

JESUS OF NAZARETH AT THE HEART OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT JESUS FROM THE GOSPEL WOMEN?

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Introduction

All Catholic schools locate Jesus of Nazareth at the heart of their enterprise. Jesus is their hero and sponsor; their inspiration and leader. Jesus of Nazareth is the key to the identity and mission of a Catholic school. Insights about Jesus provide intellectual, religious and pastoral resources that assist Catholic schools in pursuing their educational goals. Unfortunately, the sources for encountering and understanding Jesus are opaque and distant rather than immediate and transparent. Windsor (2017) posed the question of what kind of connection with Jesus is possible for modern Australian Catholics. He suggested that traditional forms of relationship offered by the Christian saints, mystics and dreamers with their arcane language and medieval imagery “would leave a majority of Australian believers uncomfortable.” He thought the best model for determining a personal relationship with Jesus “is that of his disciples, people who lived with him during his earthly life” (Windsor, 2017, p. 72).

The following discussion focuses on one specific group of people who lived with Jesus during his public ministry - the gospel women - and seeks to discover what we can learn from them about Jesus of Nazareth. Modern people who seek to recover Jesus of Nazareth from our opaque sources are indebted to these gospel women. As Fredriksen (1999) explained, those who followed Jesus were the first to hear his message. If they had not been impressed and moved by what he said and did, they would not have passed their recollections on to others: “without his immediate followers, we would know nothing about Jesus, nor - since it is upon them that the existence of Christianity ultimately depends - would we have historical reason to care.” Her observation underlines the significance of the women and men who chose to follow him and our necessity to comprehend their part in his story: “we cannot explain and understand him without likewise explaining and understanding them” (Fredriksen, 1999, p. 78). This paper seeks to understand and explain the gospel women in order to achieve a two-fold purpose: to understand and appreciate Jesus of Nazareth, and to draw on these understandings to reflect on the work of Catholic schools.

The Women of Galilee

Often, the gospel women are in the background of the stories told about Jesus. But they are not absent completely. Luke offers an insight into the nature of the women friends and followers of Jesus. He relates how Jesus along with his followers travelled throughout Galilee when he was preaching and teaching:

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. (Luke 8:1-3)

Luke's description of the women of Galilee has engaged scholars who, among other issues, have debated the meaning of the expression, "provided for them out of their resources." Were these women managers or agents - as we might call them today? In what ways did they arrange the business of the Jesus movement? Presumably, it meant providing money. But did it also mean the women "ministered" to Jesus and his male disciples? And if so, could it mean that since Jesus had female "ministers", the Church today should recognise and ordain female ministers? These and other texts are read closely by advocates on either side of that debate.

We do not know much about the lives and careers of the women mentioned by Luke. Were they rich (how did they arrange for the money, time and other resources to support the movement)? Were they married, unmarried, divorced or widowed (few husbands are ever mentioned in relation to the gospel women)? Almost all of the women mentioned as followers of Jesus are identified in the gospels without any indication of relationships to husbands or other men upon whom they might be dependent. Joanna - "the wife of Herod's steward, Chuza" - is a rare exception in the gospel record. The question of whether Jesus himself was married, and to whom, has been raised since the second century. King concluded that "the most historically reliable early Christian literature is silent about Jesus' marital status" (King, 2014, p. 158). Le Donne appended a point of personal intrigue to the quest for the historical wife of Jesus. He asked: "what does it say about us that we're so fascinated and repulsed by this possibility?" (Le Donne, 2013, p. 7).

Whether they were married, unmarried, divorced or widowed, the gospels only allow us to say that, whatever male partners existed, they did not travel with their female partners in Jesus' entourage. The women figure mostly in the Passion narratives in each gospel, rather than in the accounts of Jesus' public ministry. In Luke's passage, some of them are named and some indication of their social status is provided; "many others" are not named by Luke. Some of the women followers, it seems, possess sufficient wealth to supply the Jesus movement with financial and material support. Hulen (2014) explained that such benefaction by women in the Roman era was not at all unusual, "and not limited to elite women". She said that:

there is evidence at many levels of society that women gave gifts to communities or local organizations, made bequests, loaned money, owned and freed slaves, and thus acted as patrons in many of the same ways men did. On a smaller scale, women donated or renovated buildings in support of professional guilds and religious groups. Women also made loans and supported individual clients in business and social life. (Hulen, 2014, p. 10)

Hulen's (2014) observations require gospel readers to see the work of the women who supported Jesus as unexceptional, and not the preserve of elite women in Jewish society. Bauckham (2002, pp. 121-135) explained how Jewish women in the gospel era had access to and decision-making authority over financial resources from a range of sources, including: family inheritance, gifts, a husband's deceased estate, money paid by the groom to the bride (*ketubba*), a dowry, and earnings from paid work outside the household, among other sources.

