of the agricultural produce of the Galilean Jews ended up in the Gentile city of Tyre. Although this information is notable, it is not relevant, in my view, as Jesus' exchange with the woman did not reflect the socio-economic tensions between these cultures.

In a deeper analysis of the story, we can see that the evangelist Mark has established the story as if Jesus had never known the Gentiles or this region. In Mark 3:8 a large crowd is presented, including people from Tyre and Sidon who having heard of Jesus were coming to hear him and be healed by him. This led Yarbrow Collins to correctly conclude that the passage is redactional.<sup>1</sup> Most likely, it is there to teach us what was in the air. If Gentiles as well as Jews came to listen to Jesus, then we can say that he had words and actions of hope that these people had never before experienced. Perhaps they wanted to approach a Jew who could understand them.

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<sup>1</sup> Yarbrow Collins, Mark, p. 364.

In his appendix to his commentary on Mark, Joel Marcus discusses the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were always questioning the table and who is permitted to sit around it. Essentially, this is the same table that the Syrophoenician woman mentions. It was impossible for the Jewish religious leaders to see someone partake of the table and be unclean at the same time. This attitude is reflected in Mark: "When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, 'Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?'" (2:16). Some commenters argue that this pericope is a late addition. However, Marcus argues that it is pre-Markan, that is comes from a period decades before the Jewish revolt.<sup>2</sup> Some Gentiles, those who did not belong to the close community of the synagogue, wanted to participate of the same table. Yet, they encountered many barriers from the very ones who professed to know God. Would this be one of the reasons why they were looking for Jesus?

When we analyze these questions, it is difficult to argue that Jesus treated the Syrophoenician woman and her daughter in a disparaging way—if only because of the way the pericope ends. Jesus' final, affirmative answer to the woman is, "Go the demon has gone out of your daughter." The unclean spirit or demon leaves the girl immediately. It is similar to the healing of the daughter of Jairus: "Don't be afraid any longer, only believe" (5:36). Jesus' exorcism of the unclean spirit is signaling the incorporation, not only of the Syrophoenician woman and her daughter, but of Gentiles in general, into Jesus' new society or new community.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, pp. 519-54 passim.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Struthers Malbon argues ("Gospel of Mark," p. 483) that when Paul addresses his Gentile converts as "brothers and sisters" and when Jesus calls "whoever does the will of God" his new family, the status quo was seriously confronted.

When I arrive in the United States, I wanted to ingest the pure gospel. I wanted to sit at the original table, the table from which so many evangelists had gone out to preach in remote places. I was excited at the prospect. I always thought it must be different, that there had to be something more. I wanted to sit at the original table from which they had gone forth to bring the gospel to South America. The gospel we received, I thought, was packaged or "canned". It was a "second hand" gospel teaching. Of course, the first missionaries taught a pure gospel, I assumed. They were outstanding men and unscathed in their way of living. Yet, once I sat at the "original table," I observed that many had dropped "food" (the children's bread) without realizing that we picked up their leftovers.

Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera instructs us that this pericope resonates for South Asians. Although the main purpose of this pericope is to discuss purity, it also focuses on identity, difference, power, and dialogue between different branches of the church. In Asia, this pericope is commonly seen as showing how Jesus transcends his Jewish identity to reach other social strata in which people feel unprotected and forgotten by their leaders. This is also the reason why Mark needed to use this meeting to address issues that were important in the early church, because many Gentiles were entering this new community.<sup>4</sup>

It is also for this reason that this passage has kept many scholars differing regarding Jesus' response. When we cannot clarify the concepts that existed, in which the words were said, those same words will serve, without analysis, as a model of exploitation and subjection. In this case, women have been subdued with these words. Centuries of

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<sup>4</sup> Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 101-102. The author mentions that impurity and rejection are issues of significance for all South Asian women, regardless of their religious beliefs.

