

# Women in the Gospels

## by Irene Brennan

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At the present time women are becoming more and more integrated into the public and professional spheres; they are taking posts of responsibility not only within the home, but outside of it, where they are being accepted not just as feminists but as members of the community with particular skills and aptitudes, which are not, moreover, merely 'womanly' skills and aptitudes. In many professional situations it is now no longer sensible to ask whether the applicant for a post is a man or a woman; the only criteria applied are those of professional competence. This change within the secular society is not reflected within Church communities. Women are systematically discriminated against; the most crude and powerful symbol of this is their exclusion from the sanctuary. Now, it is argued that 'tradition' supports this discrimination and any attack on it is an attack on the living and holy tradition of the Church, and moreover that woman's place is sharply and strictly defined in scripture. We shall not be able to examine both of these objections, but must content ourselves with a partial examination of the second. Partial because we shall only look at the four Gospels and not at the Old Testament or the other writings of the New Testament. Also much of the work that has been done on this question is based on a study of the role of the Mother of God, but very little has been attempted in the study of the roles of other women mentioned in the Gospel narratives. Therefore, we shall concentrate on this area, hoping to discuss the unique and all-important place of the Mother of God later. Finally we should make clear that in spite of the content, this article is not a statement of a merely 'feminist' point of view. Issues will be raised that go far beyond the single problem of the status of women; rather this problem should be seen as one of many which present a moral challenge to the Church and which are all inter-related. Sexual discrimination is only one form of discrimination which may afflict a 'Christian' community.

Although women in Old Testament times had a certain amount of freedom and were allowed to play a part in the religious life of the community, with the development of rabbinical theology woman's role became more and more limited and her position within the community became more and more circumscribed. It was at this time that the prayer, offered still by the devout orthodox Jew, found its way into the morning service: 'I thank Thee, O Lord, that Thou hast not made me a woman.'<sup>1</sup> It is clear that women were not thought to form an integral part of the worshipping community; the worship of God was primarily the responsibility of men, not women, who had to remain behind a screen in the synagogue and who were confined to a separate court in the Temple. They were not allowed

<sup>1</sup>Orthodox Jewish Prayer Book. Quoted in *Rabbinic Theology*, edited by C. G. Montifiore and H. Loewe (London, 1938), p. 507.

to offer sacrifice except for ritual purification and the animals they offered were not blessed by the laying on of hands,<sup>1</sup> for women were seen as necessary instruments of procreation, yet still perpetuating the temptation Eve offered Adam.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, they formed an underprivileged and often despised section of the community (a position not peculiar to the Jewish women of the time; in all middle-eastern countries of that time, women occupied a roughly similar place).

We know that Jesus saw his mission as one to preach the gospel to the poor (Matt. 11, 5), to those who laboured under heavy burdens (Matt. 12, 27), and that he himself was identified with the poor and despised (Is. 53, 2–5). What then was his attitude towards women? It is not easy for us to enter into the situation of the times; from our point of view, Jesus' attitude and behaviour towards women is only what we might expect. We forget that Jewish society was very different from our own and that Jesus' behaviour with regard to women very often ran counter to accepted social and religious conventions. He challenged these, not only by what he said but also by what he did.

#### *Choosing the better part*

It is evident that women were not only tolerated on the fringe of the apostolic circle, as those 'who ministered out of their substance', but were admitted to the group of those who were taught the 'secrets of the Kingdom'. Jesus had a small group of disciples to whom he gave special revelation and instruction (Matt. 13, 11–17); they were those who were to continue his work and who would form the nucleus of the Church community. At that time, every man who was accepted as a rabbi, or someone having spiritual authority, had a circle of disciples to whom he taught the Torah and the 'oral law', i.e. the interpretation and application of the Torah; these disciples were said to 'sit at the feet' of their master and teacher. Any man could study in this way, indeed was encouraged to do so, but it was expressly forbidden to teach women the oral law.<sup>3</sup> It was thought that they were not capable of rational judgment and, perhaps more importantly, the study of the oral law might permit them to pass judgment in any case of a supposed transgression of the law. Therefore the study of the oral law was seen not only as theoretical instruction, but as a preparation for the adoption of a role of spiritual and moral authority within the community.<sup>4</sup> Women, however, although forbidden to study the law were allowed to read the scriptures. In the famous story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10, 38 ff.) we find that Jesus defends Mary's place in the group of disciples whom he was teaching, that is, her place within the 'rabbinical circle', and, more-

<sup>1</sup>G. F. Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge, 1927), p. 130.