The gospel women are also sufficiently independent of households to join Jesus' travelling entourage. These women, without mention of male chaperones, are shown by Luke to accompany Jesus on his travels around Galilee and also up to Jerusalem (Luke 23:49). The tradition is also attested in Mark 15:40-1: "There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem". The intention is to show continuity among the many women followers who were with Jesus in Galilee and who maintained their relationship with the Jesus movement when they moved to Jerusalem in the

last days of his life. We can plausibly assume that even though the women are not specifically mentioned in a particular gospel incident, they are nonetheless present; we need to read them into the action when the gospel writers have omitted their probable presence (Dowling, 2004). Women are the continuous witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Only these women, according to Luke, “saw Jesus die, watched him being buried, and first found the empty tomb” (Osiek, 2010, p. 79).

In all four gospels, the women of Galilee who accompany Jesus to Jerusalem during the last week of his life are shown as present at his crucifixion (Matthew 27:55; Mark 15:40-1; Luke 23:49; John 19:25). We know some of these women by name, but little else about them is conveyed in the gospels. The gospel stories of the women who discover the empty tomb have been read in an ambiguous manner by Christians over the centuries. Some interpreters have seen their actions in response to discovering Jesus’ empty tomb as a failure in discipleship. Joynes (2011, p. 21) judged from her survey of the history of interpretation that “it becomes apparent that they [the women] are not universally regarded as fallible followers; but neither are they unequivocally held up as paradigms of faith. The discord among interpreters on this point highlights tensions in the text.” In other words, if Christians have sensed ambiguity in the way the women are presented as faithful followers, then it more than likely follows from the ambiguity expressed by the gospel authors. Despite the ambiguity, there is substance to the view that “the women’s presence at Jesus’ crucifixion, burial and resurrection highlights their position not as failed or fallible followers but as faithful witnesses of the climactic events” (Aernie, 2016, p. 785).

Some women who support Jesus are either not from Galilee or do not join his travelling entourage. A notable gospel example of such women is found in the story of Jesus visiting the house of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42; John 12:1-8 and 11:1-44). Jesus comes to the house of Martha and Mary and finds welcoming hospitality there. It seems that Jesus and his travelling companions could rely upon food, money and shelter when they arrived in villages on their journeys. Whatever the source of their motivation, these non-travelling supporters can also be counted as followers of Jesus, even if they did not leave their homes to do so (Karris, 1994).

