

JESUS WAS A FEMINIST

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Definition of terms; By *Jesus* is meant the historical person who lived in Palestine two thousand years ago, whom Christians traditionally acknowledge as Lord and Saviour, and whom they should "imitate" as much as possible. By a *feminist* is meant a person who is in favour of, and who promotes the equality of women with men, a person who advocates and practices treating women primarily as human persons (as men are so treated) and willingly contravenes social customs in so acting.

To prove the thesis it must be demonstrated that, so far as we can tell, Jesus neither said nor did anything which would indicate that he advocated treating women as intrinsically inferior to men, but that on the contrary he said and did things which indicated that he thought of women as the equals of men, and that in the process he willingly violated pertinent social mores.

The negative portion of the argument can be documented quite simply by reading through the four gospels. Nowhere does Jesus treat women as "inferior beings". In fact, Jesus clearly felt especially sent to the typical classes of "inferior beings", such as the poor, the lame, the sinner - and women - to call them all to the freedom and equality of the Kingdom of God. But there are two factors which raise this negative result exponentially in its significance: the status of women in Palestine at the time of Jesus, and the nature of the gospels. Both need to be recalled here in some detail, particularly the former.

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN PALESTINE

The status of women in Palestine during the time of Jesus was very decidedly that of an inferior. Despite the fact that there were several heroines recorded in the Scriptures, according to most rabbinic customs of Jesus' time - and long after - women were not allowed to study the Scriptures (Torah). One first-century rabbi, Eliezer, put the point sharply: "Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman ... Whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her lasciviousness".

In the vitally religious area of prayer women were so little thought of as not to be given obligations of the same seriousness as men. For example, women, along with children and slaves, were not obliged to recite the *Schema*, the morning prayer, nor prayers at meals. In fact, the Talmud states: "Let a curse come upon the man who (must needs have) his wife or children say grace for him". Moreover, in the daily prayers of Jews there was a threefold thanksgiving:

"Praised be God that he has not created me a gentile; praised be God that he has not created me a woman; praised be God that he has not created me an ignorant man". (It was obviously a version of this rabbinic prayer that Paul controverted in his letter to the Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus").

Besides the disabilities women suffered in the areas of prayer and worship there were many others in the private and public forums of society. As one Scripture scholar, Peter Ketter, noted: "A rabbi regarded it as beneath his dignity, as indeed positively disreputable, to speak to a woman in public. The 'Proverbs of the Fathers' contain the injunction: 'Speak not much with a woman'. Since a man's own wife is meant here, how much more does not this apply to the wife of another? The wise men say: 'Who speaks much with a woman draws down misfortune on himself, neglects the words of the law, and finally earns hell ...' If it were merely the too free intercourse of the sexes which was being warned against, this would signify nothing derogatory to woman. But since the rabbi may not speak even to his own wife, daughter or sister in the street, then only male arrogance can be the motive. Intercourse with low or uneducated company is warned against in exactly the same terms. One is not so much as to greet a woman". In addition, save in the rarest instances, women were not allowed to bear witness in a court of law. Some Jewish thinkers, as for example, Philo, a contemporary of Jesus, thought women ought not to leave their households except to go to the synagogue (and that only at a time when most of the other people would be at home); girls ought even not cross the threshold that separated the male and female apartments of the household.

In general, the attitude toward women was epitomized in the institutions and customs surrounding marriage. For the most part the function of women was thought rather exclusively in terms of child-bearing and rearing; women were almost always under the tutelage of a man, either the father or husband, or if a widow, the dead husband's brother. Polygamy - in the sense of having several wives, but *not* in the sense of having several husbands - was legal among Jews at the time of Jesus, although probably not heavily practiced. Moreover, divorce of

a wife was very easily obtained by the husband - he merely had to give her a writ of divorce. Women in Palestine, on the other hand, were not allowed to divorce their husbands.

Rabbinic sayings about women also provide an insight into the attitude toward women: "It is well for those whose children are male, but ill for those whose children are female ... At the birth of a boy all are joyful, but at the birth of a girl all are sad ... When a boy comes into the world, peace comes into the world; when a girl comes, nothing comes ... Even the most virtuous of women is a witch ... Our teachers have said: "Four qualities are evident in women: They are greedy at their food, eager to gossip, lazy and jealous".

