An illustration from the fifteenth-century manuscript Des cleres et nobles femmes depicts Erythraea wearing a blue gown and turning the page of a manuscript on the lectern of a golden altar decorated with icons and books. A rich library with ornately clasped books is visible within the Gothic architectural frame.


GAVERTA, BEVERLY ROBERTS, AND CYNTHIA L. RUGBY, eds. Blessed One: Protestant

INTRODUCTION

John’s Canonical Voice

The basic plot structure of all four canonical Gospels is remarkably similar—all tell the story of a prophetic teacher and healer whose challenge of the status quo of religious and political systems led to his trial and public execution. All contain the promise of God’s victory over death in the resurrection. All four also share many particular narrative details, for example, the giving of sight to the blind, restoring the ability to walk to those who are paralyzed, a miracle of bread and fish. All four contain lengthy accounts of the trial and death of Jesus.

The story and details that are shared by all four canonical Gospels form an important starting point for any introduction to the Gospel of John, because the differences between John and the other Gospels are often exaggerated, with little attention to what all canonical Gospels have in common. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are grouped together under the title the Synoptic Gospels (literally, “the Gospels that see together”), further suggesting that these three Gospels speak with a common voice and that John is the only Gospel with a distinctive voice. The lectionaries in current use in the church reinforce this view of the interrelationship of the canonical Gospels, because they follow a three-year cycle, with one year devoted to each of the Synoptic Gospels.

The Synoptic Gospels do agree with one another in ways that John does not share. For example, in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus’ public ministry begins in Galilee, and Jesus moves out of Galilee into Judea only once, in the journey to Jerusalem that culminates in his death. In John, Jesus’ ministry alternates between Galilee and Jerusalem. He makes three trips to Jerusalem (2:13; 5:1; 7:10) in contrast to the one trip of the Synoptic Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus’ public ministry lasts one year, whereas John narrates a three-year public ministry. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus often speaks in parables; in John he rarely does. Yet to identify the Synoptic Gospels as the single norm against which John should be measured and interpreted does a disservice to John in particular, but more importantly, also distorts our understanding of the New Testament Gospel literature more generally. There is no single New Testament story of Jesus, and John’s story of Jesus cannot be understood fully when it is read primarily as “other” or “different.”

Each canonical Gospel is engaged in interpreting the meaning of the Jesus story for the faith needs of a particular community. Each Gospel selects details from the life and ministry of Jesus—none of them is encyclopedic in scope—to highlight a particular understanding of the ways in which Jesus revealed God to the world and the ways a community can shape its life and faith around that revelation. The church’s faith is fuller when the particularities of each Gospel story are recognized and celebrated for their distinctive contribution to the story of God in Jesus.

Recognition of the range and distinctiveness of NT Gospel-portraits of Jesus is an important starting point and building block of feminist-attuned readings of these texts. That the NT Gospels contain multiple stories and images of
Jesus suggests that from early on, the NT writers recognized the depth and richness in presenting a variety of theological and narrative perspectives. To name and claim voices and emphases in the Gospel of John (or any NT text) that may differ from the dominant cultural or church narrative about Jesus and the Christian faith continues this theological practice.

**Historical and Social Setting**

The author of the Gospel of John, like the authors of the other Gospels, is anonymous. The name "John" was attached to this Gospel by the church, and its author was identified as the apostle John. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the Gospel was actually written by this apostle. The Gospel names "the beloved disciple" as the guarantor of its tradition (19:35; 21:20-24) but does not give this disciple a name. That the guarantor of this tradition is identified by his relationship to Jesus ("beloved") and not by his name reinforces one of the central emphases of this Gospel: the centrality of relationship with Jesus. Neither does the Gospel of John provide a clear indication of its place of composition; it is written in Greek, which was spoken throughout the Mediterranean world.

In the late twentieth century, it was conventional for scholars to speak of a definitive rupture between the synagogue and the Jewish Christians for whom the Gospel of John was written, and to date that break (and hence the composition of the Gospel) to the late 80s or 90s. John 9 was seen as the signal passage that illustrated this break between the synagogue and those Jews who claimed Jesus as the Messiah. More recent scholarship has begun to take a more nuanced approach to this question, however.

There is no doubt that tension between the Jewish religious authorities who forced the Jewish Christians out of the synagogue and Jesus and his followers permeates the Gospel of John. Yet the exact nature of that tension, and what John means by the term "the Jews," is difficult to reproduce. This is not to soft-pedal the rhetoric of the Gospel of John; John 8, in particular, contains vitriolic language that parallels in intensity the anti-Pharisaic language of Matthew 23. Yet solutions to this tension that point knowingly to the rupture with the synagogue often inadvertently create new problems, because the responsibility for the tension is shifted to the Jewish religious authorities who forced the Jewish Christians out of the synagogue.

The social context of the first-century Mediterranean world was much more complex than a simple Jew/Christian polarity. Everyone in ancient Palestine was first and foremost a subject of the Roman Empire, and all religious, economic, and social life took place under the reality of imperial domination. For all Jews, both those who understood Jesus to be the fresh and definitive revelation of God in the world and those who did not, life was fraught with tension. Among canonical NT books, this tension is most on display in Revelation, where the trinitarian theme propels the reader forward into the Gospel's story of Jesus.

The Gospel of John was written in the same social setting, and the religious interactions in the book need to be read in that light. Much like the audience for Revelation, the community that reads the Gospel of John was faced with a complex set of social choices: to stay in the synagogue as a member of a religious group officially recognized by the Roman Empire and thereby avoid the empire's fresh scrutiny; to stay in the synagogue and also worship with Jewish Christians privately, outside of imperial view and safe from imperial sanction; or to break with the synagogue, worship openly, and take the consequences. For John, the third option was the only real choice, and he casts the choice throughout the Gospel in very stark terms. Like the author of Revelation, John has little patience with those who take what he perceives to be the safe course. He calls his readers to do exactly what Jesus did—live as God's faithful and love of God publicly, even if the cost for that execution is at the hands of Rome.

The values of resistance and witness that shape John's Gospel are consistent with a feminist critique of power; John challenged his readers not to take the easy way and accommodate to existing social structures. Yet John's rhetoric about "the Jews" and the demands of faithful witness for God is made known in the enfleshed life of the Word in the world, and that life is one of fullness and grace. This contrasts sharply with themes of sacrifice and emptying, common in other NT writings and later Christian traditions. John 1:14 could not be further removed from the kenotic perspective of Paul's 2:6-7, for example. For Paul, the incarnation is a moment of emptying, of "giving up" that reaches its nadir in the death on the cross (Phil 2:8). The point of the death is then balanced by the high point of exaltation (Phil 2:9). This perspective dominates most conversations, especially Protestant conversations, about the life and death of Jesus. But for John, the incarnation is not an emptying; rather, as 1:14 and 16 make abundantly clear, the incarnation is a moment of fullness. Flesh is where the action is—where the Word encounters and engages the world.

The prologue also introduces the language of father and son, language that underscores the importance of embodiment for John. John 1:18 speaks of Jesus as *monogenes* (regularly translated as "the only begotten"). *Monogenes* is an adjective formed by adding "mono" (single) to the verb *germinatheto*, which importantly can mean both "begotten" and "born of birthed."
English reader of *genethenai* is forced to choose between a translation that favors the male procreative role (begotten—sired, to use an old-fashioned phrase), or the female role (birthed). John's use of the dual meaning of "begotten" side of "sired" means that translation choice, yet it is a more accurate reading to imagine both aspects of *genethenai* at play simultaneously. The addition of the prefix "mono" names the distinctive relationship of the incarnate Word to God: the Son is the only begotten/birthed one of the Father. The use of this adjective with multiple meanings enables John to evoke in one word the full range of human birth and generation in describing the incarnation. That the Son is both "sired" by the Father and "birthed" by the Father suggests that conventional understandings of gender are being redefined. The vocabulary may name conventionally male roles, but the enactment of those roles by God and Jesus transform gender.

**Jesus' Ministry (John 2-12)**

**The Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11)**

John 2:1-11 is the opening event in Jesus' ministry. In 1:35-51, Jesus gathers his first disciples, and in 2:1-11 he attends a wedding with them (2:2). Jesus' mother is also in attendance (2:1). This is the first mention of Jesus' mother in John. Verse 2 indicates that Jesus was "invited" to the wedding. He is the host of the wedding feast, but he acts like everyone else. Jesus' mother is the catalyst for the miracle in this story. When the wine at the wedding feast runs out, Jesus' mother informs him of this lack. When Jesus' mother speaks to him in 2:3, she asks nothing explicit of him, but Jesus' response in verse 4 makes clear that her words contain an implied request. Jesus' words to his mother in verse 2 seem harsh to the modern ear, "Woman, why do you involve me in this?" (which can equally be translated "sire" or "beget"), and "My hour has not yet come." His words are not an act of rudeness to his mother, however, but are an important assertion of Jesus' freedom from all human control. Verse 4 insists that Jesus' actions will not be dictated by anyone else's time or will. His mother's response indicates that she understands this. She tells the servants with utter confidence that Jesus will do something. His mother endorses discipleship; she trusts that Jesus will act and allows him to act in freedom.

The miracle that Jesus performs is appropriate to the personal setting of the wedding. Turning water into wine is an act of turning scarcity into abundance, of repaying the initial hospitality offered him. Jesus' first miracle in John takes place in the presence of friends and family, not in the presence of powers and authorities. This opening to Jesus' ministry shows that the miraculous life-giving power of God is at work even (and perhaps, especially) in the intimate domestic places of human lives. It also is a miracle of pure abundance and grace—nothing life-threatening was at stake here, as will be the case in many of Jesus' healing miracles. This miracle illustrates the celebration of the prologue, "from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."

**New Birth (John 3)**

The monogenes of the prologue occurs again in the Gospel at 3:3-8, in the conclusion to Jesus' teachings to Nicodemus about new birth. The exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus centers around the meaning of birth and embodiment, expressed with two words with double meanings, *genethenai* and anothen (which can equally be translated "new" or "from above"). The most frequent translation choice for anothen, "new" or "again," privileges its temporal dimension and renders invisible its spatial or physical dimensions.

Nicodemus has difficulty understanding the language of anothen, in part because he cannot hold the physical and the spiritual together ("How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"). Jesus tries to clarify Nicodemus' misunderstanding by restating the kind of birth he envisions with the phrase "born of water and Spirit." This phrase highlights the new life of which Jesus speaks, because "water" evokes the waters of physical birth, and "spirit" points to a new birth from God. The physical birth and the spiritual rebirth go hand in hand here. They are not distinct options, because flesh and spirit belong together in the new birth Jesus envisions. One is not reborn to a new life apart from the physical body; one is reborn to a new life within the physical body.

What Jesus offers Nicodemus is what Jesus himself embodies in the incarnation: God-made-present in the flesh. The promise of new life that Jesus extends here is a promise that will be experienced in the body of the believer and made possible by the body of Jesus. Jesus engages believers with his body—the living water that flows from his belly (or, as it can also be translated, his womb, 7:37-39), his body bread, his blood wine (6:53). Jesus' body is the temple (2:21). Jesus' body is the place where God dwells, the place where God's presence can be found in the world (cf. also 1:1). Jesus' miracles are enacted in the realm of the body and its physical functions—a superabundance of wine, bread, and fish, healings, the raising of a man from the dead. The feminist theme of embodiment is central to this Gospel.

**Jesus and the Samaritan Woman (John 4:4-42)**

Prior to this story of Jesus' visit to Samaria, Jesus' activity has centered on the people and places of official Judaism (e.g., 2:13-25; 3:1-21). When Jesus travels to Samaria (4:4), he moves away from official Judaism. At the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies (see 4:9). The source of the enmity between them was a dispute about the correct location of the cultic place of worship, a problem the Samaritan woman herself puts before Jesus (4:20). Although the break between Jews and Samaritans is first narrated in 2 Kings 17, the most intense rivalry began around 300 BCE. The Samaritans built and worshiped a shrine that competed with the temple in Jerusalem. This shrine eventually was destroyed by Jewish troops in 128 BCE. When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, he meets someone who provides a striking contrast to all that has preceded. When Jesus speaks with Nicodemus in John 3, he speaks with a male member of the Jewish religious establishment. In John 4 he speaks with a female member of an enemy people. Nicodemus has a name, but the woman is unnamed. She is known only by what she is: a foreign woman.

The woman herself notes the scandal of their conversation. She responds to Jesus' request for water with the words, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (4:9). The woman knows that a Jewish man should not talk with a Samaritan woman. Moreover, a Jew should not consider drinking water from a Samaritan vessel (4:9). The scandal is noted also by Jesus' disciples when they arrive at the well (4:27). They are amazed that Jesus speaks with this woman.

The disciples want to ask Jesus why he is speaking with her, but their question remains unvoiced. Their protests reflect traditional cultural and social conventions and expectations, and their protests show their distance from Jesus and his work in the world. Jesus breaks open boundaries in his conversation with the Samaritan woman: the boundary between male and female, the boundary between chosen people and rejected people. Jesus' journey to Samaria and his conversation with the woman demonstrate that the grace of God that he offers is available to all. This conversation challenges the status quo by offering the water of life (4:13-14) to a Samaritan woman.