Jesus, Women and Ritual Purity

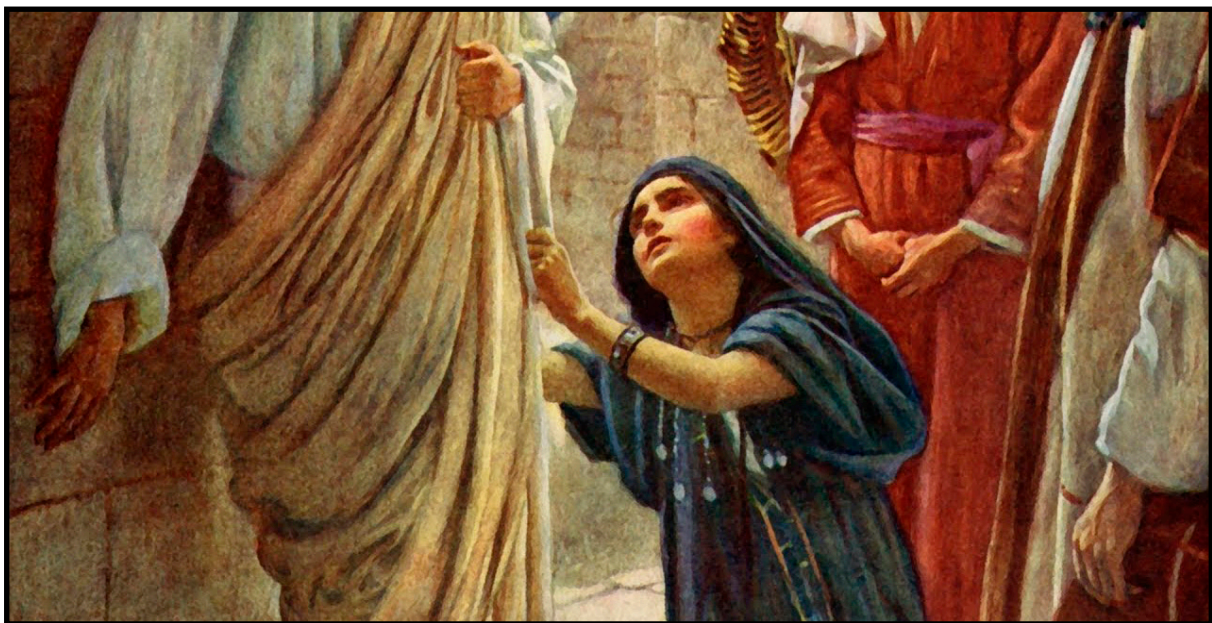
Christian preaching and teaching have introduced many misunderstandings about the nature of Jesus’ relationship with women. Consider the story in Mark 5:25-34 of an unnamed woman who approached Jesus: she “had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had” (Mark 5:25-6). Here is a woman in great distress who is insistent in her approach to Jesus. She has been let down by the “health system” - she has spent (wasted?) all her financial resources on physicians without a successful resolution. Things were getting worse, in fact. Everyone she has approached has failed her. She resorts to an alternative form of health care - one accessible and free of charge. She approaches Jesus from behind without his awareness of her presence, touches his cloak and immediately “felt in her body that she is healed of her disease”.

The incident has caused much discussion for centuries. Many Christian commentators have observed that by touching Jesus’ garment she has made him ritually impure as she herself is due to her flow of blood (Haber, 2003). From the earliest centuries, commentators focused on the way Jesus appears to ignore what is characterised - by them - as oppressive ritual taboos and rescues the woman from her debilitating illness as well as from the restrictions imposed upon her by repressive Jewish Law. Jesus tells the woman that her faith has made her well and to go in peace. In sending her on her way, Jesus appears to be communicating that the Jewish purity laws are obsolete and are now null and void. Jesus seems to be flouting the purity laws and reaching out to women who are oppressed by them.

But a close reading of the story casts doubt on such interpretations. The first thing to notice in the way Mark relates the story is that the woman does not mention anything to do with ritual impurity, nor

does Jesus, nor do any of the people gathered around, nor does the author of Mark's gospel. The Torah prescription in the book of Leviticus 15:2-33 outlines guidance for ritual purity for men and women. The gospel author does not mention Leviticus. Silence all round. No one seems bothered by an ill woman in a close crowd who touches a man's garment. Her state of purity is not an issue and seems irrelevant to the story. As Levine (2006, p. 174) explained, "Jesus abrogates no Laws concerning any 'crippling cultural taboos', for there is no Law forbidding the woman to touch him or him to touch her." Jesus does not abrogate or seek to overturn these or any other Jewish purity laws. If purity was the point of the story we would expect some words from the gospel author about it. No such commentary is offered by Mark. In fact, there is no issue in the story concerning Jesus and his ritual impurity. Leviticus 15:25-30 does not actually state that a woman with a discharge of blood who touches a man's clothing renders him ritually impure. Instead, Mark has crafted a story where the woman's pain and desperation provokes a profound empathy from the reader. Jesus' capacity to resolve the tension is at the heart of the story, not a question about observing or abrogating Jewish purity laws.

The focus of the story in Mark is on the woman's health and her faith: her miraculous healing is available also to those with faith in Jesus as God's agent even when Jesus is not directly conscious of the desired healing (the woman approaches Jesus' without his knowledge and a cure is effected by her touching his garment without his knowledge of her intention). The woman is held up as a model of faith in the community. Christian commentators have tried to read the gospel story as Jesus' implicit condemnation of Jewish purity laws, but they have based their criticisms on misrepresentations of those laws and of Jesus' attitude towards them.