The condition of women in Palestinian Judaism was bleak.

THE NATURE OF THE GOSPELS

The gospels, of course, are not the straight factual reports of eye-witnesses of the events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth as one might find in the columns of the *New York Times* or the pages of a critical biography. Rather, they are four different faith statements reflecting at least four primitive Christian communities who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Lord, and Saviour of the world. They were composed from a variety of sources, written and oral, over a period of time and in response to certain needs felt in the communities and individuals at the time, consequently they are many-layered. Since the gospel writer-editors were not twentieth-century critical historians they were not particularly intent on recording *ipsissima verba Christi*, nor were they concerned to winnow out all of their own cultural biases and assumptions; indeed, it is doubtful they were particularly conscious of them.

This modern critical understanding of the gospels, of course, does not impugn the historical character of the gospels; it merely describes the type of historical documents they are so their historical significance can more accurately be evaluated. Its religious value lies in the fact that modern Christians are thereby helped to know much more precisely what Jesus meant by certain statements and actions as they are reported by the first Christian communities in the gospels. With this new knowledge of the nature of the gospels it is easier to make the vital distinction between the religious truth that is to be handed on and the time-conditioned categories and customs involved in expressing it.

When the fact that no negative attitudes by Jesus toward women are portrayed in the gospels is set side by side with the recently discerned "communal faith-statement" understanding of the nature of the gospels, the importance of the former is vastly enhanced. For whatever Jesus said or did comes to us only through lens of the first Christians. If there were no

very special religious significance in a particular concept or custom we would expect that current concept or custom to be reflected by Jesus. The fact that the overwhelmingly negative attitude toward women in Palestine did not come through the primitive Christian communal lens by itself underscores the clearly great religious importance Jesus attached to his positive attitude - his feminist attitude - toward women; feminism, that is, personalism extended to women, is a constitutive part of the Gospel, the Good News, of Jesus.

WOMEN DISCIPLES OF JESUS

One of the first things noticed in the gospels about Jesus' attitude toward women is that he taught them the Gospel, the meaning of the Scriptures, and religious truths in general. When it is recalled that in Judaism it was considered improper, and even "obscene" to teach women the Scriptures, this action of Jesus was an extraordinary, deliberate decision to break with a custom invidious to women. Moreover, women became disciples of Jesus not only in the sense of learning from him, but also in the sense of following him in his travels and ministering to him. A number of women, married and unmarried, were regular followers of Jesus. In Luke 8:1 ff. several are mentioned by name in the same sentence with the Twelve: "He made his way through towns and villages preaching and proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom of God. With him went the Twelve, as well as certain women ... who provided for them out of their own resources". (Cf. Mk. 15:40f. The Greek word translated here as "provided for" and in Mark as "ministered to" is *diakonoun*, the same basic word as "deacon"; indeed, apparently the tasks of the deacons in early Christianity were much the same as these women undertook). The significance of this phenomenon of women following Jesus about, learning from and ministering to him, can be properly appreciated when it is recalled that not only were women not to read or study the Scriptures, but in the more observant settings they were not even to leave their household, whether as a daughter, a sole wife, or a member of a harem.

WOMEN AS SEX OBJECTS

There are of course numerous occasions recorded in the gospels where women are treated by various men as second-class citizens. There are also situations where women were treated by others not at all as persons but as sex objects, and it was expected that Jesus would do the same. The expectations were disappointed. One such occasion occurred when Jesus was invited to dinner at the house of a sceptical Pharisee (Lk. 7:36 ff.) and a woman of ill repute entered and washed Jesus' feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair and anointed them. The Pharisee saw her solely as an evil sexual

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creature: "The Pharisee ... said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who this woman is who is touching him and what a bad name she has'. But Jesus deliberately rejected this approach to the woman as a sex object. He rebuked the Pharisee and spoke solely of the woman's human, spiritual, actions; he spoke of her love, her unlove, that is, her sins, of her being forgiven, and her faith. Jesus then addressed her (it was not "proper" to speak to women in public, especially, "improper" women) as a human person: "Your sins are forgiven ... Your faith has saved you; go in peace".