Perhaps it is not surprising that commentators on this text have more readily accepted the offer of the gospel to the Samaritans, a despised people, than they have accepted the offer of the gospel to the woman, a despised sex. This resistance to Jesus' boundary breaking in his conversation with the woman takes two main forms. First, many commentators raise questions about the woman's moral character. Second, many commentators express doubts about the woman's intellectual or theological ability to engage Jesus in serious conversation. Both strategies attempt to delegitimize the woman as a conversation partner for Jesus and hence as a recipient of the gospel.

The popular portrait of the woman in John 4 as a woman of dubious morals, guilty of aberrant sexual behavior, derives from a misreading of John 4:16-18. In these verses, the Samaritan woman tells Jesus that she has had five husbands. In 4:17, Jesus responds to the woman's words by telling her the story of her life (4:18). The text does not say, as most interpreters automatically assume, that the woman has been divorced five times but that she has had five husbands. There are many possible reasons for the woman's marital history, and one should be leery of the dominant explanation of moral laxity. Perhaps the woman, like Tamar in Genesis 38, is trapped in the custom of levirate marriage and the last male in the family line has refused to marry her. Significantly, the reasons for the woman's marital history intrigue commentators but do not seem to concern Jesus. Nor does Jesus pass moral judgment on the woman because of her marital history and status. All such judgments are imported into the text by interpreters. When interpreters speak of the woman as "a five-time loser" or a "tramp" (as has been the case in scholarship about this story), they are reflecting their own prejudices against women, not the views of the text.
When one sets aside the prejudicial mis-reading of John 4:16-18 and reads the story on its own terms, one sees that the conversa-
tion about the woman's husbands serves two purposes. First, it illustrates Jesus' ability to see and know all things. This is an important theme in John (e.g., 1:48-50; 2:24). Second, it is a moment of revelation for the woman, a moment when she is able to see Jesus with new eyes. She responds to Jesus' announcement of her marital status with the words, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet" (4:19). This exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman about her husbands does not delegitimize the woman because of her supposed immorality but instead shows the woman's growing faith.

The woman's recognition of Jesus as a prophet leads her to ask him the most pressing theological question that stands between Jews and Samaritans (4:20): Where is the proper place to worship God? Yet many commentators have dismissed the woman's words to Jesus as a psychological ploy, as a classical act of evasion to change the subject from the embarrassing truth about her morals. Commentators doubt whether this woman would have been able to understand the substance of Jesus' words to her. Once again we see presuppositions about women (women's intellect and interests) skewing a faithful reading of the text. The text presents a prototypical character who is unafraid to stay in conversation with Jesus, who recognizes that a prophet is the perfect person of whom to ask her question. The woman is the first character in the Gospel to engage in sustained theological conversation with Jesus. At the end of the conversation about worship (4:20-26), the woman's faith grows again, as she begins to think about the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah (4:29).

The outcome of the story of John 4:44-42 itself offers a persuasive counterbalance to any attempts to diminish the woman's identity and role. When Jesus' disciples return from the city (4:27), the woman leaves Jesus and goes into the city to testify to her townspeople about Jesus (4:29). On the basis of the woman's testi-
mimony (4:30, 39), many of the Samaritan vil-
lagers who believed in Jesus and went to meet Jesus for themselves. To witness to Jesus—to see Jesus and tell others about that experience—is one of the primary marks of discipleship in John. John the Baptist witnessed to Jesus and led some of his own disciples to Jesus (1:29-37). Jesus' first disciples witnessed to him, and the number of his followers grew (1:40-49). Now the Samaritan woman witnesses to Jesus, and through her words many come to faith. When the Samaritan villagers hear and see Jesus for themselves, the woman's witness is superseded (4:42). That is the appropriate pattern of discipleship and faith. The witness that leads to Jesus is replaced by one's own experience of Jesus. The Samaritan woman is a witness and disciple like John the Baptist, Andrew, and Philip.

**A Textual Interlude: Scribes, Pharisees, and Women (John 7:53-8:11)**

The story traditionally known as "the Woman Taken in Adultery" has a complicated textual history. The passage is missing from the earliest Greek manuscripts of John. When the passage is found in manuscripts, it appears in several locations. This location after 7:52 is the best-attested, but some manuscripts place the passage after John 7:36, or at the end of the Gospel of John. The complicated textual history influences the way the passage is printed in most English translations (note the brackets that surround John 7:53-8:11 in the NRSV) and has occasioned much scholarly debate. The scholarly consensus holds that the story is an authentic piece of Jesus tradition, but opinion is divided on whether or not the story belonged originally to the tradition of the Gospel of John.

When reading John 7:53-8:11, the interpreter finds a situation unique to the New Testament—a well-known Jesus story that is told and retold in the life of the church, but whose textual and canonical status is up for debate. This presents a challenge to the interpreter: while one can comment on the contents and theology of this particular passage, one cannot really move from there to talk about how this passage fits in the larger scheme of John. John 7:53-8:11 is a story without a time or place, a story to be read on its own terms without sustained reference to its larger literary context.

Just as popular interpretation reads John 4:16-18 as a judgment against the Samaritan woman, popular interpretation of 7:53-8:11 reads this text as a judgment against the woman. In the most prevalent reading of this text, which can be traced back to Augustine, Jesus is the embodiment of grace and the woman is the embodiment of sin. A careful reading of the story, however, shows that this narrow polarity between Jesus and the woman distorts the text.

The story consists of three scenes. The action of the story begins when the scribes and Pharisees bring the woman who has been caught in adultery to Jesus and ask him to judge her case (8:3-5). The second scene of the story begins in 8:6 when Jesus bends down and writes on the ground with his finger. He writes on the ground to indicate his unwillingness to spring the trap that has been set for him. The scribes and Pharisees continue to press him for an answer; so in 8:7 Jesus stands and addresses them directly. The last scene of the story begins in 8:8, when Jesus bends down and writes on the ground again. The crowd departs while Jesus writes on the ground (8:9). In 8:10 Jesus stands up again and speaks to the woman twice. When he finishes speaking to her, she is free to go, just as the rest of the crowd did.

What is striking about this story is that Jesus treats the woman as the social and human equal of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus speaks to both sets of characters about sin. His words to the scribes and Pharisees, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (8:7), envision the past, the way the crowd has lived until this moment. His words to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (8:11), envision the future, the way the woman could live from now on, Jesus invites both the scribes and Pharisees and the woman to begin anew in the present moment. They are invited to give up old ways and enter a new way of life.

When the scribes and Pharisees brought the woman who had been caught in adultery to Jesus, they dehumanized her, turning her into an object for debate and discussion. Interpretations of John 7:53-8:11 that focus exclusively on the woman's testimony testifies to the powerful place Mary occupied in the tradition of the early church. One could not speak of this Mary without remembering the story of the anointing (cf. Mark 14:9).

Mary and Martha's initiative sets this story in motion (11:1). Their message about Lazarus' illness resembles the words of Jesus' mother in 2:3 about the wine shortage. In both cases the women do not explicitly request anything of Jesus; they simply present Jesus with the facts. Yet in both cases the reader senses that these women address Jesus with the confidence that he will know what to do. The motivation for Mary and Martha's address to Jesus, and perhaps the source of their confidence in him as well, is their knowledge of his love for Lazarus. Like the story of Jesus and his mother in chapter 2, this is a story about intimates.

John 11:5 shows that Mary and Martha are correct: Jesus loves the whole family. Yet Jesus' actions in response to that love are puzzling. Instead of rushing to the assistance of the beloved family, Jesus stays away longer (11:6). Jesus is not insensitive to the family's needs, but he understands that this family drama belongs to a larger story. Lazarus' illness is part of the story of the glory of God (11:4). This illness is not an isolated event but is part of Jesus' ministry and mission (11:15). Jesus finally heads for this family in Bethany, he does so knowing that his return to Judea carries with it the possibility of his own death (11:8). Jesus' own future and the future of this family are inextricably linked.

When Jesus arrives at Bethany, Lazarus has been buried for four days (11:17). Men and
women from the Jewish community have come to mourn with the two sisters (11:19). When word of Jesus' approach reaches this grieving family and community, Martha goes first to meet him, while Mary stays at home (11:20). This detail is reminiscent of the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42. Luke and John both may be preserving memories of the same family.

The conversations between Martha and Jesus is the theological heart of this story. Martha's opening words to Jesus express both complaint and confidence: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him" (11:21-22). Martha's bold and robust faith empowers her to speak forthrightly to Jesus. Even in the face of her brother's death, she still trusts Jesus to make God's gifts available.

Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus will rise again (11:23). Martha understands those words as a statement of the Jewish belief in the resurrection at the last day (11:24); however, this is not the resurrection of which Jesus speaks. In 11:25 Jesus tells Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life." The victory over death that resurrection represents is available in the present moment in the person of Jesus, not only in some distant future. Through faith in Jesus, death loses its power and life gains new power (11:26a). Jesus challenges and transforms Martha's (and the reader's) traditional understandings of life and death. Jesus places this promise of new life before Martha and asks her, "Do you believe this" (11:26b).

Mary responds to Jesus' question with a confession of faith (11:27). Her confession, spoken in conversational language, rings more of the old than of the radical new life offered by Jesus. Martha embodied the central question of this Gospel: Will the faithful continue to contain Jesus within their own predetermined categories, however well intended those categories may be, or will believers allow Jesus to shatter those categories and offer them the radical fullness of his grace?

Martha returns home and summons Mary to Jesus (11:28). Mary speaks to Jesus with the same straightforwardness that Martha did (11:32); and also places her grief before Jesus. She and the Jews who have followed her continue their weeping in Jesus' presence. Their weeping touches Jesus (11:33), and he is finally ready to go to Lazarus' tomb (11:34), where Jesus himself weeps (11:35). Jesus' tears may be a sign of his love for this family, as some in the crowd suppose (11:36), but that is not all they signify. Jesus weeps also because of the destructive power of death that is still at work in the world. Once again one sees the intersection of the intimate and the cosmic: the pain of this family reminds Jesus of the pain of the world.

At Lazarus' tomb Jesus orders the stone to be taken away (11:39). Martha tries to stop him, reminding him of how putrid the four-day-old corpse will smell. Jesus reminds Martha of what he said earlier: "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (11:40). Jesus' words hold sway, the stone is rolled away, and Jesus calls Lazarus from death back into life (11:41, 43-44).

Jesus’ conversations with Mary and Martha transform this story from a miracle story about the raising of Lazarus into a story about the fullness of new life that is possible to all who believe in Jesus. For John, the initiative of these women in sending for Jesus, their bold and robust faith, the grief and pain that they bring to Jesus, their willingness to engage Jesus in conversation about life, death, and faith, and their unflinching love for Jesus are marks of discipleship.

The Anointing of Jesus (John 12:1-8)
The family of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus returns to prominence in the story of the anointing in 12:1-8. In the interval between the raising of Lazarus and this story, the chief priests and the Pharisees have determined that Jesus must be killed (11:53). The upcoming feast of Passover seems a good time to capture him, because the Pharisees have decided that Jesus must be killed (11:53). The upcoming feast of Passover seems a good time to capture him, because the Pharisees have decided that Jesus must be killed (11:53).

Mary, who is mentioned last in these verses, anoints Jesus' feet rather than his head (cf. Mark 14:3-7). This anointing anticipates three crucial parts of the remainder of the Gospel of John. First, as Jesus' words to Judas suggest, the anointing anticipates Jesus' death and burial. Jesus will be anointed again when he is laid in the tomb (19:38-42). At his death, however, Jesus will be anointed in secret by men who are afraid to make public their faith (19:38-39). In this story, Mary unashamedly anoints Jesus in front of all who dined with him. Mary's declaration for Jesus is not deferred until after his death but is offered to Jesus while he lives.

Second, this anointing, in which Mary anoints Jesus' feet rather than his head (cf. Mark 14:3-7), anticipates the footwashing in John 13:1-20. There are two dimensions to the footwashing: It models service and discipleship (13:12-16), but service and discipleship are possible because to participate in the footwashing is to participate in the expression of Jesus' love that leads to his death (13:3-11). Mary's anointing of Jesus anticipates both of these dimensions. It is an act of service, but it also participates in the events of Jesus' death. Mary does for Jesus now what Jesus will do for his disciples later.

Third, Mary's anointing of Jesus anticipates the love commandment that Jesus will give his disciples: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (13:34). Jesus' words in chapters 13-17 offer a vision of the new life that is possible for all who follow him. At the heart of this vision is the commandment to love one another: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you also should love one another." This vision runs throughout the Farewell Discourse (e.g., 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:8-9).

When the commandment to love one another is compared with the abundance and variety of ethical teaching in Matthew and Luke, the ethics of John are often found wanting. For example, in Matthew and Luke Jesus commands that one love one's enemies, but in John, Jesus commands only one thing: "Love one another as I have loved you." To find the ethical demand of this commandment too easy and somehow inferior, however, is to be deceived by the simplicity of its wording and the sharpness of its focus. It is also to dismiss the language of love and mutuality as not being serious ethical categories. The commandment to love one another is essentially sectarian; its primary focus is on the life of the Christian community. That focus does not provide grounds for dismissing the ethical seriousness of the commandment. Indeed, the history of the church and of individual communities of faith suggests that to love one another may be the most difficult thing Jesus could have asked. There are many circumstances in which it is easier to love one's enemies than it is to love those with whom one lives, works, and worships day after day.