"She came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak." Mark 5:27

Mary, Jesus and Jewish Liberation

Gospel readers may notice a recurring fact about the gospel women: the name Mary occurs often. Fifteen women are named in the gospels; five of them are called Mary, including Jesus' mother. Mary was one of the most popular names for girls and women in Roman Palestine in Jesus' time: one in every four females whose names are known to us was named Mary. Over half of all women and girls in first century Roman Palestine, whose names are known to us, were named Salome (or, Salomezion) or Mary (Williams, 1995). Variations based on Greek, Hebrew and Latin were common - Mariam, Miriam, Maria. It was a favourite name of members of the Herodian rulers. King Herod the Great's wife second wife, Mariamme

was a Hasmonean princess who was murdered on the orders of her husband in 29 BCE and subsequently became a hero martyr among ordinary Jewish people in Roman Palestine (Richardson, 1996, pp. 216-220). The use of the name Mary/Miriam increased throughout Roman Palestine after her death.

So, what are we to make of the proliferation of Marys associated with Jesus - Mary, his mother, Mary of Magdala, and Mary of Clopas (John 19:25) as well as Mary of Bethany (John 11:1) and Mary the mother of James and Joses (Mark 15:40)? It is possible to imagine that the Galilean families who named their daughters in honour of a Hasmonean hero and martyr may have been sympathetic to the Hasmonean cause. The Hasmoneans were a Jewish dynasty who led an uprising in 167 BCE against the Syrian colonial rulers who dominated Jewish life at that time. These liberators of the Jewish people drove out the Syrians and established the first sovereign Jewish state in more than four centuries and appointed a High Priest from the ranks of their own family as the supreme leader of the people.

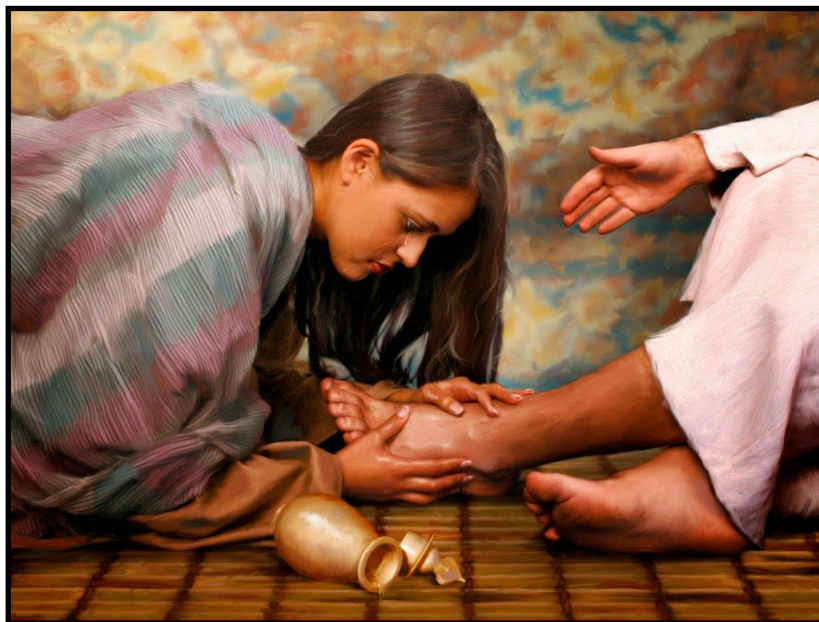
The Hasmoneans were highly regarded by many in the general Jewish population but were viewed suspiciously by some of the upper classes who thought they had undermined their traditional privileges and authority. The Hasmoneans ruled for about eighty years until the Romans arrived in 63 BCE to establish their rule in Palestine. The high number of Galilean women named Mary associated with the Jesus movement may be a clue to those who followed Jesus and their reasons for doing so. If these families hoped for a liberation arising from within the Jewish community from the oppressive Roman rulers of their land, then naming their children after the heroes of the Hasmonean uprising may have been one subtle, public means of establishing solidarity and declaring their loyalties. A longing for political independence from Rome may have been implied by a family who named their daughter Mary. In a tightly enforced political environment, naming your girl children might have provided one, small sphere of protest against oppressors (Ilan, 1995).