A similar situation occurred when the scribes and Pharisees used a woman reduced entirely to a sex object to set a legal trap for Jesus. It is difficult to imagine a more callous use of a human person than the "adulterous" woman was put to by the enemies of Jesus. First, she was surprised in the intimate act of sexual intercourse (quite possibly a trap was set up ahead of time by the suspicious husband), and then dragged before the scribes and Pharisees, and then by them before an even larger crowd that Jesus was instructing: "making her stand in full view of everybody". They told Jesus that she had been caught in the very act of committing adultery and that Moses had commanded that such women be stoned to death. (Dt. 22:22 ff.) "What have you to say?" The trap was partly that if Jesus said yes to stoning he would be violating the Roman law, which reserved capital punishment, and if he said no, he would appear to contravene Mosaic law. It could also partly have been to place Jesus' reputation for kindness toward, and championing the cause of women in opposition to the law and the condemnation of sin. Jesus of course eluded their snares by refusing to become entangled in legalisms and abstractions. Rather, he dealt with both the accusers and the accused directly as spiritual, ethical, human persons. He spoke directly to the accusers in the context of their own personal ethical conduct: "If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." To the accused woman he likewise spoke directly with compassion, but without approving her conduct: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord". And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again".

(One detail of this encounter provides the basis for a short excursus related to the status of women. The Pharisees stated that the woman had been caught in the act of adultery and according to the Law of Moses was therefore to be stoned to death. Since the type of execution mentioned was stoning the

woman must have been a "virgin betrothed", as referred to in Deut. 22:23 f. There provision is made for the stoning of *both* the man and the woman, although in the gospel story only the woman is brought forward. However, the reason given for why the man ought to be stoned was not because he had violated the woman, or God's law, but: "because he had violated the wife of his neighbour". It was the injury of the man by misusing his property - wife - that was the great evil).

JESUS' REJECTION OF THE BLOOD TABOO

All three of the synoptic gospels insert into the middle of the account of the raising from the dead of Jairus' daughter the story of the curing of the woman who had an issue of blood for twelve years (Mt. 9:20ff; Mk. 4:25ff.; Lk. 8:43ff.). The especially touching thing about this story is that the affected woman was so reluctant to project herself into public attention that she, "said to herself, 'If, only I touch his garment, I shall be made well' ". Her shyness was not because she came from the poor, lower classes, for Mark pointed out that over the twelve years she had been to many physicians - with no success - on whom she had spent all her money. It was probably because for twelve years, as a woman with a flow of blood, she was constantly ritually unclean (Lv. 15:19 ff.), which not only made her incapable of participating in any cultic action and made her in some sense "displeasing to God", but also rendered anyone and anything she touched (or anyone who touched what she had touched!) similarly unclean. (Here is the basis for the Catholic Church not allowing women in the sanctuary during Mass - she might be menstruating and hence unclean). The sense of degradation and contagion that her "womanly weakness" worked upon her over the twelve years doubtless was oppressive in the extreme. This would have been especially so when a religious teacher, a rabbi, was involved. But not only does Jesus' power heal her, one of many of Jesus' acts of compassion on the downtrodden and afflicted, often including women, but Jesus also makes a great to-do about the event, calling extraordinary attention to the publicity-shy woman: "And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone forth from him, immediately turned about in the crowd, and said, 'Who touched my garments?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, 'Who touched me?' And he looked around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had been done to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease'. It seems clear that Jesus wanted to call attention to the fact that he did not shrink from the ritual uncleanness incurred from being touched by the "unclean" woman (on several occasions Jesus rejected the notion of ritual

uncleanness) and by immediate implication rejected the "uncleanness" of a woman who had a flow of blood, menstruous or continual. Jesus apparently, placed a greater importance on the dramatic making of this point, both to the afflicted woman herself and the crowd, than he did on avoiding the temporary psychological discomfort of the embarrassed woman, which in light of Jesus' extraordinary concern to alleviate the pain of the afflicted, meant he placed a great weight on the teaching of this lesson on the dignity of women.

JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

On another occasion Jesus again deliberately violated the then common case concerning men's relationship to women. It is recorded in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob (John 4:5 ff.). Jesus was waiting at the well outside of the village while his disciples were off getting food, and a Samaritan woman approached the well to draw water. Normally a Jew would not address a Samaritan, as the woman pointed out: "Jews, in fact, do not associate with Samaritans". But also normally a man would not speak to a woman in public (doubly so in the case of a rabbi). However, Jesus startled the woman by initiating a conversation. The woman was aware that on both counts, her being a Samaritan and being a woman, Jesus' action was out of the ordinary for she replied: "how is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" As hated as the Samaritans were by the Jews, it is nevertheless clear that Jesus' speaking with a woman was considered a much more flagrant breach of conduct than his speaking with a Samaritan, for John related: "His disciples returned, and were surprised to find him speaking to a woman, though none of them asked, 'What do you want from her?' or, 'Why are you talking to her?' ". However, Jesus' bridging of the gap of inequality between men and women continued further, for in the conversation with the woman he revealed himself in a straightforward fashion as the Messiah for the first time: "The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' ... Jesus said to her, 'I who speak to you am he.'".

Just as when Jesus revealed himself to Martha as "the resurrection" and to Mary as the "risen one" and bade her to bear witness to the apostles, Jesus here also revealed himself in one of his key roles, as Messiah, to a woman - who immediately bore witness to the fact to her fellow villagers. (It is interesting to note that apparently the testimony of women carried greater weight among the Samaritans than the Jews, for the villagers came out to see Jesus: "Many Samaritans of that town believed in him on the strength of the woman's testimony ...". It would seem that John the gospel writer deliberately highlighted this contrast in the way he wrote about this event, and also that he clearly wished to reinforce thereby Jesus' stress on the equal dignity of women).

One other point should be noted in connection

with this story. As the crowd of Samaritans was walking out to see Jesus, Jesus was speaking to his disciples about the fields being ready for the harvest and how he was sending them to reap what others had sown. He was clearly speaking of the souls of men, and most probably was referring directly to the approaching Samaritans. Such exegesis is standard. It is also rather standard to refer to others in general and only Jesus in particular as having been the sowers whose harvest the apostles were about to reap (e.g. in the Jerusalem Bible). But it would seem that the evangelist also meant to specifically include the Samaritan woman among those sowers for immediately after he recorded Jesus' statement to the disciples about their reaping what others had sown he added the above mentioned verse: "Many Samaritans of that town had believed in him on the strength of the woman's testimony ...".

MARRIAGE AND THE DIGNITY OF WOMAN

One of the most important stands of Jesus in relation to the dignity of women was his position on marriage. His unpopular attitude toward marriage (cf. Mt. 19:10: "The disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry'.") presupposed a feminist view of women; they had rights and responsibilities equal to men. It was quite possible in Jewish law for men to have more than one wife (this was probably not frequently the case in Jesus' time, but there are recorded instances, e.g. Herod, Josephus), though the reverse was not possible. Divorce, of course, also was a simple matter, to be initiated only by the man. In both situations women were basically chattel to be collected or dismissed as the man was able and wished to; the double moral standard was flagrantly apparent. Jesus rejected both by insisting on monogamy and the elimination of divorce: both the man and the woman were to have the same rights and responsibilities in their relationship toward each other (cf. Mk. 10:2 ff.; Mt. 19:3 ff.). This stance of Jesus was one of the few that was rather thoroughly assimilated by the Christian Church (in fact, often in an over-rigid way concerning divorce - but, how to understand the ethical prescriptions of Jesus is another article), doubtless in part because it was reinforced by various sociological conditions and other historical accidents, such as the then current strength in the Greek world of the stoic philosophy. However, the notion of equal rights and responsibilities was not extended very far within the Christian marriage. The general role of women was *Kirche, Kinder, Küche* - and only a suppliant's role in the first

THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE FOR WOMEN

However, Jesus clearly did not think of woman's role in such restricted terms; she was not to be limited to being *only* a housekeeper. Jesus quite directly rejected the stereotype that the proper place of all women is "in the home", during a visit to the

house of Martha and Mary (Lk. 10:38 ff.). Martha took the typical woman's role: "Martha was distracted with much serving". Mary, however, took the supposedly "male" role: she "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching". Martha apparently thought Mary was out of place in choosing the role of the "intellectual", for she complained to Jesus. But Jesus' response was a refusal to force all women into the stereotype; he treated Mary first of all as a person (whose highest faculty is the intellect, the spirit) who was allowed to set her own priorities, and in this instance had "chosen the better part". And Jesus applauded her: "it is not to be taken from her". Again, when one recalls the Palestinian restriction on women studying the Scriptures or studying with rabbis, that is, engaging in the intellectual life or acquiring any "religious authority", it is difficult to imagine how Jesus could possibly have been clearer in his insistence that women were called to the intellectual, the spiritual life just as were men.