The language of love is a different ethical language from the language of discipleship to serve, to love one another, to share in Jesus' death. Jesus' Last Days (John 13-21)
The Farewell Discourse (John 13:1—17:24) Chapters 13-17 are known as the Farewell Discourse, because here Jesus speaks to his disciples just prior to his arrest, trial, and death. Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure and for their life in his absence. What Jesus envisions as the future for his disciples is the present reality for the reader of the Gospel, because the contemporary church lives without the physical presence of Jesus and is sustained by Jesus' words. Jesus' words in chapters 13-17 offer a vision of the new life that is possible for all who follow him. At the heart of this vision is the commandment to love one another: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you also should love one another." This vision for Jesus is not deferred until after his death but is offered to Jesus while he lives.
found in the Synoptic Gospels. It is language of fulness rather than language of emptying. One will give one's life for one's friends as an act of love (15:13), not as an act of self-denial and self-sacrifice in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g., Mark 8:34). In John, one gives out of the abundance of one's love, not out of the denial of one's self.

The Johannine language of the fullness and abundance of love is very important for women, because a one-sided emphasis on emptying and self-denial has led many women (and some men) to subscribe to an ethos of perpetual self-sacrifice and the meaninglessness of self. In the Gospel of John provides a much-needed balance to this ethos. Fullness and the sharing of love characterize discipleship and faith. The Christian community is known by how much its members love one another, not by how much they deny themselves. The ultimate sign of this love remains the willingness to give one's life in love, but this gift, like Jesus' gift, will be given in fullness of grace, not in self-denial.

The Gospel of John makes clear that the Christians' love for one another derives from and is modeled on Jesus' love for his followers. Jesus loves his followers by making God known to them (14:10–11), giving them God's word (17:14), embodying God's love (17:23), calling many and varied sheep into his fold (10:16), calling his followers "friend," not servant (15:14–15), and laying down his life for his friends (10:17-18). All of these ways, not exclusively the last, model how the community of Jesus' followers is to love one another.

In the Farewell Discourse Jesus also paints a picture of the Christian community with his metaphor of the vine and its branches (15:1-11). The metaphor is quite vivid: Jesus is the vine, whose love Jesus is the branches, and God is the vine grower who tends the vine, pruning and trimming branches so that they bear fruit.

Two aspects of this metaphor are striking. First, the vine metaphor characterizes the Christian community as a community of interrelation, mutuality, and indwelling. This mutuality is conveyed by the use of the verb "abide." This occurs ten times in 15:1-11. To "abide" means to persevere or remain and suggests constancy of presence. The term "abide" describes Jesus' relationship to God (15:10), Jesus' relationship to the community (15:4, 9), and the community's relationship to Jesus (15:1, 7). In their mutuality, Jesus and God anticipate the possibilities of life for the community.

Individuals in the community will prosper only insofar as they recognize themselves as members of a larger whole. They are not individual free agents; rather, he or she is one branch of an encircling and intertwining vine whose fruitfulness depends on abiding with Jesus: "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." (15:4-5).

The life envisioned in this metaphor stands in striking contrast to contemporary Western models of individualism, privatism, and success based on individual accomplishment. This metaphor assumes social interrelationship and accountability. In the vine metaphor, an individual is fruitful only as he or she abides with others in Jesus' love. The mutuality envisioned by the vine metaphor is a sign of the presence and work of God: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." (15:9).

Second, the metaphor of the vine provides a radical, nonhierarchical, perhaps even antihierarchical image for the composition and constitution of the church. One branch is indistinguishable from another; no branch has pride of place. All branches are rooted together in one vine, and only as a result of their common root can they bear fruit. The task of assessing fruitfulness falls to God alone (15:2), not to any of the branches. As the vine grower, God works to prune and shape the vine so that it produces the maximum fruit. God decides what is dead wood and determines where and when to prune back a dead branch to find green wood and the promise of new life. Since God and God alone is the vine grower, all branches are equal before God. The future of the vine, of the church, is entrusted to God, not to any of the branches. There is no bishop branch, elder branch, or church bureaucratic branch with special status in this vine. One cannot distinguish between clergy and laity in this vine.

Jesus is the vine of the church, out of, into, and around which all the branches grow. The vine metaphor is a powerful image of the church: the center vine out of which the branches grow is identifiable, but the mass of intertwining branches is indistinguishable. One cannot tell which branch sprouted first, which branch is longest, where one branch stops and another branch begins. Hierarchy among members is impossible in the vine of the church, because all members grow out of the same vine and are tended equally by the one vine grower.

**Jesus' Mother and the Beloved Disciple (19:25–27)**

John 19:25–27 narrates the scene at the foot of Jesus' cross. All four Gospel accounts of Jesus' death agree that women keep vigil at Jesus' death. Jesus predicted that all the followers would abandon him at his death, scattering to their own homes (16:32), but the women stand firm. In the face of death and the fear of reprisals, the women do not run away. They gather for the death watch (19:25). The tradition does not speculate on the reasons for the women's faithfulness; it simply reports it as fact. In the Synoptic Gospels the women watch Jesus' death from afar, but in John they stand near the cross, so near that Jesus is able to speak to his mother, Verses 26–27 focus on Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple, who stands with her. This disciple is unnamed in the Gospel and is identified solely on the basis of Jesus' love for him. Like Mary in chapter 12, the disciple returns Jesus' love by being present to Jesus in his need.

Jesus speaks parallel sentences to his mother and the beloved disciple. To his mother he says, "Woman, here is your son" (19:26), to the disciple, "Here is your mother." (19:27). The precise symmetry of Jesus' words reinforces the symbolism of this exchange. Both Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple function as symbolic figures. As Jesus' birth mother, she is a reminder of the incarnation. She also was the witness to Jesus' first miracle (2:1-11), and so here at the cross Jesus' mother is a connection to Jesus' earthly ministry. The beloved disciple represents the community of disciples whose love and works will extend beyond the limits of the Gospel story proper. In this moment at the foot of Jesus' cross, the past (Jesus' mother) and the future (the beloved disciple) meet. At his death, Jesus ensures continuity between the past and the future.

At the heart of Jesus' ministry is the creation of a new family of God. The creation of this family is recapitulated here when the beloved disciple takes Jesus' mother to his own home (19:27). Jesus was rejected by "his own" (1:11), but the beloved disciple's reception of Jesus' mother signals the possibility of a future marked by acceptance, not rejection. The new family that is born at the foot of the cross is marked by love and faith.

In many of the stories from John, the gospel is expressed in language of intimacy and family. Jesus' mother, the family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and the beloved disciple are all bound to Jesus with the intimate bonds of love. The Gospel of John is frequently criticized for making Jesus seem distant and removed from the everyday realities and struggles of human life. Many of the stories in this Gospel, however, especially those whose principal character is a woman, call such criticisms into question. In these stories Jesus is shown in intimate, loving relationship with family and friends.

**Mary Magdalene and the Risen Jesus (20:1–18)**

All four Gospels agree on one vital detail about Easter morning: in the early morning hours, when it was still dark, women went to see Jesus' tomb. The specifics of that early morning visit vary from Gospel to Gospel (how many women were at the tomb, who greeted them at the tomb, how they responded to what they saw and heard), but the presence of the women is a constant. As with the women's vigil at Jesus' crucifixion, the tradition does not speculate about this further display of faithfulness by the women. It simply accepts it as an essential part of the story of the resurrection.

The story of Mary Magdalene in chapter 20 is the most detailed of the four stories about women at Jesus' tomb. It divides into two scenes: 20:1–10 (Mary at the empty tomb) and 20:11–18 (Mary and the risen Jesus).

Verses 1–10 establish Mary Magdalene as the first witness of the empty tomb. When she arrives at the tomb, she sees that the stone has been rolled away (20:1). She runs and reports the news to Peter and the beloved disciple (20:2). She offers what appears to be the only logical explanation of the data: someone has taken Jesus' body out of the tomb, and it cannot be found. Mary's confusion reflects the world-shattering dimension of the empty tomb. Until the community encounters the risen Jesus, there are no categories through which to understand the news of Jesus' resurrection. The world cannot make sense of an empty tomb with any theory except grave robbing.

On the basis of Mary's words, Peter and the beloved disciple run to the tomb (20:3–4).
Both men enter the tomb (20:5–8), but only the response of the beloved disciple is recorded. Verse 8 says that he "saw and believed." His faith is only incipient faith, however, because the story goes on to say that they did not yet know the resurrection (20:9). The male disciples, like Mary, could find no words out of their prior experiences to describe the empty tomb. Yet Mary bore witness to the tomb even in her confusion; Peter and the beloved disciple kept silent.

The second scene (20:11–18) begins with Mary alone again at the tomb, weeping. She, like Peter and the beloved disciple before her, now looks into the tomb. She is greeted by two angels. The angels address her: "Woman, why are you weeping?" (20:13). (This greeting, "woman," is the same word with which Jesus addressed his mother in 2:4 and 19:26 and with which the risen Jesus will address Mary in 20:15.) Mary's answer to the angels resembles her initial announcement to Peter and the beloved disciple (20:2), but with one important difference. In 20:13 her words are more personal. She speaks of "my Lord" (not "the Lord"); she says, "I do not know" (not her earlier, "we do not know"). Her words to the angels are spoken out of her personal grief, not simply out of her confusion.

After Mary answers the angels, she turns around (to face the garden) and sees Jesus, but "she did not know that it was Jesus" (20:14). The conversation that takes place between Jesus and Mary at the tomb is one of the most poignant and artfully drawn scenes in all of Scripture. The reader knows what Mary does not know—that the man she assumes to be the gardener is really Jesus (20:15). The power of the scene comes from the reader's anticipation of Mary's moment of recognition.

Jesus speaks to Mary, repeating the angels' question about her weeping and asking an additional question, "Whom are you looking for?" (20:15). These questions are the first words spoken by the risen Jesus. His question, "Whom are you looking for?" mirrors the first words he spoke in his ministry. When the followers of John (the Baptist) approached Jesus, he asked them, "What are you looking for?" (1:38). This question is an invitation that introduces one of the marks of discipleship: to look for Jesus. The repetition of that question in chapter 20 establishes continuity between Mary and the first disciples of Jesus.

Jesus' questions to Mary do not penetrate her grief and confusion. Her world is determined by the seemingly harsh reality of the empty tomb, and so she begs the "gardener" for assistance: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away" (20:15). Because Mary still has no categories with which to grasp the significance of the empty tomb, she assumes that the solution to the mystery of the missing body lies within her control. If the gardener would tell her what she needs to know, she would take care of the situation.

The word the "gardener" speaks changes Mary's world forever: The risen Jesus calls Mary by name, and he speaks to her without the burden of self-conscious formality in his voice, she turns around again. But this time she sees Jesus, her teacher, not the gardener (20:16). Once again the intimate and the cosmic conjoin: through the intimacy of Mary's name, the reality of the resurrection is revealed. When Mary hears the voice of the risen Jesus, she sees the garden and the gardener differently. She no longer understands the empty tomb as a manifestation of death, but as testimony to the power and possibilities of life. In the parable of the Shepherd in John 10, Jesus said, "[The shepherd] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... The sheep follow him because they know his voice" (10:3–4). Jesus called Lazarus by name to summon him from the tomb (11:43), and now his voice summons Mary to new life.

Mary may have attempted to embrace Jesus after she recognized him, because he says to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." (20:17a). Jesus' words may strike some readers as unnecessarily harsh, as a cruel rebuke to Mary's expression of joyous recognition. To read these words as cold and harsh is to misread them, however, and to overlook their import.

Jesus' command, "Do not hold on to me," is the first postresurrection teaching. When he speaks these words, Jesus teaches Mary that he cannot and will not be held and controlled. If Mary had stopped Jesus from ascending to God, holding him with her in the garden, the Easter story would be incomplete. This is an awkward narrative moment, as John tries to put into linear form something that actually transforms conventional categories of time and place. For John, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension is one continuous act, and so here it is as if he hits the narrative pause button, to give Mary and the reader a glimpse of something that is still in progress. Jesus' prohibition is followed by a positive exhortation, "But go to my brothers [and sisters] and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (20:17b) Mary is expected to spread the news of the resurrection and ascension and of the new life with God and one another that is now available to all. Those who follow Jesus have become members of the family of God and Jesus.

Mary heeds Jesus' words and goes to the disciples with the announcement, "I have seen the Lord." (20:18). Her announcement of the presence of the risen Jesus is the core of the Easter gospel. Her confusion and sadness at the empty tomb have been transformed by her encounter with Jesus into the witness of Easter. Mary is the first Easter witness: she is the first to see the risen Jesus, and she is the first to tell others what she has seen. She is the first disciple of the risen Jesus.

Hermeneutical Postscript: Father Language for God and the Gospel of John

The question of the appropriate language to use for God is a vital one for many women in the church. Throughout the history of the church, the church has almost exclusively used male pronouns and images for God, in allusions both the rich variety of names and images for God in the biblical and historical material and the biblical and theological assumptions that undergird this language. The exclusive use of male language for God is not a neutral act; it shapes the way people speak about God and involve women in the church, bringing with them advantages and difficulties. When the followers of John, the Church, the church has almost exclusively used male pronouns and images for God, in allusions both the rich variety of names and images for God in the biblical and historical material and the biblical and theological assumptions that undergird this language. The exclusive use of male language for God is not a neutral act; it shapes the way people speak about God and involve women in the church, bringing with them advantages and difficulties.
many of the pivotal events in Jesus' ministry occur in the presence of those whom he loves. Jesus' announcement to Mary of the good news of Easter is couched in the language of family: "But go to my brothers [and sisters] and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (20:17). At Jesus' ascension, the creation of the new family is fully under way: Jesus' followers are now called his brothers and sisters, children of God.