Jesus and the Gospel Women

The mention of the gospel women provokes speculation about their possible motives for being involved with the Jesus movement. It seems that women from across the political, social and economic spectrum were attracted to the Jesus movement. Some have argued that Jesus transgressed the boundaries imposed by the Jewish religion of his day. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza published a ground-breaking book in 1983, *In Memory of Her*, that influenced a generation of scholars. She thought Jesus promoted an agenda of radical equality, an end to distinctions based on gender and social class and a new society based on equality that would replace the hierarchical structures that governed relations between people in his day. For many scholars who took up these ideas in their analyses of the gospel texts, Jesus was cast in the mould of one who preached a radical message where men and women were to be considered as equals in the assembly of Christian believers.

Despite the enthusiasm with which these ideas were taken up, the evidence to support these conclusions is unpromising in some places and contradictory in others. The gospel women show great interest in the Jesus movement; Jesus does not seem to show great interest in them. The gospels offer scant evidence of Jesus in dialogue with his women followers, nor does he seem to be influenced by their ideas and intentions for the movement. On the few occasions when Jesus does engage in public dialogue and debate with women, it is with those who are not his immediate followers: for example, the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-30 and the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-42. Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well around noon. The interaction between the pair is prolonged and involves discussion of profound personal, religious and political concerns - they engage in "verbal jousting" (Matthews, 2010, p. 224). The woman is a conduit to faith in Jesus among many Samaritans who "believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (John 4:39). Even in these dialogues, Jesus is presented as someone with decisive views who seeks to persuade and convince, rather than engage in open dialogue with women.

This way of interpreting the story should not be taken to mean that Jesus never interacts with women in the gospels. He talks to women, often Gentile women. He heals women. He allows himself to be anointed by women. He helps women in need on several occasions. See, for example, the cure of the daughter of a Syrophenician woman - a Gentile woman - in Mark 7:24-30 (and Matthew 15:21-9). Some major scenes in the gospel narratives occur when he interacts with women. Similarly, in Luke 7:36-50 an unnamed woman described as a “woman of the city who was a sinner” (though the nature of that sin is not disclosed) enters a dinner party at the home of a Pharisee. She weeps her tears on Jesus’ feet, dries them with her unbound hair, kisses them and anoints them with oil from an alabaster jar she has brought with her to the gathering. Her weeping suggests either gratitude towards Jesus, devotion, or a form of grieving solicitation for help or mercy (Cosgrove, 2005). Jesus responds by pointing out to those present that great forgiveness produces great love in the one forgiven. He pronounces forgiveness on the woman and interprets her actions as gestures of hospitality. The care she has shown is exemplary. The woman is applauded as one whose actions are a model of true discipleship. She is like another unnamed woman in Matthew 26:6-13 who anoints his head with “very costly ointment”. Her actions draw from Jesus the observation that “wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (Matthew 26:13) (Park, 2017).



“She began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair.” Luke 7:38

Women are not commissioned by Jesus to go out and speak on behalf of the movement, as men are. Most interactions in the gospels are between Jesus and other men. Jesus sees God as “Father” and worships accordingly - in Matthew’s gospel alone the word Father is placed on Jesus’ lips 45 times. Jesus does not use feminine imagery for God - as mother, for example. The gospel authors do not refer to the women who follow Jesus as disciples - a term reserved for Jesus’ male followers. While Jesus specifically called twelve male followers, he did not call any women to follow him. The women who follow Jesus are obviously welcome in the Jesus movement, but the gospels do not show Jesus actually calling them to follow him, despite the plethora of men who are called.

Jesus selected twelve men to be the symbolic and actual representatives of his reform movement, but does not include a woman among the Twelve (Mark 3:13-19). The gospels show him intending the arrangement to be a permanent and abiding one. In Matthew 19:28, when his followers question him about their future role in his organisation, Jesus responds in this way: “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will

also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Such pronouncements do not represent the agenda for a radical, egalitarian and gender-inclusive organisation: no woman is called into the inner circle of the movement; none is appointed to preach to the world. The coming Kingdom will be administered by twelve men.

The preferential focus on men in the gospels has diminished potential for understanding Jesus. Moxnes (2014) claimed that much scholarship on the masculinity of Jesus has tended to focus on Jesus “in comparison with other men” which consequently “tends to make women invisible” and so restricts a full understanding of Jesus within the range of relations (Moxnes, 2014, p. 73). Gospel readers can gain the perception of Jesus as a dominant male in a predominantly male society. Shining a light on Jesus’ relations with women opens rich possibilities for understanding Jesus in his first-century context. Myers (2015, p. 213) observed how John’s gospel presents a “new model of masculinity made manifest by Jesus.” John’s portrait of a revised masculinity incorporates perceived feminine traits. Myers (2015, p. 213) argued that John “subverts cultural assumptions” about gender, “in order to claim a superior identity both for Jesus and for those who dare to follow in his gender-bending tracks”.

