# Women in the Ministry of Jesus

***Ben Witherington, III***

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Jesus, we have been told in recent times, was a "radical feminist." He was one who deliberately undermined the traditional patriarchal framework so obviously a part of Old Testament culture and religion. His own teaching and way of life were such that, according to the contention of many, only an egalitarian view of husband-wife relationships and an equalitarian view of male-female roles as disciples comport with his world view. This particular kind of analysis of Jesus' views on women has become increasingly accepted as the "correct" interpretation of the relevant material in the four Gospels, both in scholarly and in lay circles. Perhaps, however, it might be worthwile to ask whether or not this is yet another attempt to recreate Jesus and His views in the image of our own modern concerns about the place of women in the Christian community.

So often we come to the Biblical text with an agenda, and it is not surprising that we often find what we are looking for! We use the evidence in a way that partially clarifies and partially obscures the truth. Then too, so often our presuppositions about the text, our ways of handling it, dictate what sort of results we harvest. Methodology, as Robert Funk once said, is not an indifferent net. It catches what it is intended to catch.

In relation to the question of women in the ministry of Jesus, the only way around the problems of reading an agenda into the text, is by careful, comprehensive, historical study of the relevant material. We should not presume to know what the text means *for us,* before we first examine what it meant to its author and audience in its original historical setting. Quite clearly, the text cannot mean something now that is contrary to what the author intended for it to mean *then.* With these thoughts in mind, let us consider some of the relevant material, bearing in mind that I can only summarize some of the material found in my monograph, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Jesus came to proclaim the Kingdom, an event which had implications for women, but he did not directly address the question, what is the proper place of women in that Kingdom, His community of believers. Nevertheless, the implications are fascinating. Take for instance the material found in Mt 19.10-12 where Jesus proclaims a place for the single person in His Kingdom. This might not at first glance seem to be a very radical concept until we see it in its historical context. The Jewish teachers of Jesus' day believed Gen 1.28 commanded that all able-bodied persons must marry and procreate. To remain single by choice was not a legitimate option. Indeed, frequently the rabbis viewed "eunuchs" as an affront to God. By contrast, Jesus taught that it was legitimate to remain single for the sake of His Kingdom. This text may be Jesus' justification for why He Himself remained single. This teaching had a profound effect on women in Jesus' ministry. It meant that they had the option to be something other than wife or mother in this life. Here then we see a radical departure from Judaism, for in Judaism a woman's place was said to be exclusively in the home in some manner. She had no possibility of being the disciple of a famous rabbi or being trained to lead synagogue worship, much less to serve in the Temple as a priest.

In Lk 10.38-42 we find out how Jesus felt about such Jewish attitudes. Here quite clearly we see a study in contrasts. Martha takes on the role of the traditional Jewish hostess, while Mary represents the attentive disciple. The phrase, "sit at the feet of" (10.39) is used often as a technical phrase meaning to be a disciple of, and probably it has that meaning here. When Martha becomes irritated with Mary's failure to help in the kitchen, and even berates Jesus for not doing something about it, the story takes a rather surprising turn. Jesus does not relegate Mary to the hospitality committee, but rather suggests that Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken from her. She has a right, indeed a higher obligation, to be Jesus' disciple rather than to be His hostess. This, of course, is in line with Jesus' teaching elsewhere that nothing has a greater priority than taking up one's cross and following Jesus, but its application to women would have been seen as decidedly unacceptable in Jewish circles.