As the earlier discussion of "only begotten" suggested, for Jesus to speak of God as Father in John does not evoke conventional gender categories. John speaks of God as Father neither to reinforce patriarchy (recall also the nonhierarchical image of the vine in 15:1-11) nor to reinforce the primacy of the male gender. Importantly, "Father" is not the only name for God in John. Jesus refers to God as "the one who sent me" with even greater frequency than he refers to God as Father. One name for God highlights Jesus' share in God's identity (Father/Son), and the other name highlights Jesus' share in God's work (the one who sends/the sent one). The church's almost exclusive focus on maleness as the point of father language, and on Father as an essentialist and normative category with no specific theological content, actually distorts the theological possibilities of that language to name relationship with God. Jesus calls God Father in John in order to evoke a new world in which intimate, loving relations with God and one another are possible.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Apostle or prostitute? Witness to the resurrection or penitent whore? Prominent disciple or seductive temptress? Faithful follower or beloved wife? Over the centuries, a discernible trajectory can be traced in which Mary Magdalene begins as a principal witness and follower of Jesus, yet becomes known as a redeemed "woman of ill-repute." Even today, in modern parlance, "Mary Magdalene" is virtually synonymous with "prostitute." However, due in large part to recent feminist biblical scholarship, Mary Magdalene's so-called sexually sinful past has itself fallen into disrepute. By interpreters' turning to the New Testament and other early Christian texts, Mary Magdalene has once again taken her rightful place as an important figure in early Christianity.

In the New Testament, Mary Magdalene holds a significant position in the Gospels, mainly in connection with Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. According to Mark and Matthew, she is present during Jesus' crucifixion with a number of other women (Mark 15:40-41/Matt. 27:55-56), and she sees Jesus' body laid in the tomb (Mark 15:47//Matt. 27:61). Luke also implies her presence during the crucifixion and burial (Luke 23:49, 55-56) and earlier identifies her as a follower of Jesus alongside the twelve disciples (Luke 8:1-3). In all three of these Gospel accounts, Mary Magdalene also discovers the empty tomb, along with various other women, and is told to share this good news (Mark 16:1-8; Matt. 28:1-10; cf. Luke 24:1-12). In the Gospel of John, however, Mary Magdalene is singled out even more. Not only does she witness the crucifixion (John 19:25), but she alone approaches the empty tomb (John 20:1-2), and she is the first person to whom Jesus appears in his resurrected state (John 20:11-18).

Mary Magdalene's significance as the first to witness Jesus' resurrection is also picked up in the longer ending of Mark, a later conflation of the Gospel accounts most likely compiled in the late second century (Mark 16:9-11; cf. 16:8). Drawing on Luke, the longer ending also identifies her as having been cured of seven demons (Luke 8:2//Mark 16:9). While numerous Marys populate the pages of the Gospels, the epithet "Magdalene" differentiates Mary Magdalene from these other women and presumably derives from her place of origin, a city of Galilee called Magdala. And while other women often appear in conjunction with Mary Magdalene, the Gospel authors typically indicate her prominence by either singling her out or listing her name first.

Mary Magdalene's prominence is also apparent in a number of later Christian texts written around the second and third centuries and often identified as gnostic. While many of these texts were eventually deemed heretical due to their denial of Jesus' full humanity and divinity, they reveal an interest in Mary Magdalene as a bearer of Jesus' special knowledge or "gnosis." To varying degrees, Mary Magdalene emerges as an important follower and interlocutor of Jesus in writings such as The Gospel of Thomas, The Sophia of Jesus Christ, The Dialogue of the Savior, The Gospel of Mary, The Gospel of Philip, and the Pistis Sophia, as well as in the no longer extant Great Questions of Mary. Of these writings, the longest and most elaborately developed picture of Mary Magdalene occurs in the Pistis Sophia. Throughout the series of dialogues that comprise this lengthy work, Mary Magdalene is Jesus' dominant conversation partner, and she consistently bests the male disciples via her verbal exchanges.

Two of the other most important sources on Mary Magdalene include The Gospel of Mary, a fragmentary Gospel written in her name, and The Gospel of Philip. Both of these texts also contain controversial material that some have argued suggests a sexual relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. In The Gospel of Mary, she is identified as being one whom Jesus loves (10:1-3; 18:13-15), and in The Gospel of Philip, she is called Jesus' companion, whom Jesus loves above all the other disciples and...
author does not identify what heresy the false teachers are promulgating, but rather, assumes that the audience knows the situation and needs no explanation. Language pointing to sen­suality, sexual immorality, and "unnatural desires" as the root of the problem suggests that behavior rather than doctrine might be at stake. A more careful reading, however, shows that the heart of the problem seems to be the unnatural desire for a human union with angelic beings and not a union between human beings.

The third section reminds the audience that what is happening now is the expected conflict that follows when those who defy authority try to transcend their proper limits (vv. 5–16). From the negative examples and their tragic consequences, the letter moves to a positive exhortation in verses 17–23 that people keep themselves in the love of God, remember the words spoken by the apostles, and build on the foundation of their faith through prayer "in the Holy Spirit" (v. 20) with the support of the community (v. 21).

The final section concludes with a doxology (vv. 24–25), which is Jude's prayer for the community to be kept safe from intruders. This conclusion makes us realize that Jude has actually written the letter he originally wanted to write (about their common salvation, v. 3), at the same time that he warns the community about the deceivers.

**Conclusion**

Several points in this letter are of particular importance for feminist interpretation. First, there is the lack of mention of women or women's concerns, and the silence about the women implicated in the behavior condemned in verses 5–16. That silence points to women's minimal role in the life of the community. Second, the insistence on correct belief and practice, as defined by the author of the letter, functions to limit the acceptable forms of religious belief and experience to the official ones, which usually mean those defined by elite males in the community.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**INTRODUCTION**

The biblical end of the world appears throughout the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, but this last book holds the longest vision dedicated to earth's last days. The book's title, from the Greek, means "revelation, a revealing, a taking the lid off" of the end-time chaos, like Pandora opening the box. As a bookend to the book of Genesis, the Apocalypse is about the total destruction of earth and the re-creation of a new heaven and earth (21:1–2) as part of God's divine plan. John takes the reader back to a garden paradise within an urban setting. The true believers (the 144,000 purified males) are the only ones definitely slated to return to the holy city of God. Perhaps women are included in the persecuted souls under the altar (6:9–11), but John never clearly states their inclusion, and these souls remain in a "not yet" waiting position.

Some feminist biblical scholars celebrate and reclaim the hopefulness of John's end-time vision, while others decry John's controlling and exclusivist rhetoric.

The Apocalypse of John begins with John in a visionary state, receiving messages from an angel intermediary (1:1–2). His vision is full of symbols: numbers, colors, images, and references to other biblical texts (e.g., the plagues of Exodus). This book is loud and colorful, along with being quite violent and bloody. Jesus appears to John on the island of Patmos as the Son of Man, "clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters, and he had a two-edged sword in his mouth and a shining face (1:14–16). John addresses his dream of the end in the form of "letters" to the seven churches of western Anatolia (Asia Minor or current-day Turkey). In these letters the churches are judged individually, based on their faithfulness or lack of it (e.g., 3:7–13). He ends each letter with the admonition; "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). There are letters to the seven churches of western Asia Minor that chastise, praise, and offer guidance for their individual and communal actions. A series of seven visions follows, with angel intermediaries as guides. John sees into the heavenly throne room, where the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures, and God on the throne reside. This central, and highly desirable, space of the throne room of God is depicted as an all-male enclave, a portrayal that begs a queer reading. In this way the Apocalypse echoes the realm of God from Genesis on; there is God and other supernatural creatures, such as angels, and these are all male. Women remain on the outside, on the margins, and are either punished ("Jezebel" and the Whore of Babylon) or left behind (the Woman Clothed with the Sun and the Bride). There are other female spaces in the abyss and the heavenly city: the earth goddess Gaia (12:16), the tree of life (if the tree is read as a symbol of some ancient goddesses), along with the gender-bending Lamb and other spaces yet to be discovered. Only the 144,000 purified men have spaces reserved for them in heaven. The duality of male-female is not
so clear in this book, even as the main female characters are under patriarchal control and ultimately erased from the end visions. Issues of gender and sexuality in this last book of the Bible are complex, and the play of these differences calls for the interpreter to enter this difficult journey with John, with no clear, definitive “meaning” at the end.

The book of Daniel, chapters 7-12, in which Daniel has visions of the Ancient One on the heavenly throne and of a terrifying judgment, heavily infects John’s visions. John dreams of a baal-led kingship and of two realms of heaven and earth. In the heavenly realm the twenty-four elders (along with the four living creatures) worship God and the Lamb on the throne. The heavenly throng sings a song as a prelude for the end-time pronouncements. There is a scroll of seven seals full of the secrets of God’s plan for humans and the earth, which only the Lamb is worthy to open (4:1-5:14). The series of seven (a number signifying perfection in the ancient world) continues with the seven seals (Rev. 6-7). The seventh seal brings angels with trumpets (8:6-9:21) and bowls of wrath (16:1-21), and these announcements bring great destruction to the earth. After the defeat of the Whore of Babylon and her followers and the marriage of the Lamb and the Bride (Rev. 17-19), the New Jerusalem appears, and John ends his prophecy on an open note: “Do not seal up the words of this prophecy of John, the time is near. Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy” (22:10-11). The end is always not yet, and the visions are in an eternal cycle.

The book of Revelation or the Apocalypse of John ends the official canon of the Christian Bible in some very challenging ways. This book has gripped readers’ imaginations beyond its text into many spheres of influence, including art, music, film, and social movements. Women readers of this text grapple with its violent imagery and marginalized women figures. As the visionary John had a difficult experience with what he heard and saw, so too do contemporary readers, who have to decide on the text’s message and authority and whether or not this text is a liberating and hopeful one in their specific contexts.

Authorship and Social Setting

The tradition is that John of Patmos is the John of the Gospels, a disciple of Jesus, grown old in Ephesus (with Mary, mother of Jesus) and imprisoned for political activity by the Romans and eventually martyred by being boiled in oil. Most contemporary biblical scholars find the author John to be an itinerate preacher in western Anatolia, either right after the Jewish rebellion against Roman rule in Palestine (66-73 CE) or, more likely, at the end of the first century immediately after the murder of the Roman emperor Domitian (81-95 CE).

John sets himself in prison on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). John refers to persecutions (e.g., his own in 1:9; of the souls under the altar in 6:9-11; by Antipas in 2:13; of the two witnesses in chap. 11), but even more to false teaching (2:14-16, 19-26). The author holds to a two-hundred-year-old tradition of anti-Roman sentiment in western Anatolia. Roman rule is evil, and John’s vision is heavily focused on the downfall of Rome (coded as “Babylon”, from the memory of the Babylonian exile of the Jews beginning in 587 BCE). The faithful do not fight this bloody battle. In the ultimate colonized fantasy, God and God’s army arrive to wipe out the colonizer, along with a fiery purification of the planet.

Jezebel (Rev. 2:20-23)

In the letter to the church in Thyatira, John gives quick praise to the church for their faith, then launches into a critique of a false teacher in their midst: “But I have this against you; you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (2:20). This “Jezebel” (as John names her, referring to King Ahab’s queen) had a chance to repent but continued to teach or, in the words of the vision from the Son of Man, to “commit adultery with members of the church” (2:22). The warning comes to both the church members and to Jezebel: stop following these teachings (“the deep things of Satan,” 2:24) or suffer the consequences: “Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repeat of her doings; and I will strike her children dead” (2:22-23). Anyone who follows Jezebel will die.

The Apocalypse holds to a duality of true versus false teachings and the choice of “Christ or Caesar.” Like the lukewarm water at Laodicea, God says, “So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit [i.e., forcefully vomit, in the Greek] you out of my mouth” (3:16). This prophetess—whatever her real name is—is never allowed to speak for herself; we know only one side of the story. For a book whose inclusion in the canon was hotly debated in the early church, the Apocalypse makes many absolute claims for its authority as a trailer for the last days.

The Woman Clothed with the Sun (Rev. 12:1-6, 13-17)

This mother of the Messiah is an image of the ancient goddess “clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (12:1). She has been interpreted as many things: the image of Israel, of Mary, of Ishtar, of Inanna, of Isis, and more recently of Our Lady of Guadalupe (a merger of Mary with the Aztec goddess Coatlaxopeuh). The diversity of this goddess images fits easily into a variety of cultural contexts as a symbol of power. The great red dragon threatens to devour the woman’s child; after she gives birth, her child (“a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron,” 12:5) “was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne” (12:5). The woman, with the dragon in hot pursuit, receives two great wings and flies to the wilderness, and when the dragon unleashes a great flood from his mouth, she is rescued by the earth (Gaia), who swallowed all the water. The woman remains in the wilderness for the duration of the narrative, while an angry dragon pursues her children. John fails to tell the end of her story. Does she remain stranded in the wilderness, and if so, could this be a liberating space for her? There are many unanswered questions in this text concerning the female characters. John’s silence allows for feminist interpreters to fill in the gaps with a more hopeful ending, or not.