Reading the Gospel Women Today

Many have challenged the view that Jesus can be characterised in the style of a liberated male of the twenty-first century. Some - even many - modern Christians have wanted to take the message of Jesus as liberator of women and read the gospels as if all Jewish women of Jesus’ time were oppressed, and, only Jesus had the capacity to liberate them from their oppression. In reality, the way the gospel authors style Jesus of Nazareth reflects “the patriarchal character of first-century Palestinian society” (Weaver, 2010, p. 399). Jesus incorporated and expressed many of the received traditions of his time, place and culture.

As we have seen, Jesus’ feminist credentials are deficient in many areas, at least when judged against modern standards: the “effort to show that Jesus was a feminist has largely failed” (Kostenberger, 2008, p. 112). To begin with, the gospel women are not presented as especially oppressed; they show a high degree of agency and interdependence. The gospel women:

- have full access to their own finances (the hemorrhaging woman spends her *own* money on physicians, Mark 5:26; Luke 8:43; Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna financially support Jesus, Luke 8:1-3; the unnamed woman anoints Jesus with expensive ointment, Mark 14:3, Matthew 26:7, Luke 7:37, John 12:3; the women go to anoint Jesus’ body, Mark 16:1)
- own houses (“Martha welcomed him into *her* home”, Luke 10:38)
- participate in synagogue and Temple activities (Anna, the prophet in the Temple, Luke 2:36-7; the crippled woman in the synagogue, Luke 13:10-11; the poor widow in the Temple, Luke 21:1-4)
- are free to travel independent of male family chaperones (the women of Galilee, Luke 8:1-3; the women at the cross, John 19:25; Mark 15:40-1; Matthew 27:55-6; Luke 23:49)
- are free to express their ideas to male strangers (the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, John 4:1-26; the Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman, Mark 7:24-30, Matthew 15:21-28; the high priest’s servant girl confronts Peter, Mark 14:66-71, Matthew 26:69-75, Luke 22:54-62, John 18:15-18)
- express their views in public without restraint or fear of recrimination (the woman in the crowd, Luke 11:27; the Daughters of Jerusalem who weep for Jesus, Luke 23:27-8)
- touch Jesus; and, Jesus touches them (a sinful woman washes, kisses and anoints his feet, Luke 7:36-50; the hemorrhaging women, Luke 8:44; Simon’s mother-in-law, Mark 1:31; Jairus’ daughter, Mark 5:41; a crippled women, Luke 13:13)

While most commentators concede the culture in which women lived was patriarchal, still it was not the draconian and repressive environment that many Christians have attempted to portray. The women in the Jesus movement reflect and represent the greater social freedom for women already

occurring throughout the Roman Empire in Jesus' time. Jewish women participated in the changing social environment which afforded women "access to certain legal rights (such as divorce), social contexts (such as communal meals), religious contexts (such as synagogue and Temple), and political power (as patronesses and synagogue leaders)" (Corley, 2002, p. 2). The presence of women in a wide range of spheres of everyday life undermines claims that they joined the Jesus movement to escape a moribund and oppressive Jewish religion.



"When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight." Luke 13:13

What may be required from modern bible readers is a revision of their received perspective on the role of women in antiquity in the cultures described in the bible. Pilch (2016) argued that modern scholars have reached a consensus on the power of women in ancient societies, especially with regard to the domestic sphere. But any perceived scholarly consensus requires revision. Pilch (2016) said:

The range of social roles played by women in the prehistoric past extended far beyond the domestic sphere and overlapped with roles occupied by men. Women have been hunters, merchants, healers, athletes, warriors, rulers, and religious leaders. Women and men have collaborated in productive activities instead of female-male division of labor. To limit one's vision to gender differences alone, namely that gender dictates the common division of labor, is a serious deficiency. (Pilch 2016, pp. 204-5)

