

‘WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM HER?’

Women in the Gospel of John

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IN AUGUST 2016, after ‘intense prayer and mature reflection’, Pope Francis set up the ‘Study Commission on the Women’s Diaconate’ to study the question of women and the diaconate ‘in the earliest times of the Church’.¹ Many church historians claim there is good evidence that women served as deacons in the early Church. In the Letter to the Romans (16:1), St Paul mentions Phoebe as being a deacon. John Wijngaards, writing in *The Tablet* (8 May 1999), states:

History has left us ample records of the activity of genuine women deacons who flourished mainly in Greece, Asia Minor, Dalmatia, Syria and Palestine, certainly from the third to at least the eighth century until here too, as in the West, menstruation and other taboos eroded it. St Chrysostom at Constantinople had 40 women deacons. We also have many epigraphic inscriptions, such as that of Theodora in Gaul (sixth century) and Sophia in Jerusalem (fourth century) *Here lies the servant and Virgin of Christ, the deacon, the second Phoebe.*²

According to Raymond Brown we should be reflecting upon the Gospel of John ‘when we are discussing new roles for women in the Church today’.³ He acknowledges that there is not much information about church offices in the Fourth Gospel but I think, nonetheless, that there is evidence to illustrate the importance and significance of women, at least in the Johannine community (that is, the early church community in which the Gospel was produced), in the spreading of the gospel message.⁴

¹ See ‘Pope Institutes Commission to Study the Diaconate of Women’, available at http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/08/02/pope_institutes_commission_to_study_the_diaconate_of_women/1248731.

² John Wijngaards, ‘When Women Were Deacons’, *The Tablet* (8 May 1999), 622.

³ Raymond Brown, ‘Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel’, *Theological Studies*, 36/4 (1975), 689.

⁴ Brown, ‘Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel’, 690.

The Mother of Jesus

‘The joyful face of woman’s salvation.’⁵

Only seven women appear in the Gospel of John: the mother of Jesus; a Samaritan woman; a woman caught in the act of adultery; the sisters of Lazarus, Martha and Mary; Mary of Magdala; and Mary, the wife of Clopas. Each of these women (except for Mary, the wife of Clopas) plays a crucial role in the gospel narrative and in the life of the early Johannine community. But, surprisingly, there is only one example in the whole narrative of Jesus addressing a woman by her name.

This takes place during Jesus’ first appearance after the resurrection, when a rather emotionally distraught Mary of Magdala is frantically searching for his body, which she fears has been removed, most probably stolen, from the tomb. Initially, she mistakes the Risen Lord for a gardener and pleads with him: ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away’ (John 20: 15). Then Jesus says ‘Mary!’ and she knows him (20: 16). ‘He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.’ (John 10: 3)

Until this moment Jesus has only ever used the word ‘woman’ to address his female followers. At the wedding feast at Cana (2: 1–12) when his mother says to him ‘They have no wine’, his reply is ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?’, which seems a rather startling way for a son to respond to his mother. John Marsh sees this as Jesus ‘claiming that the time has come when his actions derive no longer from Mary’s parental guidance and authority but are from his own relationship with his heavenly Father’.⁶ The absence of Mary’s name here and throughout the gospel narrative is a characteristic of John. Some commentators have suggested we must infer that the evangelist is using her presence figuratively to represent, in a highly symbolic situation, the Judaism that ‘bore’ Jesus according to the flesh.⁷

But it is clear from her directive to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you’ (2: 6), that she is fully aware of who her son is and, significantly, of his divine destiny. And, more importantly, it is his mother’s faith in him, at this early stage in his ministry, that facilitates the first *sign* at Cana. Without her presence and faith there is no sign because, until

⁵ Tina Beattie, *Eve’s Pilgrimage: A Woman’s Quest for the City of God* (London: Burns and Oates, 2002), 71.

⁶ John Marsh, *The Gospel of St John* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 144.

⁷ Marsh, *Gospel of St John*, 144.

that moment, his glory had not been seen and the disciples did not believe in him as the Messiah. Mary initiates the sign and, in doing so, she gives further impetus to her son’s public ministry. This necessitates her presence at the wedding feast, whether figuratively or actually.