From Lk 8.1-3 we know that women were amongst Jesus' traveling entourage, a fact in itself which would have been considered scandalous since they were probably not the wives of His disciples. It is likely that Jesus was called the "friend of sinners" in a derisive way precisely because He gave women and other disenfrancised groups free and equal access to His community. In Lk 8.1-3 we also notice that these women appear to have been carrying out functions in the community later assumed by deacons and deaconesses – providing for the material needs and well-being of the community.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of Jesus' teaching about the family of faith *vis-a-vis* the physical family. Clearly, from such texts as Mk 3.31-35 and parallels, Jesus saw faith not heredity as the basis for claiming a place in His community. Indeed Mk 3.21ff. (cf. Jn 7.5) – suggests that physical ties to Jesus might indeed be a stumbling block to understanding Him. Further, such texts as Mk 10.29-30, Lk 12.49-53 and parallels, Lk 9.57-62 make clear that for Jesus it was the family of faith, not the physical family, that must be seen as the basic relational unit within the Kingdom. To be sure, if a physical family (such as Mary, Martha, and Lazarus) was Christian, then the physical family and family of faith could stand together. But if the physical family was divided over loyalty to Jesus, and would not serve but sever the body of believers, then the priority of the family of faith must take precedent. Mk 3.31-35 means nothing less than that one's brothers and sisters in the faith are one's *primary* family to whom one must give *primary* allegiance. If an either/or situation arose, it is clear where Jesus' loyalties were, and where he expected His disciples to be. This attitude, in a lesser degree, is found amongst rabbis and their disciples where it was sometimes affirmed that a student owed his first allegiance to his teacher "who brought him into the world to come" over his parents "who brought him into the world." However, Jesus applied this principle in a more radical and thorough way (cf. Lk 11.27-28, 12.49-53). The Church has still not integrated all that this implies for our relationships in Christ.

Incidental evidence of Jesus' view of the value of a woman's word of witness about Him is found in John 4. The story of the woman at the well is too well known to bear repeating, but several things about this story indicate Jesus' attitude toward women. Firstly, Jewish teachers insisted that Jewish men should speak little or not at all with women, especially strange women, in public places. This was all the more so in regard to women of "ill repute" or of "foreign extraction." Samaritan women were regarded by rabbis as "menstruants from the womb", i.e., always unclean, untouchable, outcasts. Thus, in the disciples' eyes, Jesus had no business talking with this woman at the well. Jesus, however, not only speaks to her but refuses to treat her as unclean, engaging her in one of the most significant theological discussions in the whole of the Fourth Gospel. This implies that even such a woman as she was a proper recipient of theological information and indeed a proper candidate for discipleship. Secondly, the Fourth Evangelist stresses that while Jesus' male disciples were busy scurrying for the food that does not satisfy, this woman went to proclaim the message that led many to come hear from Jesus of a

food that offers eternal life (4.39). It may well be that the parable in 4.37-38 is intended to imply that the woman is one of the sowers or reapers. The Samaritan woman then is seen by the Fourth Evangelist as one who properly models the role of disciple – to the shame of the Twelve. Of a similar nature, though more explicit, is Jesus' commissioning of Mary Magdalene to be an "apostle to the Apostles" by being the first witness to the Resurrection (Jn 20.17-18).

It is also singularly significant that Jesus tacitly rejects the Old Testament laws of clean and unclean as binding on Himself and His followers. Thus, He does not treat the touching of a corpse (Lk 7.15), the touch of a sinner woman (Lk 7.36ff.), or a woman with a flow of blood (Mk 5.27ff.) as defiling. Indeed Mk 7.1ff. states explicitly that Jesus declared all foods clean (7.19b) on the basis of the principle that it is only what comes out of a person that can defile them, not what enters them or touches them (7.15).

One further text that has bearing on women, in both their relationships to the physical family and the family of faith is Lk 22.24-30. Here Jesus defines what sort of leadership or headship the twelve are to exercise over His followers. He explains that they are not to be like the Gentiles who lord it over people, rather they are to follow Jesus' example and be servants of all. Clearly, headship for Jesus means being a head servant – it requires increased responsibility not increased privilege. This is not to say that they cannot have or exercise authority to teach, to preach, to heal. What it does mean is that the traditional patriarchal model of headship must be reformed in the Kingdom. Jesus' choice of and commission of the Twelve men both before and after His resurrection makes quite clear that Jesus was concerned about reformation, not rejection of the traditional concept of headship. Whatever this concept now meant in the Kingdom, however, it obviously was not taken by the Evangelists to mean that women could not proclaim the Good News (Jn 20.17-18) or even teach male church figures of significance (Ac 18.24-26).