Lurking in the background of these efforts to paint Jesus as a radical egalitarian saviour of oppressed women is a ubiquitous, though murky, form of anti-Judaism. Anti-Judaism is a form of thought that places Jewish religion and culture in a negative light, usually with the intention of elevating another religious or cultural perspective. In relation to the women who followed Jesus, a common view has traditionally been expressed that the gospel women were repressed and suppressed by a Jewish culture from which Jesus was able to rescue them - a view that persists among some modern scholars and

prominent Christians. To quote but one example, former United States President Jimmy Carter (2014, p. 22) claimed that “Jesus Christ was the greatest liberator of women in a society where they had been considered throughout biblical history to be inferior.” A close reading of the gospels does not support his contention. The most thorough critique of this claim has been offered by Elliott (2002, p. 88) who argued that “the theory that Jesus was an egalitarian who established an egalitarian ‘community of equals’ is problematic in several respects and must be rejected as implausible, unsupported and unconvincing.” It more likely reflects a persistent supersessionism - replacement ideology - that infiltrated Christian tradition for nineteen hundred years: the loving and compassionate God of Christianity replaced the vengeful and legalistic God of Israel (Tapie, 2017). Supersessionist ideas are dying slowly in modern Christianity, though they remain pervasive in some corners of the tradition.



“ He also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins.” Luke 21:2

Bauckham (2002, p. xvi) described how anti-Judaism has influenced critical study of the gospel women since the early 1980s:

Some of the early scholarly work on women in the Gospels, while well aware of the importance of their Jewish context, succumbed to what was still a not uncommon model in New Testament scholarship: portraying Jesus and his movement only by contrast with contemporary Judaism, such that whatever the scholars found admirable about Jesus and his movement was set against a dark background of its opposite in Judaism. One could sometimes get the impression that women followers of Jesus were perhaps not in an enviable position by modern standards, but when compared with how truly awful it was to be a Jewish woman at that time the position of those women who joined Jesus’ movement looks wonderful.

Levine (2003, p.121) criticised the tendency among Christian New Testament scholars who present Judaism as “ossified, xenophobic, misogynist and lifeless.” She noted that allied to the dire view of Judaism is a desire to read the gospels as if “those who follow Jesus, as well as Jesus himself, somehow cease to be Jews in the minds of the faithful: they are Christians” (Levine, 2003, p. 127). Contemporary scholarship has refuted, though sometimes grudgingly, the “de-Judaising” of Jesus of Nazareth. Reinhartz (2015, p.

209) judged that “even the most sceptical readers of the Gospels and the most minimalist historians recognize that Jesus lived within an almost entirely Jewish ethnic, social and cultural milieu.”

Reclaiming Jesus’ Jewish heritage encourages gospel readers to avoid the tendency to modernise Jesus and to accept that he was “in conversation and confrontation with his times rather than ours”. Among other things, it means that “intra-Jewish disputes about *halakha*, the status of Samaritans, paying imperial taxes, and maintenance of purity stipulations are more likely to feature as topics of Jesus’ interest than feminism, globalization, or church growth strategies” (Bird, 2006, p. 310). The onus rests on modern bible readers to allow people in ancient times to be themselves, to be focused on the issues of their times and not on those that engage moderns.



“A Samaritan woman came to draw some water and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’” John 4:7

The Gospel Women and the Identity of Catholic Schools

The women who followed Jesus in his public ministry did not do so because Judaism oppressed them or suppressed their humanity. The New Testament texts show women who exercised a high level of agency and interdependence. Jesus’ preaching and teaching offered them depth and substance to their Jewish commitments, not a denigration of those commitments. Jesus and his women followers were observant, committed participants in Jewish religious and cultural life. The women who joined the Jesus movement did not stop being Jews any more than Jesus himself departed from his Jewish religion and culture. While many of Jesus’ messages were challenging and demanding, they were derived from, delivered to and contested in a lively, robust Jewish context. Jesus joined a long line of Jewish reformers, teachers and prophets who contrived a particular way to express and proclaim a message founded in the riches of Jewish cultural life. Read in this way, Jesus was not setting out to destroy his beloved Jewish religion; neither were his women followers set on a similar destruction. The gospels do not portray Jesus as intent on rescuing woman from a corrupt Judaism. His teachings drew on the depths of his Jewish heritage to offer a message of hope and promise.