misunderstanding have been devoted to trying to explain the apparent abuse by Jesus and the faith the Syrophoenician woman had in the miracle she needed. The woman with the flow of blood had already convinced Jesus that it was time to begin the mission to the Gentiles.<sup>5</sup> Mary Ann Beavis agrees when she says that the woman managed to change Jesus' mind.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that the Syrophoenician woman mentioned the table is a fact that must be investigated. It was not the first time that Jesus performed miracles among non-Jews. Matthew tells us that the male disciples were ready to bother the woman (15:23), and thereby ready to deny their participation in Jesus' inclusive community. In that version of the story, she resorted to begging. R. T. France, commenting on Mark's version, argues that Jesus appears as the wise teacher who allows himself to be "persuaded," and he even mentions "a new stage" in Jesus' ministry as a result.<sup>7</sup> The house mentioned in Mark 7:24, where Jesus entered, was also the one that the Syrophoenician woman entered. By the end of the episode, in that house, she has been incorporated as a member of Jesus' spiritual family, and, as such, on a par with the male disciples. Her boldness, her refusal to conform to gendered restrictions that imposed silence on women, is what has accomplished this, and it make her a model for women in the contemporary churches.

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<sup>5</sup> Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark* (Commentaries on The New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 296.

## 10. THE WIFE OF THE SEVEN BROTHERS

Like the mention of the sisters of Jesus (Mark 6:3), this is another passage from Mark (12:18-25) in which the woman is often overlooked or misinterpreted. Most scholars of the Gospel of Mark do analyze resurrection in the passage. Apparently, the Sadducees were the ones talking about it.<sup>1</sup> The Sadducees knew the disciples' beliefs from what Jesus taught them. Perhaps this was the way of thinking of many people at that time. This group of Sadducees rose up to confront that belief. However, the words of this group of Sadducees indicate the way in which they treated women.

In the Sadducees words to Jesus, we see reflected a view of women as male property. This view even includes an eternal state in which a woman would still be the property of a man: “In the resurrection whose wife will she be?” (12:23). The Old Testament mentions the custom of a woman marrying her brother-in-law, but not as a commandment of God. It was something that Moses had endorsed, however, as a custom to maintain a woman as property. This law of levirate marriage attributed to Moses in Deuteronomy 25:5 is contradicted both by Leviticus 18:16, “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife,” and Leviticus 20:21, “If a man takes his brother's wife, it is a hated and unclean thing; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness. They will be

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), contains an appendix on the Sadducees. Marcus explains that the Sadducees were an influential Jewish sect that appeared in the second century B.C.E. It is, however, very difficult to reconstruct the beliefs of this group. The sources available are extremely limited. Josephus associates them with the high priests, and so Caiaphas was probably one of them.

childless.” Tal Ilan mentions that levirate marriage became a custom that some practiced in the second temple period.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus begins his response to the Sadducees by applying the verb *planaō* to them (12:24). What he is saying is that they have been seduced, led astray from what is right, even though they invoke the authority of Moses. It is the same verb used in the reference to lost sheep in 1 Peter 2:25. In Mark 12, Jesus is stating, in effect, that the teaching embraced by the Sadducees that oppressed women does not come from God.

As noted above, the hypothetical case to which the Sadducees appeal envisions the oppression of women even after the general resurrection. The Sadducees apparently did not believe in the resurrection, however; at least that is what the author of the Gospel writes (12:18). So why ask about the resurrection if you don't believe in it? Aren't you tacitly admitting that you are wrong in your assessment? Their question has been characterized as a question about the resurrection over the centuries, yet it is better seen as a question about the oppression of women. And in response to the question, Mark's Jesus implicitly takes the position that the justice of God, which will be fully revealed in the resurrection, will not permit the continued treatment of women as property and their subordination in a relationship in which they are deprived of agency and self-determination.

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<sup>2</sup> Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, pp. 152-57. Ilan analyzes *yibbum* or levirate marriage, arguing that the *halakhah* and *halitzah* schools of thought were those who, respectively, were either in favor of, or found an alternative to, levirate marriage.