The 144,000 Who “Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women” (Rev. 14:1-5)

The angel Michael is joined in this holy war by the 144,000 purified men. They are slaves of
God, with the names of the Lamb and his father on their foreheads (14:1). They are the only ones who can learn the heavenly song of the harpists, and they perform before the throne (14:2-3). They have “been redeemed from the earth” and “have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes” and are “firstfruits for God and for the Lamb” (14:4). Their number is a multiple of twelve, a symbol for wholeness. For other interpreters, a more literal reading is in order. These men become the “queens of heaven,” yet their place in the throne room is not a liberating one. In this story the desire of the male God for eternal companionship comes with strict entry standards and unclear responsibilities beyond this choir.

The Whore of Babylon (Rev. 14:8; 16:19; 17:1-195)

This Rome is also the goddess Roma, a warrior goddess of the great city and empire. She is a female goddess but also a male warrior. The Whore is a performer, sitting on her great beast in her elegant garb, does she represent a male warrior in drag or a female queen with a male identity? Is she dressed as a prostitute? She sits in grand purple, bejeweled splendor on her scarlet beast with her eucharistic “cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication” (17:4). On her forehead is written “Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations.” And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus (17:5-6). The Whore speaks arrogantly—one of two women characters to speak (the other is the Bride). She says in her heart: “I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief!” (18:7). The Whore is then destroyed by her followers: she is stripped naked, gang-raped (by the kings, merchants, and sailors), cannibalized, and burned forever (17:16) with “pestilence and mourning and famine” (18:8). She and her wealth will be “laid in waste in one hour” (18:10,17). “Hallelujah! The smoke goes up from her forever and ever!” (19:3). The heavenly choir sings.

Is this Goddess Roma a male-warrior state in drag that is feminized and raped and murdered? Is this vision the ultimate dream of humiliating the colonizer?

Sex workers in the United States identify with the Whore of Babylon. In their reading, she is a prostitute like them and a victim of male violence. Groups of women victims who use these “texts of terror” in the Bible to name their own experiences with male violence, she is a prostitute like them and a victim of male violence. The violence done to the Whore is extreme; why does the demise of empire have to be symbolized by a sexually abused and deformed woman?

Abys (Rev. 9:1-11; 11:7; 20:1-3)

The abyss or the bottomless pit houses all sorts of evil creatures, from locusts (9:1-11) who have golden crowns on their faces that were like “human faces, their hair like women’s hair” with lion teeth (9:8). These big, noisy creatures sting and “torturing those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads” (9:4). The fallen star/angel with the key to the pit (9:1) is called “in Hebrew . . . Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon” (9:11), which mean “Destruction” and “Destroyer,” respectively. Beasts come out of the pit (11:7) and are thrown into it by “an angel coming down from heaven” (26:1) who also has a key on a great chain. The bottomless pit is a place of evil monsters and a place to be feared. The abyss is represented as a hell mouth in medieval theatre sets and art; it is a giant monster head with numerous sharp teeth.

It is not a big step to consider a Freudian analysis of this gaping hole in the text, a vagina with teeth, set to castrate any male who ventures too close to the edge. Yet this pit has power; is it a space of female power made evil by patriarchal appropriation? The abyss eventually becomes the opening to hell, under lock and key by a heavenly angel. As vaginal space, the lips are sealed, locked and controlled by God. For John the abyss is a vile space to be feared and avoided. In what ways can women readers reclaim this space?

Earth/Gaia (Rev. 12:16)

The earth comes to the rescue of the Woman Clothed with the Sun; she swallows the river the dragon spews to sweep her away. In one early drawing, the earth is the upper torso and head of the goddess Gaia, who rises up to protect the flying woman. There is double female power here: the Sun Woman with “two wings of the great eagle” (12:14) and Gaia, earth goddess, who gets a good drink. As one of the powerful female characters in the Apocalypse, Gaia uses her small role to block the dragon and allow the Sun Woman, the rescued “queen of heaven” (12:1). But it is also the earth that God and God’s army destroy in the text and replace with a new earth and heaven.


The Bride is the most passive of female characters in the Apocalypse. But she is true beauty as opposed to the glamour of the Whore: “his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints” (19:7-8). The truly blessed bride has made herself ready to marry the Lamb! She soon becomes “the holy city Jerusalem” (21:9-10), where John measures and examines her wealth and adornments. She speaks only once: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come’” (22:17) to gather the faithful who have come out of the Whore and into the city/bride. Is this scene another gang rape? True believers who reject the Whore are promised entry into the city/bride.

The Tree of Life (Rev. 2:7; 22:2)

The tree of life is mentioned twice in the Apocalypse: the first mention is in the letter to the church in Ephesus as a reward for faithfulness. “To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God!” John describes the location of this tree in the New Jerusalem: “On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (22:2). This tree is highly desirable, with its excess of fruit and promise of eternal life and world peace.

The Apocalypse echoes the first mention of the tree of life in Genesis 2:9. After an initial buildup, we learn of God’s command not to eat of one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). It is not until after Eve’s discovery and enlightenment that God bars man (not woman Eve, “the mother of all living” in Gen. 3:20) from the tree of life. Then the tree is mentioned: “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—therefore the Lord God . . . placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen. 3:22-24). The Apocalypse holds out the promise for fulfillment of the desire for this tree and its fruit. Whether one sees women as present or absent in this vision of the heavenly city determines who gets to eat of these most desirable and powerful fruits. Is this tree the ancient goddess in exile in the male God’s heaven? There are many ways to question the reappearance of this tree at the end of the biblical story.

Conclusion

Goddesses roam (pun intended) the Apocalypse, sometimes in their supernatural selves and sometimes in the guise of human women: Asherah (represented by her priestess Jezebel), Roma (the Whore of Babylon), Isis, and others: the Woman Clothed with the Sun, Gaia (Greek goddess of Earth), the Deep or Chaos (Tehom in Gen. 1:1) and perhaps Tiamat, creatrix serpent goddess/dragon of the Babylonian creation story (Enuma Elish), or Eris (Greek goddess of chaos and discord). The end-time male fantasy is full of powerful females, and not all (or any?) of them are easily contained—by God or the reader.

It is ultimately difficult to navigate the rugged and war-torn terrain of the last book of the Bible. There is a strange sense of this text is how much one buys into and invests in John’s apocalyptic vision. Regardless of how much hope and liberation or misogyny one finds in the portrayal of the female characters and the gender-bending characterizations of Serpent and Lamb, the destructive, genocidal violence leaves many ethical questions for those who accept this text as canonical and in any way authoritative. Is one to desire these apocalyptic endings of John? Are readers called to
question the inevitability of this vision of "God's plan" and imagine a different, more peaceful and inclusive, ending?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BEYOND THE CANON
DEIRDRE GOOD

In the beginning there was no canon or creed. What became canonical and authoritative only emerged over centuries. Since women's concerns did not engage the elite males who ultimately determined the church's canon, for a full understanding of early Christian traditions, all traditions, church orders, and images must be used alongside literary materials. Texts outside the New Testament are commonly identified as (but not restricted to) New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.

Through these sources, we know something of men and women leaders, as well as ordinary people, their relationships, and social networks in the first few centuries of the Common Era. Furthermore, by scrutinizing the ways that gender ideology functions in these texts, we gain insight into particular social constructions of what it meant to be a man or a woman according to this early literature. Initial enthusiasm about recovering women's voices from early Christian traditions, however, has been tempered by the realization that, like the Wisdom figure of Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon, male authors sometimes use women figures in the texts to express their own concerns and interests. With these caveats in mind, this essay explores female figures constructed by men and several women's roles in texts beyond the canon of the New Testament.

The Nag Hammadi Library
A cache of extracanonical writings was discovered in 1945 in Egypt. Called the Nag Hammadi Library (from the town near the discovery), these fourth-century books comprise a Coptic collection of texts. Coptic is the last form of the Egyptian language, using mostly Greek letters. These texts may have been hidden in jars by monks from the nearby monastery to avoid censorship by an emerging dominant church. Some reflect a religious movement that came to be called Gnosticism (from the Greek word gnōsis, "knowledge"). The collection itself is not so easily classified, however, and later anachronistic names like Gnosticism should be resisted. Initial assessments of texts in the Nag Hammadi Library suggested that, while some texts gendered the ideal being as male or rational and transcendent, and the lower or material reality as female, other texts described egalitarian or nongendered ideals, with gender and sexuality identified as belonging to the lower sphere. We have to ask in every case what model of gender is being used to what end. The first model might promote sexual asceticism, or spiritual perfection as the transcendence of what is female by what is male. The Gospel of Mary uses the second model to argue that man and woman show spiritual maturity apart from gender.

Valentinus and Ptolemy's Letter to Flora
Evidence exists that educated women were keenly interested in the religious teachings of the new religion of Christianity in its various forms. In this text, Ptolemy sets out a detailed introduction to Valentinian Christianity for a newly initiated woman named Flora, probably a resident of Rome. Valentinus was a Gnostic Christian who in the middle of the second
INTRODUCTION

The work traditionally entitled the Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews presents readers, especially feminist readers, with multiple problems. Most scholars now share Origen's view that Hebrews was not written by Paul. Its intended audience was not Hebrew-speaking but Greek-speaking, and it is far from certain that they were "Hebrews" (Jews). The work is not formally a letter, but a "word/discourse of exhortation" or hortatory discourse (13:22) with a conventional letter closing appended (13:18–25). Its Greek style is sophisticated, and its thought shows some acquaintance with ancient philosophy. The imagery and language are nearly exclusively masculine; its major metaphor for salvation presents Jesus as high priest and claims that his once-for-all obedience has abolished sacrifice (9:9). A feminist reading of Hebrews is a challenge made more difficult by the long history of Christian patriarchy and supersessionism.

Author, Destination, and Date

Because Hebrews lacks the signature and address that normally open a Greek letter, there have been many attempts to identify its author and destination. In 1900, Adolf von Harnack proposed the hypothesis that Hebrews was written by Prisca, in conjunction with her husband Aquila, a Jewish freedman. She argued that Prisca was a Roman from a patrician family who became a proselyte (convert to Judaism) and married Aquila, a Jewish freedman. In her view Prisca wrote Hebrews to Ephesus, using works of interpretation of Scripture from an Essene community like the covenanters at Qumran. Hoppin's 1969 article was a laudable attempt to refute assertions that only a "masculine mind" could have produced Hebrews.

Her suggestion that "strong identification" with women is evidence of a woman author and that Hebrews manifests that identification finds less agreement among women scholars. The article is of particular interest as a relatively early attempt to argue for a broader picture of the participation of women in the early Christian mission. She redressed the question in a monograph (2000) and an article (2004; see this article, listed in the bibliography, for references to her other work and to Harnack).

One problem with Prisca's authorship is that in Hebrews 11:32 the masculine form of a Greek participle refers to the author and thus indicates that the author either was a man or else had chosen to use a male persona. Hoppin responds to this objection by raising the possibility of either scribal error or editorial revision like the ones that produced a sex-change on Junia the apostle (Rom. 16:7) and Nymphah (Col. 4:15). The manuscript evidence that supports the feminine in those cases is lacking in Hebrews 11:32. The reference to Timothy in the letter closing (13:23) may mean that the author is from the circle of Paul, that the letter closing is a pseudographical attempt to claim Paul or someone in his circle as author, or that there was more than one Timothy. That "anonymous was a woman" has been proved true in some cases in the past, and it is certainly possible that some Christian texts were authored by women. But it is extremely difficult to establish a woman author for any specific text. Hebrews' author remains unknown.

The Word of Exhortation

As a "word of exhortation," Hebrews' main purpose is to encourage its readers. Two elaborate exhortations organize the discourse into three parts. These exhortations urge the readers, "let us approach" or "draw near" (4:16; 10:22), and each closes one argument while introducing the next. The three parts are carefully integrated; each is dominated by a major image of Jesus that appears as a subordinate motif throughout the work.

Partners in a Heavenly Calling (Heb. 1:1–4:16)

The first part, 1:1–4:16, focused on Jesus as Son of God and apostle, speaker from God to human beings, uses Scripture to compare "the son" to both the angels (1:1–2:4) and Moses (3:1–6). Hebrews 1:3 explains "son" in philosophical terms that were used in descriptions of Wisdom/Sophia as a philosophical creator goddess, a "reflection of eternal light" and the "image of [God's] goodness" (Wis. Sol. 7:22–27, esp. 26). The priestly Christology may draw on the image of Wisdom as priest in Sirach 24:9. But in Hebrews the female imagery associated with Wisdom disappears behind the language of sonship. "Son" expresses Jesus' relation not only to God but also to the congregation, who are also God's sons (2:10) and siblings to each other (2:1; NRSV "brothers and sisters"), as well as the children God committed to Jesus (2:13, 14). Jesus fully shares their "flesh and blood" (humanity), including death. This solidarity in human suffering/experience makes him "the pioneer of their salvation" who must undergo perfection (or consecration; Lev. 4:5) and shows that he is capable of the role of high priest (2:10, 17). Psalm 95, read as a reminder of...
the way that the generation of the desert failed to heed the word. In fact, the whole nation destroyed at the new exodus, a journey in response to the call to enter into God's rest. The exhortation (4:14–16) forms a bridge to the second section, which focuses on Jesus as the high priest who speaks to God on behalf of believers.