Jesus uses the same form of address on the cross to entrust his mother to the care of the beloved disciple, ‘Woman, here is your son’ (19:26). Jesus’ use of the word ‘woman’ is suggestive for some commentators of Genesis 3:15 and 20, and



**The Crucifixion with the Virgin and St John,
*French school, fifteenth century***

appears to present the mother of Jesus as the ‘new Eve’ and the spiritual Mother of all the faithful. Tina Beattie writes:

Eve and Mary together represent the redemption of women, for it is only by knowing what it means to be fallen that we can understand what it means to be redeemed. It is as if, in order to represent Mary, the early Church had to construct her opposite out of the shadowy and relatively insignificant figure of the biblical Eve. In some patristic writings, Eve is the face of woman’s sorrow while Mary is the joyful face of woman’s salvation. Mary is the eschatological woman of the new creation, whereas Eve is Everywoman, representing both the promise of fulfilment and the reality of suffering.⁸

The Samaritan Woman

‘With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.’ (Isaiah 12:3)

The Samaritan woman is drawing water from Jacob’s well at the sixth hour—about noon, the hottest part of the day. Water was usually drawn

⁸ Beattie, *Eve’s Pilgrimage*, 71.

from the well in the morning or late evening when it was cooler. Is this a sign that she has been ostracized and excluded from the community by the other women of the town—on account, perhaps, of her immorality, since she has had five husbands and is now living with a man who is not her husband?

According to Kenneth Grayston, the encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4) 'is, at the simplest, a story about moving from ignorance to disturbing self-knowledge'.⁹ But, more significantly, it is about redemption: in presenting Jesus reaching out to the Samaritan woman the evangelist is clearly showing that Jesus' mission is for all people—including sinners and Samaritans alike. Whatever her status and standing within the community, Jesus sees in this woman someone who is alive to the voice of the 'true bridegroom'. When he asks her to call her husband she replies, 'I have no husband' (4:18). Her openness to Jesus' questioning contrasts with his previous and frustrating encounter with Nicodemus—a stock representative, perhaps, of the Jews as a whole.

Her frank and honest admission of having 'no husband' is significant on a theological level and is, perhaps, at the heart of this encounter at Jacob's well. As previous chapters in this Gospel have illustrated the inadequacies of the Jewish purification rites (Cana), temple worship (cleansing of the Temple) and the priestly caste (Nicodemus), so now attention is turned to the shortcomings of the Samaritan religion. The Samaritan woman's marital history and current status are used to stand for the inadequacies of that religion. The Samaritans' supposed worship of five gods—symbolized by the woman's five husbands—is not true belief.¹⁰

Jesus tells her that the hour has now come when 'the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him' (4:23). Suddenly, the woman says 'I know that Messiah is coming When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' (4:25) Ironically, Jesus has already told her everything, but now he reveals himself to her as the Messiah. The earthly water is forsaken as she

⁹ Kenneth Grayston, *The Gospel of John* (London: Epworth, 1990), 40.

¹⁰ 2 Kings 17:24 following suggests that the Samaritans had seven gods; the figure of five comes from Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities*, 11.288). See Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda, *The Johannine Exegesis of God: An Exploration into the Johannine Understanding of God* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 240 n.30.

realises what is now being offered to her from the ‘wells of salvation’ and, joyfully, she returns to tell—or perhaps evangelize—the people of the town. The Samaritan woman has been chosen, appointed, by Jesus to reveal his glory to her people and, on the strength of her preaching, many believe in him. She is a missionary, and her ‘preaching’ converts others whom she then leads out to encounter the very source of the good news (4:29–30).

When the disciples return they are ‘astonished that he was speaking to a woman’ (4:27) They have missed the point and Jesus admonishes them, ‘I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.’ (4:38) The Samaritan woman at the well had certainly worked for her harvest!

The Adulterous Woman

‘Righteousness and mercy will kiss each other.’ (Psalm 85:10)

This incident was not originally part of the Gospel of John and may not have been added until as late as the third century. It is, however, generally agreed among scholars to be a reliable and authentic story of the oral tradition. Its inclusion in the Gospel was an opportunity for the Early Church to give an example of dominical leniency as well as to emphasize, above all, that Jesus did not come to judge (*to condemn*) but to offer forgiveness to sinners. As we read later in John 8: 15, ‘You judge by human standards; I judge no one’.

Just as the plight of the sick man at the pool of Bethzatha (5:1–18), waiting for the arbitrary movement of the pool for a cure, highlighted a lack of compassion and mercy for sinners at the heart of Pharisaic religion, so too does the insistence of the blood-lusting mob on punishing the adulterous woman for her sin. This, perhaps, captures the very essence of this enigmatic and touching encounter with the adulterous woman. Jesus is replacing the harsh use (or abuse) of Mosaic law with a compassionate, just and merciful alternative. The adulterous woman is now the ‘poster girl’ for this new and radical dispensation. The fallen are redeemed. Righteousness and mercy have kissed. Condemnation is replaced by empowerment and hope: ‘Go your way, and from now on do not sin again’ (8:11). It is a message for all, not just for the adulterous woman.