There is at least one other instance recorded in the gospels when Jesus uttered much the same message (Lk. 11:27f.). One day as Jesus was preaching a woman from the crowd apparently was very deeply impressed and, perhaps imagining how happy she would be to have such a son, raised her voice to pay Jesus a compliment. She did so by referring to his mother, and did so in a way that was probably not untypical at that time and place. But her image of a woman was sexually reductionist in the extreme (one that largely persists to the present): female genitals and breasts. "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!" Although this was obviously meant as a compliment, and although it was even uttered by a woman, Jesus clearly felt it necessary to reject this "baby-machine" image of women and insist again on the personhood, the intellectual and moral faculties, being primary for all: "But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!'" Looking at this text it is difficult to see how the primary point could be anything substantially other than this. Luke and the tradition and Christian communities he depended on must also have been quite clear about the sexual significance of this event. Otherwise, why would he (and they) have kept and included such a small event from all the years of Jesus public life? It was not retained *merely* because Jesus said blessed are those who hear and keep God's word, but because that was stressed by Jesus as being primary in comparison to a woman's sexuality. Luke, however, seems to have had a discernment here and elsewhere concerning what Jesus was about in the question of the status of women that has not been shared by subsequent Christians (nor apparently by many of his fellow Christians), for in the explanation of this passage Christians for two thousand years did not see its plain meaning - doubtless because of unconscious presuppositions about the status of women inculcated by their cultural milieu.

In many ways Jesus strove to communicate the notion of the equal dignity of women. In one sense that effort was capped by his parable of the woman who found the lost coin (Lk. 15:8ff.), for here Jesus projected God in the image of a woman! Luke recorded that the despised tax-collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus, and consequently the Pharisees and scribes complained. Jesus, therefore, related three parables in a row, all of which depicted God's being deeply concerned for that which was lost. The first story was of the shepherd who left the ninety-nine sheep to seek the one lost - the shepherd is God. The third parable is of the prodigal son - the father is God. The second story is of the woman who sought the lost coin - the woman is God! Jesus did not shrink from the notion of God as feminine. In fact, it would appear that Jesus included this womanly image of God quite deliberately at this point for the scribes and Pharisees were among those who most of all denigrated women - just as they did the "tax collectors and sinners".

(There have been some instances in Christian history when the Holy Spirit has been associated with a feminine character, as, for example, in the Syrian *Didascalia* where, in speaking of various offices in the Church, it states: "the Deaconess however should be honoured by you as the image of the Holy Spirit". It would make an interesting investigation to see if these images of God presented here by Luke were ever used in a trinitarian manner - thereby giving the Holy Spirit a feminine image. A negative result to the investigation would be as significant as a positive one, for this passage would seem to be particularly apt for trinitarian interpretation: the prodigal son's father is God the Father (this interpretation has in fact been quite common in Christian history); since Jesus elsewhere identified himself as the Good Shepherd, the shepherd seeking the lost sheep is Jesus, the Son (this standard interpretation is reflected in, among other things, the often-seen picture of Jesus carrying the lost sheep on his shoulders); the woman who sought the lost coin should "logically" be the Holy Spirit. If such an interpretation has existed, it surely has not been common. Should such lack of "logic" be attributed to the general cultural denigration of women or the abhorrence of pagan goddesses - although Christian abhorrence of pagan gods did not result in a Christian rejection of a male image of God?)

CONCLUSION

From this evidence it should be clear that Jesus vigorously promoted the dignity and equality of women in the midst of a very male dominated society; Jesus was a feminist, and a very radical one. Can his followers attempt to be anything less - *De Imitatione Christi?*

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