<sup>2</sup>See Timothy 1, 13–15, where Paul's rabbinic training is apparent.

<sup>3</sup>*Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 12, p. 157. (Also: 'May the words of Torah be burned, they should not be handed over to women', J. Sota, 10a.8, quoted *Theological Dictionary*, p. 781.)

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. 10, p. 294.

over, he states that as she has chosen the better part, it shall not be taken away from her. Martha had protested, and demanded that Mary should help her with the serving, the only way in which a woman could be present at a meeting of this sort without offending against rabbinic precepts. When Jesus quietly chides Martha for her insistence that Mary accept the traditional woman's role, he makes it clear that he himself admits Mary into full discipleship, regardless of her sex. In so doing Christ admits a woman to an equal place with men in that preparation which will enable her to be actively engaged in the establishment of the Kingdom. The importance of Jesus' teaching and its implications must have been clear to those present and to the early Church. Unfortunately this passage has too often been given a gloss which ignores its more radical aspects. It would seem that Jesus is not making a point primarily about the contemplative life, but rather about the status of women in the Church community.<sup>1</sup>

*Neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem*

The right and duty of every male Jew to learn, teach and help administer the Law did not, of course, infringe upon the function of the priests which was to offer sacrifice in the Temple at Jerusalem and to supervise Temple administration. Women were confined to an outer court of the Temple and were not allowed to worship within the inner courts; their court was found outside of the Temple proper, together with the court of the Gentiles. As far as liturgical worship was concerned, they had no real part in the life of the worshipping community. Their exclusion can no doubt be partly explained as the operation of an ancient blood taboo and by the fear of the local Canaanite religions which had female goddesses, such as Aneth, the goddess of the religion of Baal.<sup>2</sup> Separation was the principle upon which Temple worship was founded; it emphasized the distinction between man and God, Jew and Gentile, men and women, priests and people. These various separations were symbolized by the different courts of the Temple and by the jealously guarded emptiness of the Holy of Holies, which was only entered when sacrifice was to be performed. Jesus' attitude towards the Temple is very important, because it must reflect his views on the nature of the worshipping community. We find it most clearly expressed in his conversation with a woman, the Samaritan at the well (John 4).

The passage is a surprising one in a number of ways. Firstly, Jesus, as a Jewish religious teacher, should have had only the most limited contact with the Samaritans, for the Jews regarded the Samaritans as schismatic. Samaritans and Jews differed about the right place of Temple worship; the Jews worshipping in Jerusalem, the Samaritans on Mount Garizim. They disliked and feared one another and were

<sup>1</sup>This does not mean, of course, that the inner circle of disciples resembled in every other respect a rabbinic circle, rather that it should be seen in this context.

<sup>2</sup>G. H. Gordon, *Before the Bible* (London, 1962), pp. 184–95.

bidden by their respective religious leaders to have only the most minimal and necessary dealings with members of the other people. Jesus indirectly attacked this prejudice a number of times (e.g. Luke 10, 30 ff.); on this occasion he not only enters into conversation with a Samaritan, but with a Samaritan woman. No self-respecting Jew, still less a religious teacher, would talk in public with a woman,<sup>1</sup> so we can understand the woman's surprise—'Why speakest thou with me?'—and that of the disciples who were astonished but did not dare question Jesus about it. (The accepted social convention, that a man should not speak to a woman in public, was adopted in such an extreme form by certain Pharisees that they were known as the 'bruised and bleeding Pharisees'. These men refused to look about them for fear of looking upon a woman and the subsequent injuries they sustained were thought to be evidence of extraordinary piety.)<sup>2</sup> Jesus shows none of this 'pious' fear in his dealings with women and this incident is no exception. Christ not only makes the socially permissible request for water, but goes on to engage the woman in conversation where he not only discusses the details of her private life but, more importantly, reveals himself as the Messiah, and teaches her that the true worship of God is worship 'in spirit and truth' and goes beyond the confines and demands of Jewish Temple worship and the religion of the Samaritans. Not only is the teaching important but so is the manner in which it is given. Christ is preaching universalism, and he illustrates this by giving the teaching to someone who is considered at least partially separated from the House of Israel. Moreover, the recipient is a woman, who would normally be considered unfit to engage in theological discussion. The separations, so rigorously maintained in Temple worship, are broken down; Jesus appeals in her to that common humanity they both share, which enables her to worship 'in spirit and truth', i.e. with both her heart and her intelligence. In this true adoration of God, distinctions of race and sex are unimportant; so, also, is the place of worship. Jesus then uses her as an apostle (one who is sent) to her fellow Samaritans.