The Main Point (Heb. 4:14–10:39)

The central section consists in large part of a series of technically sophisticated allegorical arguments from Scripture arguing that Jesus is a suitable and effective high priest, indeed, the great high priest of "the true temple that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up" (8:2). Lacking a priestly genealogy, Jesus is a priest only, but supremely, according to the order of Melchizedek (5:1–10; 6:3–7:28; Ps. 110:4; Gen. 14:17–20). Even more, Hebrews claims that the whole liturgical law in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers was really written as an allegory of Jesus' ascension to God, his journey through "the curtain," that is, his flesh/heavens (4:14; 6:19–20; 10:20). When Hebrews exhorts the reader to "press on" from "the beginning of the word of Christ . . . toward its perfection" (6:1, my trans.), this allegorical reading of the Scripture emerges as that perfected word. The "main point" of Hebrews' comparison between Christ and the high priest (8:1) is that Jesus once-only death and entry into the divine presence was both the goal and the end of the sacrificial priesthood. This once-for-allness both reassures and warns: there is no more need for sacrifice for sin, nor is there any possible second repentance. Those who have begun to follow Jesus "into God's rest," "beyond the curtain," will have no recourse if they turn back (10:18, 26–31; 6:4–8).

The use of the liturgy for the Day of Atonement as the metaphor for salvation raises multiple problems. The allegory focuses on a rite reserved not only to men but to one man only. The metaphor of sacrifice and priesthood has been and continues to be used to bar women from ministry in some Christian communities. Further, other filmmakers skill in the method of allegory itself, which has been used to eradicate the historical reality of those who are defined as "other." Throughout Christian history allegory and typology not only appropriated the Hebrew Bible for Christians, but also denied both the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and the status of "chosen people" to the Jews. Hebrews claims that worship based on priesthood and sacrifice have been abolished (10:9) and interprets Jeremiah's "new covenant" (31:31) as Jesus' commitment to God's will (10:1–8), making the covenant that established the cult "old and near disappearance" (8:13). The lengthy and complex exhortation in 10:19–39 expands the invitation: "let us draw near": drawing near means not only going forward in understanding the Scripture and the message of Christ, but also enduring and resisting the persecution that the author foresees, so as to enter into God's presence with Christ. This exhortation not only brings the preceding section to its climax, but also leads into the procession of saints that opens the third section.

A Cloud of Witnesses (Heb. 11:1–13:25)

The final section of the letter focuses on Jesus as pioneer of salvation. Beginning with a series of examples of those whose faith is attested by Scripture, it is almost entirely an exhortation to go forward on "the new and living way opened" up by Christ.

First comes a celebration of the elders attested by Scriptures as examples of faith (11:1–40). A few women appear among these heroic "strangers and foreigners," whose journeying summarizes the history of Israel. Only two, Sarah (11:11–12) and Rahab the harlot (11:31), are remembered by name. Sarah's role has been further diminished in some modern translations. The Greek says, "By faith, Sarah received the power to deposit seed" (11:1, my trans.). "Deposit seed" often describes the male part in procreation. The NRSV has resolved this problem by making Abraham the subject of 11:11–12 and treating the reference to Sarah as an footnote, while providing the unversed version in a footnote. But this revision is unnecessary. The author of Hebrews could have understood this language in either of two ways. First, it is far from clear that this language could only apply to a man. The Hippocrates, later theorists, and popular understanding held that women as well as men contributed seed to conception. In fact, the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Numbers 5:22 says explicitly that woman produces seed. Second, male language used about a woman had implied moral and spiritual perfection in antiquity, an idea that was applied to Sarah and other biblical figures (Phil. On the Pestility and Ectasy of Cain 134; Questions and Answers on Genesis 4.15, 66; 2 Macc. 7.21; 4 Macc. 15:30; Gospel of Thomas 114), and that became increasingly important in the first centuries. Rahab was popular in early Christian and Jewish example lists (1 Clem. 12:1–8; Jas. 2:25; Sifre on Numbers 78; see also Matt. 1:5), apparently representing proselytes (Gentile converts to Judaism) who "drew near" and had "to believe that [God] exists, and rewards those who seek [God]" (11:6, my trans.). Sarah, like her husband/Kin Abraham (see Gen. 11:27–29; 12:19–20; 20:1–17), would also have been seen as a proselyte.

Some women seem to have ceased being from the scriptural traditions. The Hebrew text of Exodus 2:2 reports that the mother of Moses hid him for three months, and the Septuagint uses "they." But for Hebrews it was "his fathers" (11:23) who preserved him by faith; the inclusive NRSV translation "parents" accords with a scriptural usage. The slaughter of Pharaoh is named only in reference to Moses' refusal to be called her son (11:24). Miriam appears neither as a participant in the birth and salvation of Moses nor at the crossing of the sea (11:24–26, 29). In the summary lists of 11:32–40, Barak is memorialized among the judges with Gideon, Samson, and the infamous Jephthah, but Deborah and Jael are forgotten. Hebrews 11:35 refers to women who received back their dead through faith; Rahab, Sarah, and Hagar are resuscitated by Elijah and Eliseus (1 Kgs. 17:22; 2 Kgs. 4:36). The author finds a better example in "others" (masculine plural in Greek) who "were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection." The "others" are almost certainly the martyrs of 2 Maccabees 6:12–7:42, including the mother of seven sons, praised by 4 Maccabees 15:30 as "more noble than males in steadfastness and more manly than men in endurance" (my trans.). She is not explicitly mentioned by Hebrews. Both Rahab and Sarah appear to represent Gentiles as well as (or rather than) women. Rahab's dubious sexual status renders her problematic as an example to women who also heard, "Let marriage be held in honor by all and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers" (13:4).

Thus Hebrews seems to neglect women examples, even to avoid them. Does the author then seek to exclude women, to discourage the women of the community from "drawing near'? If Sarah is presented as a woman who has attained the perfection of maleness, then perhaps the women of the community are included but invited to look only to the "manly" heroes of the past.

Christ as son and pioneer is perfected by suffering (2:10; 5:8–9; 12:2), and the procession in the community's past and future is seen as discipline (upholding or education) for them. As "sons" they are distinguished from "bastards" who get no upholding (12:4–11). The comparison reinforces the patriarchal valuing of "legitimate" over "illegitimate" children, which trysts women's sexuality as a commodity. Here too the NRSV uses language that is falsely inclusive; the Greek text uses "father" and "son," not "child" and "parent." The father's concern for his sons' education and discipline was only sometimes extended to daughters. The abusive connection of punishment and love has endured as a commonplace of patriarchal education and childrearing from antiquity to today. Hebrews' counsel puts a divine sanction behind the abuse of women and abusive childrearing, and its focus on obedience can encourage resignation and passivity. Pamela Eisenbaum has pointed out that father-son relationships, priesthoods, and blood sacrifice were connected in ancient Mediterranean religious practice. Israelis, Greeks, and Romans all used blood sacrifice to create a lineage from real or fictive father to son. In Hebrews, Jesus' death and ascension become blood sacrifice creating a "new, superior, divinely sanctioned lineage, with new terms for membership" (Eisenbaum 2004, 146).

Hearing the Word into Speech

Is it possible to read Hebrews as call to redefine the "terms of membership" so as to reject supercessionism and patriarchal order? To enable Hebrews to speak to feminist theology, it is essential to hear the "once-for-all" that characterizes the sacrifice by which Jesus crossed the curtain and sat down at God's right hand forever (1:3; 8:1; 9:23–28; 10:12; 12:2), "living always to intercede for those who draw near" (7:25, my trans.) on the new and living way he has opened for them. The full impact of the image of Jesus as high priest emerges when Hebrews is seen as post-70, that is, after the temple was destroyed, and while the Romans were devastating Jewish communities in response to the revolts of 66–73, 115–17, and 132–35 CE.
By choosing the high priest's entry into the sanctuary on Yom Kippur as the high point of the liturgy, the author found a single image that could provide an explanation for the two great traumas that formed so many New Testament texts: the death of Jesus and the destruction of the temple, "the place where the sins of Israel were stoned" (The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan A, 4). This image absorbed catastrophe into divine providence. For Hebrews the Pentateuchal prescriptions for the sanctuary and the prophetic promises were proven true by Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice, rather than invalidated by the Roman destruction of the temple.

If that once-for-all sacrifice has created a new "lineage with new terms for membership" (Eisenbaum 2004, 146), those new terms must be defined only by the call to draw near and be faithful. Melchizedek is the pattern of Jesus' priesthood precisely because Jesus does not fit the criteria for legitimate priesthood in the line of Levi and Aaron (7:11-19; 8:3-5). Hebrews' arguments for Christ's priesthood preclude demands to "image" that priesthood in the Christian ministry that are based on criteria of flesh and blood like race, gender, and class. Practice is defined only in the most limited and conventional terms (1:1-7).

The minimal inclusion of women in Hebrews 11 can become a starting point rather than a limitation. These exemplars extend beyond the praise of "man" (Sil. 4:4:1) to include a few women, and they are treated, to borrow Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's terms, not as archetypes but as prototypes. The saints are exemplary not so much for what they have done as for what they have not done. Despite their great faith and the divine testimony they receive, "they are not perfected without us" (11:17, my trans.). As a "cloud of witnesses" encouraging the readers to "run . . . the race that is set before us" (12:1-2), they invite feminist readers to build on their examples, and to expand them with women witnesses in and beyond the Scriptures.

Feminist readers of the twenty-first century should also draw a reverse imperative from the list: we are not perfected without these saints—or without their other descendants, the Jews who for nearly two thousand years have also offered only a "sacrifice of praise" (13:15; Ps. 50:14, 23). So many centuries later the covenant's antiquity has not meant its disappearance (6:13), but rather calls Christians to join the Jewish communities in their commitment to repair the world.

Hebrews' vision of Christian life is as journey of transformation toward a communal completion (perfection), a "household of freedom" built on the "authority of the future," calling believers to act now for the common good (Russell). To do so is to see obedience to the will of God not as resignation to "the way things are" but as commitment to justice and radical change. Feminist readers must reject the interpretation of suffering as divine discipline, but can see Jesus' pioneering passage and the "cloud of witnesses" (12:1) as an invitation to revere and remember the suffering of the oppressed who died without having received the promise and as a call to open for all the oppressed a new and living way.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


James is the first of several writings in the New Testament known as General or Catholic Epistles. These documents (James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John; Jude) are not directed to particular communities but rather reflect the names of the presumed authors. Although considered a letter, the only standard epistolary feature of James is the greeting addressed to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion who are considered the "sons of Jacob" (1:1). The letter begins with a call to living faith and to do what is just and righteous (2:14-26), during the Reformation this letter was deemed an "epistle of straw" and overshadowed by Paul's teachings on faith and works. With the exception of the widows in 1:27 and Rahab in 2:25, the letter does not specifically discuss women. Yet throughout the text, the author refers to both men and women as "brothers and sisters" (1:2; 2:1; 2:5; 2:14; 3:1; 5:12) and more generally as brothers and sisters (4:11; 5:10), envisaging a variegated community united in faith and support. The widows and Rahab function as symbolic exemplars of pure religion and engaged faithfulness. Through these exemplars and other illustrative narratives, the author consistently demonstrates that social and economic disparities, immoral judgments, and insensitive favoritism must be eradicated. This writing offers many resources for exploring contemporary injustices against women and children, as well as other injustices emanating from inequitable distribution of resources (e.g., financial, health care, educational, etc.) that continue to affect women across the globe.
INTRODUCTION

The Name and Place of Acts in the New Testament

The Acts of the Apostles, or Acts, stands alone within the New Testament as the sole narrative (rather than epistle, homily, or apocalypse) written to address the period immediately following the resurrection of the Christ. Like much of the New Testament, its authorship is unknown, although most scholars are convinced by its literary style, common themes, and other presumptions that it shares common authorship with the Gospel according to Luke. As a result, for convenience, the author of Acts is referred to as "Luke," but who Luke was remains mysterious.

The title "Acts of the Apostles" was supplied in the second century, but it is also somewhat misleading. Its principal character, Saul or Paul of Tarsus, is not, strictly speaking, an apostle, that title being reserved by Luke principally to the eleven male delegates chosen by Jesus, as well as Matthias, who was chosen by lot (Acts 1). Luke calls Paul an apostle exactly once, in Acts 14:14, and never repeats this designation. The apostles of note that function as key characters in the text are Peter and, to much lesser extent, John of Zebedee and James the brother of Jesus. Most of these disappear by chapter 6, and even Peter is largely silent after chapter 10, with the notable exception of Acts 15.

The canonical placement of Acts allows it to serve as a bridge between the Gospels that precede it and the nonnarrative writings that follow it, many of which are attributed to the primary character in Acts, Paul of Tarsus. However, this also causes some conflict among biblical scholars both theologically and historically. First, Acts differs on several points from Paul's account of his own ministerial history in the epistles (compare, for example, Acts 9 and Gal. 2). These difficulties notwithstanding, Acts continues to play a pivotal role occasionally controversial, role for scholars in the reconstruction of the history of the early Christian movement. Theologically, the canonical placement of Acts before the first-generation and second-generation Pauline and Deuter-Pauline theology of the epistles, can cause interpreters to read "Paul" through Luke's lens, a reading that can lead to a domestication of Pauline radicalism in favor of Luke's more conciliatory stance toward the Roman occupation and imperializing stance on behalf of the "kingdom" or empire of God. Both of these have implications for the growth of the Jesus movement.

Contents, Structure, and Composition


The narrative of Acts follows loosely two narratives. The first is Luke's account of Jesus' last instruction to the Eleven before his ascension: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Tracing the travels of The Way from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and ultimately to "land's end" (Malina and Pilch, 23) serves as a schema for the pre-Pauline mission. The second narrative expands the reach of The Way through Luke's account that Paul is to be "a light to the Gentiles" (or outsiders) (13:47). This second narrative undergirds Paul's travels through the Mediterranean as an ambassador of The Way.