What we have said to this point in the discussion is only one side of the story. The other side tells of Jesus' concern to strengthen the traditional physical family structure making it more equitable for women. Jesus' teaching on marriage, family, and divorce illustrate this fact. For instance, in Mt 5.27ff., Jesus clearly intensifies the prohibition against adultery. It was to include even the inclination of the heart, not just the deeds of the body. Further, in Matthew 19 (cf. Mark 10) Jesus takes a very strict stand on divorce. Indeed many scholars would suggest that His view is "no divorce," unless the marriage was improper in the first place (e.g., in the case of an incestuous union). That Jesus took a strict stand against divorce is strongly suggested by the disciples response in Mt 19.10. They knew well enough that some rabbis had said no divorce except on grounds of adultery. It is doubtful that the disciples would have responded as they did if they had understood Jesus to be simply siding with one side of the traditional Jewish debate. Then too, Mark's and Luke's Gospels record no acceptable grounds for divorce. Certainly, the first audiences who received these Gospels would have understood that Jesus taught "no divorce." Divorce for Jesus is adultery, as is remarriage, because in God's eyes when the two are joined by God that union is indissoluble except presumably by death (Mt 19.9, Mk 10.11-12, Lk 16.18). In Mt 19.8-9, Jesus contrasts His position with that of Moses. Moses allowed divorce for hardness of heart, but Jesus now insisted that God's original creation order and intention should be upheld because He is bringing in the new creation. Now, however difficult or controversial this teaching might be, its general effect for women was to give them much greater security in their role as a wife. Some rabbis had even said that if a man found a woman fairer than his own, or if his present wife burnt the breakfast, he was free to divorce and remarry. Not so in the community of Jesus. Women could be sure that no such whim could be grounds for divorce in the Christian community. Thus, even if Mt 19.9

(5.32) allows for divorce on grounds of adultery (which seems unlikely), Jesus had significantly curtailed male freedom to divorce (only males could divorce in first century Jewish culture).

Jn 7.53-8.11 also illustrates that Jesus did not tolerate a double standard. Here the question to be raised is, where is the adulterer who was also caught in the act? Obviously these Jewish elders took more seriously the woman's sin than the man's in this case. Jesus was having no part in such a selective and prejudicial procedure of justice. He does not ignore the woman's sin, but neither does he condemn her. His real condemnation falls on a system that discriminates against the "weaker" members of society. Later, he rails against the scribes who are bilking helpless widows of what little estate they had (Mk 12.40 and parallels). Jesus also felt strongly about elderly parents being disenfranchised by their own children under the pretence of godliness (Mk. 7.9-13). We know too that children held a special place in Jesus' ministry. He insisted on their right to come to Him despite the disciples' resistance (Mk 10.13ff.).

Jesus' compassion on women with lost loved ones (Lk 7.11ff., John 11), sick loved ones (Mk 7.24ff.), or special problems (Lk 8.1-3). His fellowship with them (John 12, Luke 10), and their loyalty to Him to the bitter end (even beyond that of the Twelve) bespeaks of a special relationship between Jesus and those who might have been treated by some male disciples as the least of the disciples whose word could not even be trusted (Lk 24.11). All of this suggests a very remarkable upgrading of the roles women could assume in Jesus' community as compared to their attenuated place in Judaism where they were not allowed to read Torah in the synagogue or to be members of the governing quorum because of their monthly uncleanness.

Our study of Jesus' words and deeds leads us to conclude that in many, though not all, regards, Jesus differed from His Jewish contemporaries. This is all the more remarkable when we note that Jesus, so far as we know, never left His immediate Jewish environment for any length of time and, more importantly, directed His mission specifically to His fellow Jews.