## 11. ANOINTED AT BETHANY

This story (Mark 14:3-9; see also Matt. 26:6-13; John 12:1-8) has created significant discussion in the biblical-scholarly world. Even Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza used the saying of Jesus with which it ends (“Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her”) as inspiration for the title of her most influential book, *In Memory of Her*. Fiorenza and many other scholars have compared this pericope with Luke 7:36-50. Luke presents us with a woman who approaches the Pharisee's house as “a woman of the city, who was a sinner” (7:37), a description most often understood as meaning that she was a prostitute. Mark, in contrast, introduces the woman who comes to the house of “Simon the leper” (14:3) without going into details of who this character was.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Susan Miller refers to this pericope as “unique in Mark's gospel.”<sup>2</sup>

The extravagant gift that the woman brings to Jesus in Mark is seen by some scholars as coming from a woman who has followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, as is Winsome Munro's opinion.<sup>3</sup> In any case, a powerful example of discipleship is given by this woman who lavishes such an expensive gift on Jesus. Has she sold everything she owns to acquire it? Compare what Peter says in Mark 10:28: “We have left everything and

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (Tenth Anniversary Edition; New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), pp. 128-129.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Winsome Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark?,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (April 1982): pp 224-25.



followed you." In material terms, however, the woman has given more than Peter and the other male disciples to follow Jesus. Unlike her, the rich young man walked away because he had many possessions (10:22). And Jesus bestows higher praise on this woman than he ever does on any of his male disciples: "Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (14:9).

What has this woman done to deserve such praise, besides presenting Jesus with an extravagant gift? Jesus says, "she has anointed my body beforehand for burying" (14:8). This was a royal anointing and a messianic anointing, and in the Old Testament it is a task performed by men.<sup>4</sup> The anointing separated people out for a special role, and was something entirely dependent on God. This is how Psalm 89:20 describes it: "I have found my servant." In other words, the one who is found in Mark 14:3-9 is Jesus, and the instrument to anoint him is no longer a man as in the Old Testament, but rather a woman who, like Peter in 8:29, understands that Jesus is the Messiah.

Peter, however, immediately followed his acclamation of Jesus as Messiah by showing himself incapable of understanding that Jesus was a Messiah destined to suffer and die (8:31-33), and none of the male disciples in Mark ever succeed in comprehending that, which is why they all desert him on the night of his arrest (14:50). But when Jesus says of this woman that she has anointed his body for burial (14:8), he is indicating that she understands what Peter and the other apostles have failed to understand, namely, that Jesus' messianic role necessitates his death and burial. She is the first person in Mark to have this visionary breakthrough, the second being the centurion at the foot of the cross, who, like her, is able to put together in his head the two apparently contradictory facts that

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, *Women in the Gospel of Mark*, pp. 132-34.

Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, on the one hand, and someone who must undergo crucifixion, on the other hand, something none of the apostles are able to do. In this anointing scene, this unnamed woman is presented as being greater in terms of theological vision than any male disciple. These male disciples, who were closest to Jesus in terms of being granted access to his teaching and witnessing his miracles, should have understood this fundamental facet of Jesus' messiahship, but they did not. Jaime Clark-Soles, when discussing this nameless woman, rightly identifies her action of anointing Jesus as prophetic.<sup>5</sup> This woman who appears to anoint Jesus on the head is different from the other woman who appears in Luke 7:36-50, because that woman anoints the feet of Jesus, an act without messianic significance.<sup>6</sup> In effect, Luke "demotes" the woman found in Mark 14:3-9. In Luke, she is no longer a female prophet, but merely a repentant prostitute.

The woman prophet of Mark 14, who outdoes Jesus' male disciples and receives such extraordinary acclaim from him, is not preached in the churches with which I am familiar. She is not presented as a model of discipleship. We are used to having male models of discipleship, but she is a woman. We should heed Jesus' call to speak "in remembrance of her." We should never forget this woman disciple, full of conviction even when facing critical male apostles. Mark presents them as angry at the waste of ointment (14:4-5), not realizing that she is symbolically confessing Jesus as the Messiah destined to die and rise. Similarly today, in our churches we find many disciples who get angry with women, failing to recognize and value their insights. Προλαμβάνω (*prolambanō*) is the

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<sup>5</sup> Jaime Clark-Soles, *Women in the Bible* (Interpretation series; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), p. 195.