***Condemnation
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Martha and Mary

‘Worship in spirit and truth.’ (John 4:24)



The Raising of Lazarus, by Sebastiano del Piombo, 1517–1519

According to Grayston, ‘It is not a matter of chance that Jesus works out the theological and spiritual consequences of death and resurrection with two women. His male disciples are too cautious, too easily reassured, and too heroic’ to be attentive or receptive to the signs he has already worked.¹¹ When Jesus finally arrives at Bethany, Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days, but Martha’s faith and belief in Jesus are still undeterred as she confesses, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died’ (11:21). Grayston suggests that this is both a statement of faith and also a reproach.¹² But others

tend to view it as a straightforward statement of her faith and belief in Jesus; in spite of the tragic death of her brother, Martha continues to believe: ‘even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him’ (11:22). According to John Marsh,

This statement shows Martha has already perceived that Jesus has a special relationship to the Father, and that no bounds can properly be set upon what that relationship may effect in the world over which God is Lord. Martha has seen a ray of impossible hope!¹³

The ensuing theological conversation—reminiscent of that which had taken place earlier in the narrative with the Samaritan woman at the well—about resurrection and Martha’s practical, Judaistic understanding of it (‘I

¹¹ Grayston, *Gospel of John*, 90.

¹² Grayston, *Gospel of John*, 90.

¹³ Marsh, *Gospel of St John*, 427.

know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day' [John 11:24]) allows Jesus to supersede her futuristic eschatology with his own and unique teaching of realised eschatology. Here the focus is no longer on the *last day* but on belief, *now* in this present moment, in Jesus who is both 'resurrection and life'. When Martha finally—if not completely—grasps this new and present reality she immediately responds again, characteristically, with faith: 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world' (11:27). Then, like the Samaritan woman, she immediately shares the good news, going back to call her sister Mary and tell her, 'The Teacher is here' (11:28).

It is, perhaps, significant that both sisters *approach* Jesus, or come into his presence. Mary repeats her sister's statement of faith, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died' (11:32). She prostrates herself at the feet of Jesus—the feet she will later anoint and wipe with her hair in a poignant prelude to Jesus' own death. Both sisters perceive that Jesus is the new and true focus of worship now. He is God among them. And we are reminded again of his conversation with the Samaritan woman when Jesus declares, 'Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem' (4:21).

Both Martha and Mary, in their raw and frank fidelity, stand in stark and dramatic contrast to Jesus' blundering and rumbustious male companions and followers—a contrast surely intended by the evangelist. The sisters' faith and belief in Jesus, tested by the death of their beloved brother, Lazarus, are nevertheless serenely constant and fearless in a quiet and understated way, even before they have witnessed Lazarus' remarkable and unlikely resurrection! Their faith is, more significantly, not founded on signs and wonders but on a true and intuitive realisation of the spiritual reality that 'The Teacher' is, as Martha acknowledges, 'the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world'.

Mary of Magdala

'I have called you by name, you are mine.' (Isaiah 43:1)

Mary of Magdala is the first person to witness the empty tomb and to encounter the resurrected Jesus.

Thus she combines in her own experience (the first to do so) the twin facets of what the Church has taken to be the basic experience of the resurrection. The tradition contained both an assertion of an empty

tomb and a recollection of a number of appearances of the risen Lord to his disciples. There seems to be something remarkably discerning in that a woman was made the first recipient of both these elements of the Church's faith.¹⁴

Just as the first woman, Eve, brought sin and, ultimately, death into the world, now another woman, Mary of Magdala, brings the good news of life and salvation back into a redeemed world. She has been chosen, called intimately and tenderly by her name to be the first witness of God's great salvific act for his people. But Mary also represents each one of us on our own personal and individual faith journey. We too, just like Mary of Magdala, have been called by our names into a unique and life-giving relationship with the Risen Lord.

According to Raymond Brown, women and men were equal in the Johannine community—perhaps symbolized in John's Gospel by the presence of a man and a woman at the foot of the cross. It appears to have been a community where there was no specific difference or division between male and female followers. But, as Brown concludes,

Even John has left us with one curious note of incompleteness: the disciples, surprised at Jesus' openness with a woman, still did not dare to ask him, 'What do you want of a woman?' (4:27). That may well be a question whose time has come in the Church of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

It is a question which still resonates today, over forty years later, in the continuing debate about the ministerial roles of women in the Church.

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¹⁴ Marsh, *Gospel of St John*, 632.

¹⁵ Brown, 'Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel', 696.