

“LORD, DO YOU NOT CARE?”

(Source: Levine, Amy-Jill. *Same Stories, Different Understandings: Jews and Catholics in Conversation*. Manila: Catholic Bible Association of Philippines (2004) pp.57-78)

We start by reading Luke 10:40. Do we still experience women asking this question? Who are the women who ask this question? Why is the question asked? Who are the women in our society who are recognised? Who could Mary typify in this story? There is an interpretation that Mary is liberated by sitting silently at Jesus' feet. Is this necessarily so? Levine makes the comment that at least the male disciples asked Jesus questions.

The subject of women in the Bible is not only overlooked but at times deliberately suppressed. Some both in the academy and the church regard it (the need to ask about women's role in the Bible) as a fad; while others see it as a tool for questioning church practice and belief. The study of “Jesus and Women” should be just as relevant to men as is the study of “Jesus and the Twelve” to women. What is wrong with questioning practice and belief as Martha does in this story? The Canaanite woman does so in John 11; so does the Samaritan woman and so do the disciples and Jesus and so should we. **Give some examples of these questions in the Gospel accounts and also ones we are asking or have been asked.**

Why are women unnoticed? History is typically presented by those who have power – who are these? Leadership and literacy are also related. Who are the writers of the New Testament? Where are our “Church Mothers” and “Matristics”? It would be a good exercise to take note of who the writers of the main textbooks in our schools, universities and seminaries are.

In the Gospel accounts we have numerous stories about women but their presence is rarely acknowledged. We look at possible reasons for this:

1. Most women are not named – a bent-over woman, a haemorrhaging woman, a dead twelve-year-old girl and a woman at the well in Samaria. Let us look at Mark's story – 14:9. John's story has Mary anoint Jesus' feet (Jn 12). This Mary is often associated with Mary Magdalene who in turn is associated with the “sinner” in Luke 7. Of course, the ‘sin’ is prostitution. What has happened to Mark's account of the woman who took a leadership role?
2. Namelessness has another effect: it creates an absence of reference in encyclopaedias, dictionaries and indices.
3. Women in the Gospel accounts do not have a consistent storyline. They are rather like guest stars on TV programmes: show up, make a strong impression and disappear. Ongoing characters grab our attention more – they show up more often. **Can we think of any examples of both these types of characters in the Gospel accounts?**
4. When we do notice women who appear more than once, such as Virgin Mary, do we not sufficiently acknowledge their influence?
5. Women have limited value in terms of reader identification. **Examples of this? True?** If only women identify with the women characters, then men are missing out on profound Gospel lessons. If women cannot identify with Jesus, or can only identify with him in his suffering but not in his leadership, then everyone loses.
6. Only recently has the subject of women been addressed by the academy, and only seven years ago did we see the publication of the first volume of the Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writing Series (the Old Testament sister series is at least 14 years old). Academics could not get hired or receive tenure when writing on women – ‘not serious enough’.
7. Most problematic: the study of Jesus and women was considered a dangerous subject. Some professors even lost their jobs when they took up the subject and drew their conclusions. Examples?

The task to care seriously about the women of the Gospels is for everyone, men and women, clergy and laity and Jews as well. Levine says her study of the women in the Christian texts has inspired her – how much more should Christians not undertake this study and be inspired too.

JESUS AND JUDAISM

When Christians began in the 1970s to reread the stories of women in the Gospels, so as to recover women's history, as well as to find role models, they brought certain presuppositions with them because of their ignorance of especially, Judaism. They presumed that Jesus sought to liberate women from whatever religious constraints barred them from full equality with men. Some suspected that the Catholic Church had suppressed accounts of women's leadership roles; some also presumed that the marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene was also suppressed. Some did and still do believe that first-century Judaism epitomized misogyny and so Jewish women needed Jesus' help. All three views are wrong. Jesus does not free women from "religious constraints" since they were not in general constrained: rather, he frees them from sickness and solitude. He was not married to Mary Magdalene but was a celibate. Finally, first-century Judaism, as well as Jesus, the first century Jew, was patriarchal, but Jewish women had substantial freedom in both Jewish society and in the Jesus movement within it.

Levine then picks up on a number of misconceptions that we Christians had or have about Jews and points out the historical or interpretation errors – pages 64-74. (If you would like to pursue this, I have given the reference to her book above.)

JESUS AND WOMEN

The one place where Jesus was socially disruptive on the question of male and female roles was in his sexual ethics. Jesus forbade divorce and favoured celibacy. Let us read: Mark 10:11-12. Paul reinforces this point in 1Cor 7:10 but then goes on to modify what he has said. Matthew also modifies the commandment (Mt 5:32). Jesus made an originally radical law. Why did Jesus forbid divorce and remarriage? It is not because of a societal problem. He tells us himself in Mt 19:4-5. This is based on a biblical model. Levine goes on to explain that to become one flesh is to become one family; it does not necessarily mean to have sexual intercourse. One can be both married and celibate. Not all Jews married and certainly not all Jews in the late Second Temple period, as the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo and rabbinic documents attest.

Let us look at Jesus' followers with regard to their marital state. Some references are: Mk 5:40, Mt 19:27-29, 1Cor 9:5, Lk 18:20, 20:35-36, 23:29 and Mt 23:30.

The people in Jesus' community are to establish a new family based on loyalty to each other rather than on the marriage contract or on biology. This would have a special appeal to those outside of traditional families: single women, prostitutes and slaves.

Jesus as well as Paul also acknowledged that celibacy was a spiritual gift (Mt 19; 1Cor 7) and he did attend that wedding at Cana. In other words he offered two models of behaviour, procreation and celibacy, and two models of family structure: the household and the family of faith.

When we open our eyes to the centrality of women in Jesus' family of faith, we can recover a lost part of Christian history, prevent anti-Jewish interpretations and find role models for both men and women. Remembering and embracing those women of the past, those mothers and sisters, bring us one step closer to the family of faith and so to the Kingdom of God where "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for (we shall) all be one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

What is our pastoral response in the light of some or all of the above?

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