<sup>6</sup> Beavis, *Mark*, p. 209

verb Jesus' uses when speaking about the woman having anointed him for burial (14:8). It literally means that in doing so, she has "gone ahead." This was the act that upset the male disciples, who thereby are left behind. Male egos can be frail when confronted with a woman who has exceptional insight, understanding, faith, and courage. The elite male disciples were outraged that a nameless woman recognized what they should have recognized, having spent so much more time with Jesus, and that she received the praise from him that they craved. This was a woman who was not even invited to the dinner for Jesus and his followers, yet she was the one who won the approval of Jesus. This is what mattered to Mark.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See further *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway, and James A. Kelhoffer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 87-89.

## 12. THE POOR WIDOW

This passage about the poor widow (Mark 12:41-44) is not studied in depth in the churches. Most of the time we give it a symbolic interpretation because it is convenient to a certain theology. I have argued throughout this writing about the contemporary significance of how women are treated in the Gospel of Mark. The Christian world needs a thorough review of these passages that will free women from many senseless guilts.<sup>1</sup> Widows suffer dehumanization, insensitivity, and harshness even in contemporary churches. In the Markan passage about the poor widow, the widow appears childless, and is represented as being extremely poor, is implicitly homeless perhaps, and is certainly without influence, without any position and without the honor that a human being deserves. We can infer all this from the few words used of her in the pericope.

Many decades after Jesus' death, those who wrote the epistles attributed to Paul, especially the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus), elected to reinforce the patriarchy. Joanna Dewey analyses the role of widow as set forth in the Pastoral Epistles and the extent to which she is under the control of the hierarchical male-dominated church structure.<sup>2</sup> Jaime Clark-Soles, following in the same vein, also

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<sup>1</sup> See Clark-Soles, *Women in the Bible*, p. 129, which discusses ancient patriarchy and how women were frequently at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts.

<sup>2</sup> In Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary* (revised and updated; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), pp. 595-601.

demonstrates the extent to which the widow of the Pastoral Epistles is a patriarchal construct.<sup>3</sup>

The Gospel of Mark already gives us an idea of how difficult life was for a widow, an unprotected woman, without the rights to govern her own house. She also becomes a victim of male religious authorities. The poor widow pericope in Mark is immediately preceded by Jesus' condemnation of scribes who "devour" or "consume" (*katesthiō*) widows' houses (12:40).

Jesus says of the poor widow that in contrast to those who have contributed to the temple "out of their abundance,...she out of her poverty has put in everything she had," all of her *bios* (12:44). "Life" is the primary meaning of *bios*. This woman has literally given her life as an example for male disciples to follow. Jesus could have used a male disciple to exemplify giving up everything in order to demonstrate full commitment to the will of God. Yet, he chose a widow, who was being oppressed by the scribes and Sadducees.

Joel Marcus, too, speaks about the widow's self-surrender and points out that this woman gives her entire life as a sacrifice. In this respect, she not only exceeds Jesus' male disciples, but she parallels Jesus' own complete self-sacrifice (Mark 10:45).<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, when we discuss or preach the generosity of the poor widow in church, we ordinarily contrast her to the rich. Jesus famously said of the rich, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25). This was after Jesus had challenged a rich man to divest himself of all his possessions so as to follow Jesus (10:21), and the man fails to meet the challenge (10:22).

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<sup>3</sup> Clark-Soles, *Women in the Bible*, p. 294.

<sup>4</sup> Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, p. 862.

In Jesus' words of praise on the action of the poor widow, we can infer the lesson he wanted to deliver to his disciples. That is, he was seeking total dedication and total surrender from a true disciple. A widowed woman is presented as an example to Jesus' male disciples to follow. She surrenders her entire life, just as he himself soon will.

### 13. THE MAID OF THE HIGH PRIEST

“And as Peter was below in the courtyard, there came one of the maids of the high priest” (Mark 14:66)

The scene we consider now has its context in Peter’s denial of Jesus (Mark 14: 66-72). The story concerns Christian commitment. We know that the Gospel of Mark was written in the period either slightly before or just after 70 C.E. Soon after Paul’s death, then. Jesus had risen around 33 C.E., and so at least 35 years had already passed—more than enough time to analyze the death and resurrection of Jesus for the church that had already been formed. The story of Peter’s denial of Jesus is presented to those who are hesitant in their decision to follow in the footsteps of the disciples and of Jesus himself, no matter the cost. Many New Testament scholars in discussing this pericope see it as exemplifying the failure of the disciples to follow Jesus unto death.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars prefer to emphasize the fact that Peter’s denial fulfills a prophecy made by Jesus himself in Mark 14:30.<sup>2</sup>