The Jewishness of Jesus and that of his first followers is being re-discovered and re-emphasised by contemporary Christians. Slowly dawning is the awareness that Christian self-understanding is inextricably linked to a fuller understanding of Jews and Judaism, ancient and modern. Jesus was a Jewish teacher “who accepted the authority of the Torah...and taught his interpretation of those books to his disciples...He read these scriptures, studied these scriptures, interpreted these scriptures, adhered

to these scriptures, and taught these scriptures” (Ehrman, 2005, p. 20). The Jewish women close to Jesus therefore hold some of the vital clues to this growing awareness of the significance of Jewish religion for modern Christians. Among other consequences, this will lead to an increase in the presence in Catholic schools of Jewish signs and symbols, of Jewish texts, Jewish people, rituals, art, and activities designed to increase mutual understanding.

A close reading of the gospels reveals women of their own time, place and culture. These women, in turn, allow us glimpses of Jesus in his own cultural context. However we might account for the motivations of the women, the gospels show women freely joining the Jesus movement and taking pivotal roles in it. It may be that the message preached by Jesus about the goodness and mercy of God struck a chord in the minds and hearts of all his followers - male and female - across the social spectrum. A consideration of the gospel women will encourage Catholic school people to foster a sympathetic understanding and appreciation of life in the ancient world of Jesus and his contemporaries and to bring the insights they gain from these studies into dialogue with modern concerns. A focus on the historical women who followed Jesus (as opposed to pious myths about Jesus’ followers) compels us to understand Jesus within his particular time and place. It cautions us against ascribing to Jesus and his followers twenty-first century ideologies and perspectives which could never have existed in the world Jesus knew. At the simplest level, it cautions us to present Jesus as an observant Jewish man of the Second Temple period (and *not* as a Catholic - an idea that still seems to linger in some corners of modern consciousness).

Against the traditions that have tended to marginalise the role of women in the Jesus movement, Jesus’ women followers are presented in the gospels as active, pivotal and engaged participants in Jesus’ public ministry. In the gospels, Jesus interacts mostly with other men, and only occasionally with women. Gospel readers could feasibly gain the impression that Jesus was a dominant male in a predominantly male society. A close reading of the role of the gospel women compels us to consider images of masculinity that have predominated in Catholic schools and to evaluate the sources and effects of these masculine ideas. New lessons may be gained for Catholic schools by a critical consideration of the masculinity of Jesus. These reflections will have profound implications for the education of boys and girls in Catholic schools.

The presence of the women in the Jesus movement points to a paradox in the mode of Christian discipleship. The reform movement proposed by Jesus of Nazareth is at once counter-cultural, yet culturally sensitive. The Jesus movement seems to have been counter-cultural in some, but not all, aspects, especially when including women among his travelling entourage throughout Galilee and Judea who were not accompanied by male partners or family members. While it was not at all uncommon for women in antiquity to support charismatic preachers and reform-minded religious movements, the presence of unchaperoned women in a travelling entourage seems to have been unique. These counter-cultural women prompt a consideration of countercultural signs that might be evident in Catholic schools. Fruitful discussions and sound policy can be generated by judgments about the aspects of mainstream culture that Catholic schools are well-advised to counter, contradict or avoid.

The gospel women who followed Jesus exhibited many signs of liberation stemming from the effects of the “globalising” Greco-Roman culture. Their cultural context assisted them in their commitment to Jesus and his movement. This cultural sensitivity encourages Catholic schools to promote, foster and affirm features of contemporary mainstream culture that offer liberation, justice and mercy. These affirmations are an antidote to cultural separatism, isolation and exclusivism that may be the lot of Catholic schools that fail to ignore the life-affirming features of contemporary culture. The gospel women were able to participate in the Jesus movement, at least in part, due to the liberating trends advancing throughout the Roman Empire. The challenge for Catholic schools is how best to achieve an appropriate balance between cultural preservation and cultural renewal and reform.

These insights can prompt reflections on the fundamental mission and purpose of contemporary Catholic schools. For example, the women who go to anoint Jesus at his place of burial are engaged in the activities of mourning according to contemporary Jewish custom. Instead, they become witnesses to new life. They run away from the empty tomb in “terror and amazement” (Mark 16:8). This event lies at the heart of the Christian tradition. It can provoke reflection on what might be seen as dying in today’s Catholic schools. The gospel women demonstrate the need for honest recognition of the demise of beloved traditions and respectful mourning for their passing. Their activities of mourning are respectful, realistic and responsible. And, they alert us to look for the signs of vitality, new life, and new awakenings in modern schools. As they were for the gospel women, these signs of new life may be sources of amazement and terror.

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