Jesus' rejection of divorce outright would have offended practically everyone of His day. Further, Jesus' view that the single state was a legitimate and not abnormal calling for those to whom it was given, went against prevailing views in various parts of the Roman Empire about a man's duty to marry and procreate, but nowhere more so than in His native Palestine. I suggested that it was this teaching which made it possible for women also to assume roles other than those of wife and mother in Jesus' community. That Jesus did not endorse various ways of making women "scapegoats," especially in sexual matters, placed Him at odds with other rabbis, though doubtless even many Gentiles would have thought that Jesus' rejection of the "double standard" was taking equality too far. Further, we do not find negative remarks about the nature, abilities and religious potential of women in comparison to men on the lips of Jesus in contrast to various Jewish authors. There is also reason to believe that Jesus' estimation of the worth and validity of a woman's word of testimony was higher than that of most, if not all, of His contemporaries (cf. Jn 4.27-42). Jesus' teaching that the family of faith's claims took priority over the claims of the physical family on both men and women (cf. Mk 3.31-5, 10.29-30), also led to some circumstances that both Jew and Gentile would have found objectionable; for instance, what husband (Jew or Gentile) would willingly have let his wife leave home and family to become a follower of an itinerant Jewish preacher? Yet Lk 8.3 probably indicates that Joanna, the wife of Chuza, had done this. This teaching, however, did not lead Jesus to repudiate either the traditional family structure outright or, it would seem, the patriarchal framework which existed to one degree or another in all the various Mediterranean cultures of that day. Jesus' teaching on the matter of corban,

on honouring parents, on divorce, and on children makes clear that He was not advocating a rejection of the traditional family structure. If Mt 5.27-32 and Jn 7.53-8.11 are any indication, then Jesus reaffirmed the responsibility of the husband and male leaders to be moral examples for the community. Jesus' choice of twelve men to be leaders of His new community also leads one to think that He was attempting to reform, not reject, the patriarchal framework under which He operated.

Certain of Jesus' words and deeds, such as His teaching on the laws of uncleanness, His healing of a woman on the Sabbath, and His willingness to converse with a strange woman in public, while obviously offensive to His fellow Jews, would probably not have raised many eyebrows outside Jesus' native context. Then, too, Jesus' attitude toward a woman's right to religious training and to be a disciple of a religious leader, while no doubt shocking to Jews, would not have seemed radical to many Romans or Greeks of that day.

Jesus' views of women and their roles do not fit neatly into any of the categories of His day. He was not a Qumranite, nor was he a traditional rabbi in these matters, though he had certain things in common with both groups. His use of women, both fictitious and real, as examples of faith for His followers, and His teaching on honoring parents, is not without precedent in rabbinic literature. His calling of men and women to radical commitment to God, in view of the inbreaking of the Kingdom, has certain affinities with the teachings of both John the Baptist and Qumran. Yet, on the whole, and especially in view of His Jewish context, Jesus appears to be a unique and sometimes radical reformer of the views of women and their roles that were commonly held among His people. Further, it appears that the case for new and more open attitudes toward women had still to be argued when the Evangelists wrote their Gospels. Perhaps this is the very reason why the Third and Fourth Evangelists take pains to present various women as religious models for their audiences. What then was the effect of these new attitudes about women and their roles on the women who participated in the community of Jesus? What was the community of Jesus offering women in terms of status and roles in comparison to what was offered them in Judaism?

To begin with, it is apparent, not only in the Gospels but also in Acts and the Epistles (e.g., Romans 16), that the impact of the Christian message on women was considerable. It is probable that Jesus' teachings attracted women in part because of the new roles and equal status they were granted in the Christian community. There were many cults in Greece and Rome that were for men only or, at best, allowed women to participate in very limited ways. Further, it is easy to see why women who were on the fringe of the synagogue community became Christian converts. Judaism offered women proselytes a circumscribed place at best, for they were faced with the rabbinic restrictions that limited their participation in religious functions. While women were able neither to make up the quorum necessary to found a synagogue, nor to receive the Jewish covenant sign, these limitations did not exist in the Christian community. The necessary and sufficient explanation of why Christianity differed from its religious mother, Judaism, in these matters is that Jesus broke with both biblical and rabbinic traditions that restricted women's roles in religious practices, and that He rejected attempts to devalue the worth of a woman, or her word of witness. Thus, the community of Jesus, both before and after Easter, granted women *together* with men (not segregated from men as in some pagan cults) an equal right to participate fully in the family of faith. This was a right that women did not have in contemporary Judaism or in many pagan cults. Jesus' teachings on the priorities of discipleship, His willingness to accept women as His disciples and travelling companions (cf. Lk 8.1-3, 10.38-42), and His teaching on eunuchs and what defiled a person, effectively paved the way for women to play a vital part in His com-