Peter is a negative role model in this pericope. Earlier we read, “Peter had followed [Jesus] from afar, into the courtyard of the high priest” (14:54). Peter here is the antitype of the true disciple. You cannot follow Jesus “from afar,” Mark seems to be saying. You

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Collins, *Mark*, pp. 708-709, who mentions the influential thesis of Theodore Weeden who saw Mark as “assiduously involved in a vendetta against the disciples.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 709, referring particularly to the interpretations of Robert Tannehill and Norman Petersen.

cannot be a disciple if you are not willing to give up your life completely. Mark 8:34-35 is highly pertinent here: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Mark was written in a situation of persecution, and it challenges Christians to be willing to lay down their lives for Jesus.

One might argue, then, that true discipleship is contrasted in the story of Jesus’ arrest and Jewish trial with one who follows “from afar” (*makrothen*—Mark 14:54). But the situation may be more complex than this. In 15:40, we are told that “there were also women looking [*theōreō*] from afar [*makrothen*]” while Jesus was being crucified, women “who, when he was in Galilee, followed him and ministered to him.” These women are presented positively in contrast to the male followers, who, by now, have all deserted Jesus. These women go on to become the first witnesses to the resurrection (16:1-8).

Susan Miller argues that the maid of 14:66-69 has failed to recognize that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God.<sup>3</sup> She even argues that this maid acted in a manner like Satan because she was an adversary of God in opposing Peter (cf. Mark 8:33). This and other similar interpretations of the maid has served to further stigmatize women over the centuries. But the maid has been following events closely. Mark uses the verb *emblepō* in describing how she looks at Peter (14:67). That verb means to “observe closely,” and can also mean to “discern clearly.” Although the passage does not present the maid as herself

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<sup>3</sup> Miller, *Women in Mark’s Gospel*, p. 147.



immersed in a situation of suffering, we Jesus has been undergoing suffering nearby, being mocked, spat on, and beaten (14:65). In effect, this woman, discerning clearly that Peter is a would-be follower of Jesus, is challenging Peter to live up to the demands of his calling, not shunning suffering out of cowardice, but suffering together with the one whose claims of messiahship he purports to believe. Far from being an agent of Satan in this scene, the maid is rather a messenger of God. Her actions eventually have the effect of causing Peter to weep in repentance for his cowardice (14:72), and of calling him back to his true identity as a disciple of Jesus.

#### 14. “THOSE WHO ARE PREGNANT.”

“And woe to those women who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days!” (Mark 13:17)

This saying of Jesus occurs in his eschatological discourse in Mark (13:1-37). Central to this discourse is the Abomination of Desolation of Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11, now reinterpreted as pertaining to the Roman desecration and destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E., and the massacre or enslavement of the populace of Jerusalem and people from the surrounding region taking refuge in the city at that time. The discourse weaves in many images used by the Old Testament prophets to refer God's judgments on Israel. The images of pregnant women, women in labor, or nursing mothers are among them (see, e.g., Isa. 13:6-8; 26:17-19; Mic. 4:9). Joel Marcus argues that Jesus' woe to pregnant women and “those who are nursing babies in those days” is an image of eschatological affliction, of the intense sufferings that will immediately precede the eschaton.<sup>1</sup> R. T. France, in his own commentary on Mark, book *The Gospel of Mark* NIGT points out that it would be very difficult for women to escape the Roman legions when they are pregnant, and that winter weather (“Pray that it may not happen in winter!”—13:18) would make escape even more difficult (although historically, the Roman siege of Jerusalem took place before winter).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, p. 877.

<sup>2</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 526.

My goal in this study, however, is to rescue the little information on women that appears in the eschatological discourse, and interpret them. And this verse is significant. Jesus is attempting to express the unprecedented trauma and anguish that will accompany the eschatological events: “For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be” (13:19). And to bring home the extent of this indescribable agony, he tells us that it will be similar to the mental anguish experienced by pregnant women and women nursing infants when the lives of their unborn or infant offspring are threatened by murderous military violence. The significance of this saying for a study of the Markan Jesus in his relations to women is that it implies that this Jesus possesses an instinctive empathy for women and their sufferings. More even than Luke, arguably, Mark merits the title “the Women’s Gospel.”