#### *Child-bearing, Virginity and Divorce*

We learn from the Gospels that on many of the attitudes and practices which regulated the life of Jewish women, Jesus takes a stand. This is not always clear to us, for we are not always aware of the complexity of the social relationships. For example, we can look at this passage which has been given different glosses by different commentators; the woman who, 'lifting up her voice cried "Blessed is the womb that bore thee and the paps that gave thee suck",' was expressing the common attitude that a woman's value lay in child-bearing and having worthy sons. Jesus corrects her: 'Nay, rather, blessed is that one who hears the word of God and keeps it' (Luke

<sup>1</sup>cf. R. Jose ben Johnan, quoted in *Judaism*, p. 269.

<sup>2</sup>W. Barclay, *Commentary on St Matthew's Gospel* (Edinburgh, 1965), Vol. II, p. 313.

11, 27) for he wishes to stress those qualities which engender happiness for both men and women, and in doing this he implicitly denies that woman's role or even her most important function is child-bearing. Both men and women are happy, or blessed, when doing the will of God. In the dispute with the Saducees about the Resurrection a similar point is made, for Christ paints a picture of a heaven where none marry or are given in marriage, but are like the 'angels of God', so the unfortunate woman who has married seven husbands, according to the Levirate law, is no longer thought of as the property of this or that man, but has her own life, a full human life, in God (Luke 20, 28–38).

Christ's teaching on the value of virginity betrays another radical break with traditional theology and the current prejudices of the time. Marriage was presented as a duty to young men and women and both virginity and barrenness were despised. However, it had been accepted among certain sects, such as the Essenes, that those members who were most committed to the service of God should be celibate. This would seem to have been demanded only of men as, in any case, women were not fully admitted to the brotherhood, and adopted for pragmatic reasons, because it was believed that the last days were at hand and these would be preceded by a time of warfare; in such a situation it would be wiser to avoid marriage.<sup>1</sup> Christ's statements seem to hint at such a background of belief. However, if we couple these with the position outlined in the discussion with the Saducees which we have described above they take on a significance which cannot be explained purely in terms of an essenic context. The doctrine on virginity is not a mere attempt to adopt an expedient position in a time of crisis, it reflects Jesus' preoccupation that men and women should be freed from whatever binds them and narrows their vision. In this case it is the overwhelming social pressures to marry and have children. The attack is mounted not against marriage, but against a conformist and narrow view of man's duties in life. This liberating view of man's duties in society was necessarily more important for women than men in so far as they were more oppressed by the current social values and institutions.

On the other hand, Jesus was concerned to set before his disciples a high ideal of marriage which he describes in the vivid phrase that marriage partners become 'two in one flesh' (Matt. 19, 4–9). Some of the rabbis had also preached a doctrine of marriage which demanded great fidelity of both partners;<sup>2</sup> however, the accepted ideal was far from the common practice. As woman's status had become lower during rabbinic times, so divorce had increased until conditions within Judaism were almost as lax as in other contemporary societies.<sup>3</sup> When Jesus attacks divorce, his words should be taken as a condemnation of the prevalent moral laxity, which

<sup>1</sup>cf. Matt. 24, 19; Luke 21, 23.

<sup>2</sup>1431 and 1436 *Rabbinic Anthology*.

<sup>3</sup>*Theological Dictionary*, p. 783.

constituted a grave social evil, and also as a defence of the honour and integrity of women who, of course, were the victims of a social code which made divorce easy for men but not for women, and which had a double standard for men and women in sexual matters. For example, rabbis of the school of Hillel argued that a husband could put away his wife for such frivolous reasons as that she failed to salt his food, or ceased to please him by her physical appearance.<sup>1</sup> In such a situation, it is not surprising to find Christ upholding a view of marriage as an enduring bond, and a union which makes 'two in one flesh'. Jesus sees woman not as a possession, gained by marriage, but as someone who shares the same physical existence as her husband; just as we do not consider our body a tool or possession that we can set aside at will, so a wife is united to her husband in an intimate and enduring relationship. Moreover, Jesus states that man and wife are 'two in one flesh'; although they share a common physical existence they are not submerged in one another; each preserves his personality. There could scarcely be a clearer statement of the fundamental unity of man and wife in marriage and the seriousness of their union.