munity. *Anyone* could have faith in and follow Jesus – He did not insist on any other requirements for entrance into His family of faith.

In regard to the roles women could and did assume in Jesus' community, Luke particularly shows us that a variety of tasks were assumed by women, especially in the post-Easter community. The Third Evangelist gives evidence (cf. Lk 8.3, Ac 9.36-42) that women often enough simply resumed their traditional roles of providing hospitality or material support, though now it was in service to the community of Jesus. Such roles were acceptable so long as they did not hinder a woman from choosing or learning more about the "one thing needful" (Lk 10.38-42).

While the teaching and community of Jesus was perhaps more easily and more naturally embraced by Gentile women than by Jewish women, it offered Jewish women more in terms of status and roles than it did to Gentile women. For a Jewish woman, the possibility of being a disciple of a great teacher, of being a travelling follower of Jesus, of remaining single "for the sake of the Kingdom," or even of being a teacher of the faith to persons other than children, were all opportunities that did not exist prior to her entrance into the community of Jesus. Nonetheless, the Christian faith and community offered Gentile women a great deal also. As well as the roles mentioned above, the offer of salvation from sin, of starting life with a new self-image and purpose, of actively participating in a community whose Master had directed His mission especially to the oppressed, were offers that appealed greatly to Gentile, as well as Jewish, women. This new status and these new roles, some of which had not been available to these women before, are factors which explain the influx of women into the community of Jesus.

Another motif that comes to light in the Gospels is the presentation of women as valid witnesses of the truth about Jesus (John 4 for instance), and especially about His death, burial, empty tomb and appearance as the risen Lord. Though it may have been a matter of necessity, it is significant that a crucial part of the Christian kerygma is based on the testimony of Jesus' female followers. It is to the credit of the Evangelists that, far from trying to gloss over this fact, it is highlighted in different ways by the First Evangelist, Luke, the Fourth Evangelist, and probably Mark. Worthy of special mention is Luke's way of revealing the validity of the testimony of Jesus' female followers by showing that it was confirmed by the Apostle Peter (cf. Lk 24.1-10, 12). Also notable is the Fourth Evangelist's presentation of Martha's confession as, to some extent, a model for his audience (cf. Jn 11.27, 20.31). Furthermore the Resurrection narratives, like other portions of the Gospels, tend to bear witness to the effect of Jesus' attitudes toward women on the Christian community, as women appear in these narratives as well as elsewhere as witnesses and participants in that community.

There is not time or space to explore this material further. Suffice it to say that Jesus was about the business of doing two things at once in His Ministry that dramatically affected women. On the one hand, He allowed women to have a significant place and status in His words, deeds, and ministry while combatting prejudice and double-standards. The effect of this was to give Jewish women especially new religious rights and functions in the family of faith. On the other hand, he took actions that strengthened women's traditional roles in the family. Thus, the new dichotomy of either Jesus as a "feminist" or Jesus as a traditionalist must be rejected. Neither term and neither extreme adequately describes Jesus' relationship with women. As in so many other regards, Jesus' ministry to and with women defies simple categorization. We would do well today to try and preserve the healthy balance enunciated by Jesus and perpetuated by Paul. When the Church ignores either the new thing Jesus began or the old things he reaffirmed, it stands in danger of further fragmenting the physical family or

quenching the Spirit working in the lives of the women of God. May God preserve us from both these fates.