## 15. THE WOMEN AT THE CROSS AND TOMB

The women at the cross and tomb is some of the more controversial material in the book of Mark. There have been different approaches to this material. Many scholars see these three women, who are grouped together, as fearful and failing ultimately in their following of Jesus, just as the male followers, also fearful, have failed him. In other words, Mark's story of failed discipleship culminates, for many scholars, in an episode of female discipleship failure. Some scholars have even argued that the account of the women at the cross and tomb is a fictional story, an invention of the evangelist.<sup>1</sup>

Our pericope starts in 15:40-47 and extends through 16:1-8. 15:40-41 presents us with an unnumbered company of women who have followed Jesus from Galilee, three of whom are named: "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger, and Salome." But these women have done more than simply accompany Jesus from Galilee. They have also "ministered" (*diakoneō*) to him. As we saw earlier when discussing Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law, *diakoneō* is used importantly of Christian ministry in the New Testament. Peter's mother-in-law ministered to Jesus in 1:31. Indeed, she may be one of the unnamed women who have followed him to Jerusalem and are now witnesses of his resurrection. These are bold and courageous followers, a fact that should not be overshadowed by 16:8. They present a striking contrast to the male disciples who have deserted Jesus and so are absent from the scene of his crucifixion, his hour of greatest need. The three disciples who have always been singled out to accompany Jesus—Peter, James,

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<sup>1</sup> Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, p. 773, summarizes the position of Rudolf Bultmann for whom this tradition had no historical basis. Page 773

and John—are replaced in this pericope by Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. Susan Miller argues, importantly, that the elevation of these women in the final scenes of the gospel indicates that the Markan community was a church in which women no less than men were expected to model discipleship.<sup>2</sup>

It is shocking to know that many scholars cling to biased interpretations in interpreting these passages. Susanna Asikainen, for example, argues that since fear is a stereotypically feminine trait, the women, for Mark, are not important witnesses in their own right. Their role is limited to the restoration of the bond between Jesus and his male disciples. They themselves are mere followers and not disciples, based on Acts 9:36 where a woman is mentioned for the first time as a female disciple (*mathētria*).<sup>3</sup> But the importance of the women in Mark 14:50—16:8 is indicated by the fact that their names are mentioned. Also, Mark 8:34, in which Jesus addressed “the crowd” (*ho ochlos*), at large, which would have included women as well as men, indicates that anyone who wanted to follow Jesus would be his disciple. There was no mention that discipleship was limited to men. It was open to anyone.

These women named at the cross and tomb followed and “served” (*diakoneō*) Jesus, but not in a food service context. *Diakoneō* has much richer connotations of service than that. It is the same verb that Jesus uses for his own ministry in 10:45: “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In the patriarchal Christian imagination, this Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, although Mark

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Susanna Asikainen, *Jesus and Other Men: Ideal Masculinities in the Synoptic Gospels* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), p. 110.

never presents her as one. She was unjustly conflated with the unnamed “woman of the city, who was a sinner (*hamartolōlos*) of Luke 7:37.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the women who are named in the climactic chapters of Mark follow Jesus wherever he goes, even to the place of execution and the tomb, regardless of the limits imposed by the male-led society. These women never abandoned Jesus, they always performed a diakonia service. They served “from afar” (15:40) because they could not be part of the sufferings that only Jesus could bear. This does not mean that the women stayed away because they were afraid. Although fear would be likely in such an adverse situation, we can infer that the women were willing to risk their own safety in order to give their last service to the one who had dignified them.

In the last verses of Mark’s Gospel, we see that the women are the ones who witnessed the evidence of Jesus’ resurrection. Indeed, this evidence was not witnessed by a male disciple. In the end, the men appropriated the testimony that was delivered by the female disciples. In consequence, Christianity did not end at the tomb, before it had properly begun. To that extent, these women disciples, and not the male disciples, are the heroes of Mark’s gospel narrative.