The whole question of ritual defilement is clearly raised in the passage describing the cure of the woman with an issue of blood, who suffered not only her physical illness but its painful social consequences (Luke 8, 43–48). Any woman with an issue of blood was considered ritually unclean and was therefore forbidden to leave her house or have intercourse with her husband;<sup>2</sup> everyone she touched was ritually defiled, so she was socially isolated. The woman whom Jesus cured should not have been in the crowd at all, for she was ritually defiling everyone she touched and, we are told, the press was very great. In touching Jesus she defiled him also. Her extreme fear when she was discovered is only too understandable; she could become an object of severe social censure in a rough, pushing crowd. Jesus, however, not only heals her but he tells her to 'Go, in safety'.<sup>3</sup> He shows no indignation at the ritual defilement, but ignores it; for the woman is seen not as an unclean object but as a human being suffering both physically and morally. He does not attack the demands of cult worship directly, he merely ignores them as irrelevant when they distract from the essential relationship between man and God. However, on occasions he is forced into direct opposition. After curing the woman with a spinal deformity in the Synagogue on a Sabbath (Luke 13, 11–17), Jesus is quite prepared to meet the anger of those present and to counter it. He reminds them that they are prepared to rescue their animals on the Sabbath, and therefore they must value them more than 'this daughter of Abraham'. By giving this woman this rarely-used title Christ echoes the phrase 'son of Abraham' and in doing so asserts that this woman is a child of

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in W. Barclay's *Commentary*, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 219.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>The translation used here was the *New English Bible*.

Abraham, a member of the people of God, and should be treated as such, instead of being valued less than a mere pack animal. The woman, then, is not only healed but restored to her true dignity.

### *The Two Sanctuaries*

At Christ's hour of trial we find that those who are discovered by his side are women, for the other disciples and apostles, except John, have fled (Mark 15, 50). It may be that their despised status as women enabled those who accompanied Jesus to do so unmolested; the authorities may have thought them too unimportant to arrest or hinder. Before Jesus arrives at Golgotha, he passes a group of mourning women with whom he stops to talk (Luke 23, 27–31); these may have been disciples or that group of women who customarily offered drugged wine to prisoners as they were being led to execution, in order to mitigate the torture of crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> His words to them, at first reading, seem strange, for he tells them not to mourn for him, but for themselves and their children; such a request may seem a cold-hearted rejection of their sympathy. However, underlying Christ's words is a sense of urgency and doom and also an act of identification with the women to whom he talks, for he sees both them and himself as victims; the suffering which he endures, the women who mourn for him will also have to endure at the hands of the religious and civil authorities, for 'if they do these things in the green wood, what shall be done in the dry?' It is probable that Jesus' words are a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem, but they might also be taken to refer to any situation where justice and mercy are trampled underfoot—for women endure a very heavy weight of persecution and oppression as they suffer not only on their own account, but even more on their children's. The women in Palestine were very vulnerable to injustice and easily fell victims to it; in that respect they shared Christ's fate, for his concern that men should 'have life and have it more abundantly' had led him into direct conflict with the forces of death, while his refusal to defend himself, at the expense of his followers, exposed him to the full weight of injustice and hatred.

The women who, with St John and the Mother of God, stood at the foot of the cross were even more identified with Christ in his humiliation and suffering (John 19, 25). We are told that a crowd of Jews who were hostile to Christ came from Jerusalem to Golgotha to jeer at him; these surrounded the cross so that the women who stood beneath it found themselves the centre of a howling, blood-thirsty mob. It was a situation fraught with danger as well as humiliation and moral suffering. However, the group of soldiers guarding the cross offered a certain limited protection, which was, nevertheless, of a rather dubious nature for these men had just crucified Christ and most probably taken part in the brutal mockery in the guardroom that preceded the execution (Matt. 27, 21–31).

<sup>1</sup>M. J. Lagrange, *Commentary on St John's Gospel* (Paris, 1921), p. 585.