Following these schemas, the contents of Acts may be organized into roughly four movements, although these are not sharp divisions within the text, and the content of each section tends to bleed into the next: The Way in Jerusalem (Acts 1-5); The Way among the Greek-Speakers (Acts 6-9); The Way among the Outiders (Acts 10:1-19:20); The Way and the Empire (Acts 19:21-28:31). These, in turn, may be combined into two broader commissions previously noted: the commission of Jesus to the disciples (Acts 1:9); and the commission of the Spirit to Paul (Acts 10:28).

Two major questions of composition attend to Acts. First, there are two parallel Greek manuscript traditions for Acts: the currently accepted "critical" manuscript and the so-called "Western" manuscript traditions. The latter maintains a much stronger anti-Jewish bias. Text critics have judged these additions to be suspect; however, they can be still be found on occasion, particularly in older translations of the English Bible (cf., e.g., Acts 3:27 in KJV and a modern translation and in translations in other languages (such as Latin and Syriac). Second, Luke seems to have used a "we" source for Acts 16, 20, 21, and 27. This source narrates parts of Paul's journeys in the first-person plural (we), that is, as one who was a fellow traveler. Outskirt of some minor issues surrounding dating Luke-Acts, the "we" source poses no significant difficulty to the interpretation of the book. In light of Luke's dependence on at least Mark, if not also Matthew, in the Gospel, the use of sources in Acts comes as no surprise.

The Historical Context of Acts

Scholars date Luke-Acts between 80 and 90 CE, despite the presence of the "we" narratives in Acts 16, 20, 21, and 27 (see above). Although some contend that the "we" narratives point to a much earlier date, Luke's own admission of a third-generation status (Luke 1:1-2), as well as the Gospel's obvious dependence upon Mark (and possibly Matthew), indicates later dating.

Luke wrote under the Roman Empire's occupation and political domination of the Mediterranean basin. This occupation was violent militaristically, economically, and religiously. Rome's armies were notorious for their brutality, and Rome did not hesitate to make examples of anyone who might be seen as arousing a revolt against its absolute rule (Luke 23:37).

Luke's community would have known this, for Acts is written not more than two decades after the Roman siege and demolition of Jerusalem.

Still, Rome's power was usually maintained through less direct means. Client kings and procurators quarried revenue in exchange for power, privilege, and wealth. Occupied lands were impoverished, their goods exported to Rome for their consumption by the elite (Rev. 18). In the realm of political religion, the use of various media from temples to coins propagated the belief that the Caesar of Rome was divi filius, son of a god, and thus himself a god. This intersected with the majority polytheistic belief systems to create mass veneration for the absolute ruler.

Socioculturally, extreme class differentiation, patriarchy, and slavery were normative. Approximately 2 percent of the population controlled the vast majority of wealth, and more than half lived at a subsistence level at least some of the time. The early attempts of The Way to redistribute wealth (Acts 2:45) would have been a political religious strategy that issued a strong challenge to the status quo.

Patriarchy affected all women, although not all equally, as the rich and powerful were able to mitigate some of its effects and even, participated in the oppression of the poor. Nevertheless, women were assumed to be inferior to men in all things, and this affected even political iconography. The famous representation Judith Capito, a picture of defeated Roman Palestine as a Jewish woman sitting in mourning under a palm in the face of a victorious Caesar or an
unmanned (i.e., captured, hands bound) Jewish men, was minted onto Roman coins after the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

Slavery was also an assumed normative institution in the first century, and it existed both outside of and within The Way (1:13). Luke—Acts illustrates no attempt on the part of The Way to emancipate its slaves or those of its community. Further, although other parts of the canon suggest Paul at least struggling with the question of slavery (in the letter to Philemon), no such potentially emancipatory document exists in the New Testament with regard to a female slave.

Four Hermeneutical Lenses: Reading Acts in a Darkly Gendered Postcolonial Way

I will employ four hermeneutical lenses while reading Acts: gender, postcoloniality, theology, and reading "darkly." For Acts is a study in contradictions. It names and highlights people of subordinate and nonnormative genders, but subjects them below a patriarchal structure headed by a masculine, imperial Deity. It reveals decolonizing impulses within The Way, but the narrative is framed by two imperializing premises (Acts 1, 9). It is the source of theological and ethical assertions that have been central within movements of justice, while stigmatizing entire groups of holy people who believe differently from The Way. It could be called the Christian justification for imperialism, and yet, when read "darkly," also provides tools for dismantling the very imperialism that it propagates.

By gender as a hermeneutical lens, I mean, first, the presence and visibility or invisibility of women, those with and those without social power. However, I will also consider nonnormative gender as well as the question of "unmanning"—ways in which men are deprived of their normative patriarchal power. Within Acts, this means that I will discuss the chamberlain of the Kandake of Meroe, who is also a eunuch; the circumcision debate; and the ways in which the text builds upon narratives about imprisonment, beating, and chains, turning them from stories of being "unmanned" to narratives of being truly masculine.

For the postcolonial critique, I turn to the questions Saya Dube raises in Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible. With her, I will wonder aloud about the text's stance for or against the Roman Empire, and consider critically how its narratives of travel, its descriptions of interactions among strangers, and its treatment of bodies of women (including the land itself) might further an alter-imperial rather than a decolonizing or anti-imperial agenda.

At the same time, I will be paying attention, along with Pametria Williams, to how Acts has been read darkly—read by those on the underside of society, particularly by African American readers, for several of the Acts narratives have been central in the African American fight against legal and systemic racism. These "dark" readers might give us a way to read against the imperializing agenda without compromising our critique of it.

I will consider the theology of Acts, focusing specifically on those theological issues that intersect the above concerns. Among these are the gendered depiction of the Deity and how that undergirds structures of patriarchy and empire; gender and theological purity or impurity, particularly as this relates to questions of manliness; and the presence of holy peoples within the text, particularly the treatment of worshippers whose beliefs differ from those within The Way, such as the Jews (Kouthis and Artemis-worshipers). Here I want to investigate how Luke seeks to shape Christian belief, and how that project might be affirmed and critiqued by contemporary readers of Acts.

COMMENT

The Way in Jerusalem (Acts 1–5)

The Beginning (Acts 1:1–2:21)

Acts begins with an aniconic ideology that "anesthetizes and sanctifies the exploitative act to make it acceptable" (Dube, 60). Through a command of Jesus (1:8), Luke authorizes Jesus' followers to travel to other lands and bear witness. Thus Luke paints as acceptable the exportation of a normative imperial political religion to "Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to lands end."

Luke does not specify that men alone are thus called; and women are among the number of the early movement (1:14–15). Thus women are present at the moment of Pentecost, translating the new imperial message into languages from Mediterranean North Africa, western Asia, and, as is often assumed, into Greek. Indeed, Peter explains the outpouring of Spirit as a gift of God regardless of gender, class, or age. Women are enabled, from the start, into this breaking empire.

Nevertheless, Peter's insistence of the egalitarian outpouring of Spirit is suspect, for it marks his proclamation of the rise of an empire (2:46–36) and the persistent presence of slaves within it (2:18). And while the members of The Way undercut some of the class distinctions of the new imperial power, this is suspect, for it reveals the likely presence of women among these crowds, whether as receptive of The Way or resistant to it. Special care should be taken when reading the synagogues scenes to Acts (such as 9:20; 13:5, 14, 43). Despite Luke's admission in Acts 9:2 that Saul might find women and men in the synagogues of Damascus who are followers of the Way, readers and commentators often fall into the habit of assuming that these political religious spaces were single-gendered gatherings. Yet according to Bernadette Brooten there is no clear archaeological evidence of single-gender gatherings within synagogues (Brook, 137–38), or of a women's gallery above the men's gallery. Further, there is archaeological evidence to suggest women in leadership in the synagogue (Brooten, 1989). Feminist interpretation of the Bible.

With her, I do not wish to read against the Lukan patriarchal lens, supplying the presence of women in crowds and synagogues. Such a reading against what appears to be the surface meaning of the text may well be closer to the truth.

Sapphira (Acts 4:32–5:11)

Sapphira's story is perhaps the ideal example of the competing interpretive stances promoted by Luke's narrative. Reading darkly, that is, from those without power or privilege, Sapphira's story illustrates a divine option for a community in which there are no class distinctions, but wealth is shared in common. Such is the reasoning of the Rev. George Woodby, who in the early part of the twentieth century argued for socialism among African Americans on the basis of this passage (Williams, 221–24). In light of the segregated class distinctions with which African Americans lived, this was good news.

Yet Sapphira also may be read as a woman caught between multiple forces of class, patriarchy, and empire; she is a woman of wealth, and thus is a member of the class that oppresses the poor. Her community is living out a radical solidarity with the poor by combining its resources, an action to which she is called as a community member. Yet she is also a married woman, the property of her husband, according to the customs and laws of her society. To dis­ honor him in public by calling him a liar would have been to risk her life. Thus she is caught between survival under patriarchy and the call to solidarity with the poor.

Further, at colonized people, Ananias and Sapphira's choice to withhold some of their earnings from the land, and not to tell those in the service of the emperor (in this case, the masculinized, all powerful God), may be understood as an act of resistance. Like a spy on behalf of an emperor, Satan uncoverers and displays their disloyalty to their patron. The response from the new imperial power is not only swift but brutal. The punishment for their
attempted shaming of their patron is immediate. Of particular note is the extent to which even internalized dissent to the empire is impossible, a threat hidden from the implied readers by the assumed justice of the God who strikes Sapphira dead. This message is clear. For clients of the Way, resistance is futile.

**Excursus 2: On Being "Unmannned"**

The ability to protect one's body from violation was an essential dimension of the Roman code of masculinity and "trifling of family life was a challenge to the traditional authority of the paterfamilias" (Glancy, 138, 262). Thus, the number of imprisonments and beatings and other narratives of "unnaming" in Acts is striking. These include the beating and imprisonment of those teaching in the temple (5:17-42), the persecution and imprisonment of women and men of The Way (8:1-4), and the mob violence faced by Jason and Sosthenes (17:5-18:17). In each case, those loyal to Rome and its clients (such as the temple elite) emasculate the stoles of the Way through the violation either of their persons or of those of the females of their households.

Acts 5:41 offers a rare glimpse into how Luke's community "re-presents" this act of unmanning as a sign not of emasculation but of exaggerated masculinity with regard to the norms and transcended strength on the part of the women. In Luke's narrative, only certain persons were "worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the Name." In this way, Luke subverts the empire's attempt to shame The Way, retaining emasculated shame as a mark of honor.

The Way among Greek-Speakers (Acts 6–9)

**The Daily diakonia (Acts 6:1–7)**

Movement two of Acts begins with a conflict typically described as the neglect of Greek-speaking widows in the daily distribution of food. However, nowhere else in the Greek New Testament or the Septuagint is any derivative of diakone used with respect to distribution of food to the poor. Rather, the diakone was a "person who functioned as an agent of a higher-ranking person...as a messenger or a diplomat" (Pilch, 55). Further, the Greek-speaking (RSV "Hellenistic") widows are not here depicted as the recipients of charity.

Acts 6 does describe a dispute between two culturally distinct groups of widows within the community. However, the nature of this dispute may center upon the right to lead, rather than to be served. The presence of tables in 6:2 does not obviate this reading. Serving at tables can be a euphemism for banking, and the ongoing disputes in the community, until this point in Luke's narrative, have concerned money, not food.

The solution to this crisis may be read as a liberating act. The appointment of Greek-speaking men to solve the conflict empowers a minority group within the community to ensure just relations. However, the presence of Greek-speaking men, who would be able to converse easily with the Roman occupants, were the disempowered in Jerusalem. Further, it ignores the Roman model of co-opting rulers from within a conquered people as client rulers of the empire. Regardless, Acts 6 certainly functions as an authorizing narrative for messengers or diplomats of the inbreaking empire, men who will fulfill Jesus' command in taking the imperial message to "land's end." In any case, patriarchy remains in place in the Way, for although the disparates are widows, the chosen diakone are all men.

**Excursus 3: About Excursus**

The second movement in Acts shifts Luke's narrative outside of Jerusalem, already a non-native city for the Galilean nucleus of the Way. Luke narrates the movements of the diakone, as messengers of the Deity to Scevier, Gaza, Damascus, Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea Maritima—land's end. Paul and his companions continue from travels into the lands of the Gentiles, or outsiders, stopping in more than thirty cities and regions along the way. Readers of Acts may be tempted to read such travel narratives as innocuous tales of adventure. However, in imperializing texts, particularly ones that claim divine authorization for travel (1:15; 16:9), travel is often the precursor to conquest and colonization, in this case, ideological conquest. Luke and Luke's colonized readers would have experienced this from Rome. Rather than imagine a new model of encounter and learning from the other, however, Luke replicates imperialism in the narrative of church growth, a narrative that would one day be accompanied by military might.