Paul tells us that he followed the tradition he had received: “He appeared to Cephas (Peter) then to the twelve” (1 Corinthians 15:5). Either Paul himself or his tradition has already erased the role that the women disciples played in the events of the resurrection. Paul is writing to the Corinthians around 55 C.E. Around fifteen years later, Mark takes the women out of the shadows and restores them to their proper place.

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<sup>4</sup> See further Jane Schaberg and Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, *Mary Magdalene Understood* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

Many commentators mention Psalm 38:11 as if it were the end of all controversy: “My loved ones and my friends stand aloof from my plague; and my neighbors [literally, “near ones”—*qārōb*] stand far away.” The Hebrew word *qārōb* in this context means closely related, someone who is very close to someone else. If Psalm 38:11 is to be applied at all to Mark 15:40, it should only be to indicate how close Jesus was to these women. The women demonstrate this closeness by their courage in standing by Jesus at his execution. Peter, James, and John, why weren't you witnesses to the final sufferings of Jesus? Didn't you always want to be with Jesus, to be close to him? Do we want to change the reference of *phobeō* and *ekthambeō*, applying the former to the cowardly male disciples and the latter to the women witnesses?

Of necessity, these women were watching Jesus from a distance. However, they afterwards followed Joseph of Arimathea to see the place where Jesus was buried (15:43-47), a further demonstration of their loyalty to Jesus. Jeffrey Aernie, comparing Mark's and Paul's Christology, rightly notes that in the closing scenes of Mark's Gospel, the women followers "do not move farther away from Jesus, but closer to him."<sup>5</sup> This is the opposite of what happens with the male followers.

Notably, then, despite the fact that Mark the evangelist does not name women in the call of the twelve male apostles, he does include in his account of Jesus's ministry a large group of women followers (“many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem”—15:41) who were urged to take up their own cross and follow Jesus (8:34-35). Ultimately, these women are not “in the shadow” as some scholars have argued. By the

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Aernie, “Cruciform Discipleship: Narrative Function of the Women in Mark 15-16,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135, no. 4 (2016): 779-797: doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1354.2016.2992>.

time we reach the end of the narrative it is clear that they are very close followers of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> In his essay “The Women, The Tomb, and the Climax of Mark,” Larry Hurtado presents three characteristics of these women disciples: unexpected appearance, named followers, and observers of Jesus’s crucifixion. He rightly concludes that Mark’s late introduction of these women followers does not indicate “simple disregard for, or lack of interest in them” on the part of the evangelist. Rather, what we are presented with is a “sudden elevation of these figures,” after the male disciples have fled. Although the three named women are mentioned together with a larger group of unnamed women followers (15:41), Hurtado makes the point that there are also “memorable but unnamed male characters in Mark.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Reconstructing ‘Real’ Women from Gospel Literature: The Case of Mary Magdalene,” in *Women and Christian Origins*, pp. 115-116. Although D’Angelo agrees that the word “followed” is used by Mark to refer to women’s ministry and service, she nevertheless sees the women as “helpers” of Jesus and the twelve. Strange to say the least!

<sup>7</sup> Larry Hurtado, “The Women, The Tomb, and the Climax of Mark”, in *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Sean Freyne*, ed. Zuleika Rodgers, Margaret Daly-Denton, and Anne Fitzpatrick McKinley (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 427-50.



## CONCLUSION

Every time we approach the Gospel of Mark, we have renewed hope to lift our vision through careful analysis of the stories in this Gospel, so as to clarify its uses in churches today. Nevertheless, the Gospel of Mark has been used to oppress women, relegating them to a domestic status. Many Christian women today silently suffer the separation that male-led churches enforce between male disciples and female disciples. In this study I have discussed at length the attributes required of disciples, whether men or women, in Mark; but such attributes are also explicitly detailed in Matt. 10:24, 25; 10:42; Luke 6:40; 14:26, 27; 14:33. However, male authorities choose to ignore many of the crucial details in the way women disciples are presented in the Gospels.

Essentially, Mark's Gospel is an anonymous text, as we saw earlier. Papias's early second-century claim that it was written by a disciple of Peter named Mark is not convincing. As a joke, many women in my church tradition have appealed to the anonymous aspect of the gospel, arguing that that is why women typically appear anonymously in it or as identified only by their husband's name or hometown. Although some Markan women also appear as solitary figures, without mention of any male person to whom they must be subservient. Two of the three women named in Mark 15-16—that is, Mary Magdalene and Salome—fall into this category.