Moreover, they were soldiers in an occupied land, concerned in putting down any possible revolt, and any women of the country would be chary of dealing with them. So, the women at the foot of the cross found themselves within a 'sanctuary' formed by a ring of brutal, gambling soldiery. We honour these women for their place at the foot of the cross, but at that time their position carried no honour; it was one of danger, humiliation and dereliction. We must remember that this was the first enactment of the mysteries we celebrate in peace and safety, within quiet sanctuaries in churches of devout believers, but those present then were, apart from the group at the foot of the cross, those who had rejected Christ and assented to his death. The ring of soldiers provided the only sanctuary; within this sanctuary, at the hour of the mystery, participating in the sacrifice of Jesus, by their identification with him in love and courage, we find St John, the Mother of God and three women. They were the witnesses and, one can say, 'co-celebrants' in this first enactment of the redemptive mystery; the rest of the believing community stood, at some distance, in comparative safety. Although in some danger, they were not forbidden to stay with Christ and to share by their loyalty in his sacrifice; theirs was a privileged position; a position of humiliation, risk and suffering. And it was not denied them.

St Matthew tells us that at the moment of Christ's death, the veil of the Temple was rent in two (Matt. 27, 51). This was the veil that symbolized the principle of separation which was the foundation of Temple cult worship. It symbolized man's separation from God, the glory of God's presence and the spiritual blindness of man. Its destruction heralded the end of the cult worship centred on the Temple and the dawn of a new relationship between man and God. With the incarnation of God, the old separation had been overcome; God was found not only in the Holy of Holies but among men as a man; every aspect of life could become sacred, the division between sacred and profane was overcome. At the same time the principles of arbitrary exclusivism and separation were abolished so that, in the words of St Paul 'there is neither Greek nor Jew, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 28).

#### *Go and tell my brethren*

Appropriately, the first witnesses of Christ's resurrection are a group of women which includes those who had stood at the foot of the cross.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps significant that Jesus does not appear first to his apostles, but to those who had shared with him, in so far as it was possible, the suffering and anguish of Calvary; because they experienced most nearly the sorrow of Christ's crucifixion, it would seem that they were chosen to be the first witnesses of the resurrection. However, their meeting with the risen Lord is not only a sign of spiritual enlightenment and election, nor just to them a source of

<sup>1</sup>The group included Salome but not Mary, the Mother of Jesus.



consolation or strength; it demands from them a mission of witness (Matt. 28, 10, John 20, 17). Jesus sends them back to his disciples to be witnesses, or apostles (those who are sent) of his resurrection; they not only enter into a special relationship with Christ, but are given a particular role to play in the new Church community, that of teacher and witness. Although the apostles and disciples are in great anguish of mind because of Jesus' death and their own desertion of him, he does not return immediately to them himself, but sends as his messengers these women. Under Jewish Law no woman was allowed to bear witness, as her judgment was deemed unreliable. Jesus shows no regard for this belief, but his disciples, with the notable exceptions of Peter and John, are blinded by fear and prejudice and refuse to accept the testimony of the women, dismissing it as 'idle tales'. For this lack of belief, and their rejection of the witness of the two disciples from Emmaus, Jesus later upbraids them, for it betrays lack of faith and hardness of heart (Mark 16, 7-11). He makes clear, therefore, to his disciples that henceforth the witness of women should be accepted by the Church community. The place that the first witnesses to Christ's resurrection had in the early Church was extremely important. It cannot be a fortuitous circumstance that these women were chosen to be the first witnesses of Christ's resurrection; they must be seen as witnessing not only to the particular event that first Sunday, but to the resurrection in the life of the Church which continues throughout time. We see that women are not only present at Calvary, but also witness to the resurrection; they are found at the heart of the redemptive mystery. If Christ accepts women as companions in the work of the redemption of the world, what man can dispute this acceptance?

Who can doubt that Christ established a community in which differences between human beings were set aside and all were accepted as the children of God? If this is so, the Church community should manifest within itself the full liberty and equality of the children of God, as a living ikon of the kingdom of God. We must not allow ourselves to betray the life and teaching of Christ, and the witness of those courageous men and women who followed him even to Calvary, who shared in his resurrection, and were called, as every human being is called, to worship God, 'in spirit and in truth'.