Patriarchy has clouded Christian views of women in this wonderful book down through the centuries. Many have seen, and still see, the disciples in Mark, and in the other Gospels, as a select group of twelve men who always accompanied Jesus. But early Christian tradition is also to blame. Explicit description of women as *mathētriai*, the

feminine form of *mathētai*, the word for male disciples, took too long. As noted earlier, it is in Acts 9:36 that the term *mathētria* is first applied to a woman. This reflects a prejudice that we are still battling today.

In many churches, it is still not easy to discuss women in the Gospel of Mark, in the ways attempted in this study, because too many Christians still see women as helpers to men. Genesis 2:18 has been enormously influential in this regard: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner. Unfortunately, many think that the term “helper” here means an inferior, someone who is not important, who is relegated to the domestic sphere, or a state of subservience. For too many Christians, to talk about a helper or “helpmeet” is to relegate another person to the background. This may be the case in modern European languages. However, the Hebrew language is completely different. The English word “helper” is customarily used to translate the Hebrew word *ezer* in Genesis 2:18. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, *ezer* connotes strength, even divine strength. In Deuteronomy 33:7, for example, God is celebrated as an *ezer* against Israel's enemies (see also Psalm 33:20; 115:9-11).

Throughout the centuries, women in the Bible have been subjected to countless misunderstandings, and in the churches have suffered as a result. Men have selectively read scripture to legitimize patriarchy. In consequence, women have been gravely mistreated, kept under strict orders of unconditional obedience to men. When a woman does not submit to this dictatorship of man, she carries the stigma of a rebellious woman throughout her life. It is a shame to know that there are still many Christian men who relegate the role of women to merely being those who “bear children” and place them in an endless hierarchy of power and authority, women being on the lowest rung of that human hierarchy. This

system has long denied the true value of women. Doesn't the apostle Paul say that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28)?

One of the evangelist Mark's purposes in writing his book was to capture the life of Jesus in its pages. The culture and customs that existed at that time kept women in the background. Yet Jesus never put women in the background. Mark fully recognized this, and so he does not put women in the background either. The women who appear in the book of Mark are imposing women, full of vitality and decisive in asking Jesus to perform a miracle in their family or in their community. This pattern begins with Simon's mother-in-law, an unnamed woman who receives healing through the word of Jesus (1:30-31), and immediately understands that she must give a service of gratitude to the wonderful person who had raised her from her bed. I argued earlier that she offered a diakonia service throughout her life. She "served them" (*diēkonei autois*), says Mark, but her service was not for half an hour. She is most likely among those women mentioned in Mark 15:40-41, who have "followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem and served him," and who never abandoned him even after Simon and the other apostles had fled.

An especially notable feature of the Gospel of Mark, as it pertains to women, is that it is women who witness the evidence of Jesus' resurrection, that all-important event for the beginnings of Christianity (see 1 Cor. 15:14: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain"). This is astonishing because according to the law of the first century, a woman could not act as a witness in a court of law, their evidence was unreliable. This is one of the reasons why Peter is depicted in Acts as making it known the people that he was among the witnesses to the resurrection—"This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses" (2:32)—and making no mention of the women

who brought the news to the male disciples in the first place. It is Mark who has the courage to acknowledge the foundational role that the women disciples played in the event of the resurrection. He makes it clear to his readers, and against the patriarchal conventions of his society, that women were chosen as the first witnesses and entrusted with carrying the news of the risen Lord to the other disciples. Mark is also not afraid to tell us that the women's initial response to the empty tomb was one of shock (16:8); but the narrative clearly implies that once they had gotten over it, they delivered the good news to Peter and the others, as instructed (16:7; see also 14:28). If they had continued to "say nothing to anyone" (16:8), the Christian movement would have ended there and then. We need to heed these women today and all the other remarkable women in the Gospel of Mark. We need to recognize the extent to which they are models for contemporary Christian discipleship, male discipleship as well as female discipleship. And we need to transform our church structures accordingly.

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