The Kandake's Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40)

The diakonos Philip travels to the desert of Gaza, authorized by "the Spirit" (8:26). His mission: the ideological conquest of "land's end" to the south: Nubia (or Ethiopia), more specifically the city-state of Meroe ruled by the Kandake (RSV "Candace"). Philip confronts the Kandake's treasurer who, like him, is a multi-lingual Jew able to interface easily with empire. Luke depicts Saul's "conquest" as an envoy of the current ruling elite who, in turn, are in league with the Roman Empire (4:27; 9:1–2). This encounter leaves him unable to stand and to defend himself. Further, he loses his power to protect his body from violation. He is blinded and thus "unnammed." The blinding of one's opponent was a known form of domination, even related in the Scriptures (4:14 acc. 18:21). And although this act is not violent or, in it turns out, irreversible, nevertheless the result is the same. The self-sufficient envoy of one empire loses self-control, a key aspect of masculinity (Glancy, 242). He is required to rely on others for existence, and even to rely on Africans, one he would have led away in chains, for sight.

This narrative of Jesus' unmanning of Saul does contain decolonizing and anti-patriarchal aspects. Yet Saul's unmanning lasts only three days. Conquered and blinded, he succeeds to colonization and becomes a delegate of the new empire, the one who will push the imperial agenda beyond land's end to the outsiders, and he never again accedes to being completely unmanned.

**Tabitha and the Joppa Assembly (Acts 9:36–42)**

Between the story of Saul's unmanning and Peter's conversion (Acts 10) is the story of the only woman specifically named "disciple" (μαθητής) in the Greek New Testament: Tabitha. Luke says of Tabitha, she is a Greek-speaking Jew who has both a Jewish name and a Greek name, Dorcas. The story of Peter's raising of Tabitha gives Luke's readers insight into one role that women played in The Way. In Tabitha's case, she uses her ability to sew and possibly her own financial resources (9:36), so that she might make clothing for widows and, presumably, other who might be in need.

Tabitha's role, especially among the widows of the community, once more calls into question the traditional interpretation of Acts 6, which styles the widows of The Way as passive recipients of food. The widows of Joppa also function as official mourners of the community, tending to Tabitha's corpse and accompanying it until its intended burial. In both instances, these are women with clear and respected roles within The Way.
not require his unmanning. Yet the struggle around circumcision continues later in Luke’s narrative as Timothy, the child of interethnic marriage, is circumcised. Perhaps his too is a political act of “choosing sides” between his Greek father and his Jewish mother.

Excursus 4: Echoes of Mercy
(Acts 16:34-36, 17:26)

Through a lens of slavery and segregation, African Americans read Acts 10:34-36 and 17:26 as biblical critiques of oppression. Acts 10 became a rallying cry against slavery from the early part of the nineteenth century. In his Appeal, David Walker argued, “Surely the Americans must believe that God is partial... Can the American preachers appeal... that they make no distinction on account of men’s color?” (Williams, 231). However, “the Greek adjective saulos (loose, wanton)” was normally descriptive of “the peculiar walking style of courtseans and effeminate males” (Malina and Pilch, 90). Luke’s shift from Saulos to Paul is thus an intentional strengthening of Paul’s masculinity as he begins the heart of his imperial commission to be a “light to the Gentiles” that is, to bring the imperial message to other lands besides his own (13:47). As in the rest of Acts, this imperialist travel is justified by divine sanction; but curiously, to fulfill it, Saul must colonize himself, leaving behind his identity, left by his very name he be unmanned.

Women and the Way (Acts 13:50; 16-17)


As Paul and his companions announce the Good News to the Gentiles, women of those cities help to receive or resist this new empire. In Antioch of Pisidia, the “God-fearing” (sebomenai) devout women reject the interfering empire. These women probably worship in the synagogue, whether or not they are ethnically Gentile. That Judean loyalists incite them to their involvement in Jewish community. This narrative about Paul, but not simply in a decolonizing stance. Instead, they, being of high rank, chose to preserve the colonial power in which their rank is secure. Luke does not report to us whether these women of power considered poorer, less highly ranked women in their rejection of The Way.


Luke’s narrative of Paul in Philippi illustrates how different kinds of women were affected by Paul’s imperializing teaching. The narrative opens with a gathering of women to pray at the river; this underscores again Brooten’s contention that there were women ritual leaders in Diaspora Judaism. From this gathering, Lydia enters into the traditional relationship of a female character to an imperial envoy (cf. the Kandake’s encounter above): “reflecting the colonizer’s desire to enter and domesticate the land” and “totally believing in the superiority of the colonizer” (Dube, 77-78). A woman of wealth and status, dealing in purple cloth and thus economically interdependent with the Philippian elite, her baptism and hospitality signal that she has been colonized; and she becomes a representative of Philippi. A slave girl, by contrast, refuses to be colonized by Paul, Silas, and their companions. Instead she discourses their identity and agenda as slaves of the Deity who intend to rescue others. Even her naming Paul and his companions as slaves of the Deity exposes them, for it points to the anti-imperializing justification for their travel. Paul’s response is to drive out the truth-telling spirit, leaving her enslaved and silenced. However, in so doing, he imposes on her, who have been exploiting her truth-telling, and this in turn leads to resistance of The Way by the people of Philippi.

Silent but present in all of this are the women of the households of Paul’s taller and of Lydia. They are baptized into the new empire with the rest of the household, likely without consultation or option. Luke thus portrays The Way as an empire that gives women like Lydia status and voice but nevertheless requires class distinctions among women and silences those without control of their own households or persons.

The Women of Thessalonica and Berea, and Damars of Athens (Acts 17:4, 12, 34). As in Philippi, so also in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens, The Way faces resistance. However, in these cities, Luke repeats a refrain: women of status and power from the cities form The Way. Luke does not say this directly, but undoubtedly they, like Lydia and Mary, also...
become patrons of the movement. That Luke consistently notes the presence of women of substance, piety, and power as among the earliest conquests of The Way speaks to the importance of these women in the early assemblies as leaders and as funders. If they represent their cities open for plunder, they also, at least initially, govern the assemblies of The Way.

**Priscilla of Italy (Acts 18:1-3, 18-19, 26)** Priscilla (or Prisca, as she appears in the epistles), a refugee of the Claudian expulsion of Jews from the city of Rome, appears only briefly in Acts. However, she further illustrates the role of women in the Christian assemblies. In the New Testament, she is usually named before her husband, and it is possible that she outranks him. She is an artisan, but she and her husband own a house and house an assembly of The Way (1 Cor. 16:19). In Romans, Paul calls Priscilla syneggos, a title also given to her husband Aquila, and to Timothy, Titus, Philonem, Mark, and Luke (Rom. 16:3). This seems to indicate significant leadership on her part. Luke portrays her sailing with Paul and teaching Apollos in the synagogue of Ephesus. Priscilla is more than a recipient of The Way. She is an envoy.


**Artemis of the Ephesians (Acts 19:21-41)**

In Luke's fourth movement in Acts, as in the Gospel, the protagonist turns to head for Jerusalem (Luke 9:52; Acts 19:21). As Luke relates this final portion of Paul's journey, women and the poor become increasingly invisible, with attention paid instead to the representatives of Roman imperial occupation. The protest of the Ephesian silversmiths is a notable exception to this. While a human woman is not named, the protest breaks out in celebration of a goddes, Artemis of the Ephesians, in opposition to the very masculinist God and Jesus of Paul's proclamation.

Ephesus was home to a temple to Artemis called the "Artemis and the Lion of the wonders of the ancient world" (Malina and Plich, 140). As with all other temples, including the one in Jerusalem, for the Ephesians the Artemision was the center of political religion. Artemis, the Ephesian's, in opposition to the very masculinist God and Jesus of Paul's proclamation.

They similarly, co-opted their households without discussion, as did Lydia. The silence of the female prophets of Caesarea reminds us that there is more to tell, both of women's complicity in the sexualizing rhetoric of The Way. It also reminds us that some of those stories will never be told.

**Women Leaders in the Assembly (Acts 21:9)**

Luke's last explicit reference to women in leadership in The Way takes place in Caesarea Maritima. There Philip (8:64), one of the original seven diaconos, Luke tells us, has four prophetic daughters. The presence of these four women prophets as members of The Way echoes the Israelite tradition of four female prophets: Miriam (Exod. 15:20); Deborah (Judg. 4:4); Huldah (2 Kgs. 22:14); and Noadiah (Neh. 6:14). The silence of these women underscores that, even when named, women leaders of The Way are too often unheard, because of the patriarchal society of their day. Nevertheless, women pioneered a vital role that challenged the patriarchy that they all experienced.

Still, it is not enough to note that women were silenced by Luke in favor of male protagonists. Silencing speaking women in The Way, no less than men, was part of the masculinist mission of the Way. Women leaders, no less than men, preached, taught, and traveled under the gaze of anticonquest theology. However, the resistance of The Way to the silences that made the mission God-sanctioned and thus unassailable.

Within communities outside of Roman Palestine, they harbored the representatives of this new ideology and banished the assemblies of the kingdom of God. For they were not as men, but as women. When she clergies that "the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorched and she will be deprived of her majesty," he is identifiably, correctly, what the unnamed Philippian slave girl has also noted (19:27). Paul and his companions are not innocent purveyors of knowledge. They are slaves of a Deity who has sent them to liberate traditions of female biology.

**Patriarchy and the Rise of the Roman Empire (Acts 19:21-41)**

Luke's portrayal of God is difficult to define. The relationship between God and Jesus is undefined, and the relationship of the Spirit to both is never completely clear. Yet Luke's God is clearly masculinist, a patron that brooks no public shaming (Acts 19:25), but who will con­quer and co-opt into his service those who he thinks might be valuable (Acts 9). Luke's narrative portrays this deity as able to give Peter power over life and death (Acts 9) and as capable of blinding an opponent with a flash of light (Acts 9). Yet Peter affirms of this God, "God is no respecter of persons." And concerning this God, Paul testifies, "God has made of one blood all nations of the gentiles" (Acts 17:34).

How then is Acts to be read by women, who see themselves in places of power and of oppression, women who see the God of Acts as a liberator and women who see his dominion? I suggest that women read Acts in two ways. The first I have tried to demonstrate throughout this commentary. It is a text that takes seriously the presence of women in Acts, but also their power differentials. It is a reading that takes gender seriously, particularly nonnormative gender. For women readers of biblical texts, gendered readings must mean something broader than identifying characters who seem to have female biology. Patriarchy affects not only the power of women but also the power of all those who are unmaned.

However, other readings of Acts are also possible, and some of these are indicated by the interpretations of African American readers that appear in this chapter. These readings, by persons with a history of slavery and segregation, point to the possibilities for the use of these imperializing narratives in dark, decolonizing ways. They call readers to acknowledge how these texts can be used not only to oppress and colonize but also to liberate and decolonize. The use of Acts 2 to oppose obstacles to women preachers: of Acts 6 to point to male treatment for ethnic minorities or of Acts 10 and Acts 17 to challenge slavery and segregation point to ways in which these texts can be used to challenge our own patriarchal, classist, racist, and imperialist structures.

In the context of Botswana, Musa Dube might call these latter moves Semoya readings, readings that take seriously the transgressive nature of Spirit (Moya) in Acts. For Botswana women in African Independent Churches, Moya "empowered them to reject the discriminatory leadership of missionary-founded churches and to begin their own churches... Moya revealed to them... the call of justice and its liberating inclusivity." Such readings, dark readings, Semoya readings, "pretext discrimination and articulate... healing" (Dube, 192). Perhaps such readings are possible only when oppressive patriarchal, imperialist, gendered, and classist structures are named in our sacred texts. For then the promise of Acts, to women and men, to those unmaned and envies of occupying forces, to slaves and shareholders, is realized in a new reading of these texts. The poor become increasingly visible, with attention paid instead to the representatives of Roman occupying forces, to slaves and slaveholders, to the poor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Paul's letter to Christians in the powerful city of Rome expands on the customary letter opening (identification of the writer and the audience, 1:1, 7) with a brief summary of the gospel itself (1:2-6). The gospel concerns Jesus Christ, who is both a physical descendant of David and a powerful son of God, and through whom Paul's work among the Gentiles has been authorized. The thanksgiving that follows (1:8-12) reveals that Paul himself has not yet been to Rome, although he knows the reputation of believers there. Paul also specifies that his work is among the Gentiles ("both to Greeks and to barbarians," 1:13-14). With 1:16-17, the introduction culminates in an initial statement of the letter's overall argument: In the gospel God acts with power to save all human beings, first Jews and then also Greeks. If the gospel reveals God's salvation, it also reveals God's "wrath," that is, why that salvation is needed. In 1:18-3:20 Paul relentlessly argues that all human beings, without exception, are sinful in that they rebel against the very power and priority of God. The sin of Gentiles (i.e., all persons who are not Jews) consists of their refusal to acknowledge God. Even the advantage of God's gifts to the Jewish people does not change the fact that they, along with Gentiles, are "under the power of sin" (3:9).

In 3:21 Paul returns to unpack the central point he has already introduced in 1:16-17. Through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, God reveals God's own righteousness and thereby reclaims humanity from the deadly grip of sin.

Since this act of salvation is God's doing, human beings have no right to boast of their own accomplishments (3:21-31). Like Abraham and Sarah (Rom. 4), who could not imagine the possibility of a child born in their old age, humanity finds that God has not only raised Jesus from the dead but has made right those who are ungodly (i.e., everyone). To explain the extravagance of God's act of reconciliation, Paul takes up a comparison between Adam and Christ in chapter 5. Both lives affect every human being, yet Adam's act of rebellion ushers sin and death into the world, while Christ's act of righteousness inaugurates a new and gracious life of reconciliation. In this new life the Spirit of God rules in place of sin, and the Spirit empowers hope even in the face of suffering and pain. Indeed, by means of the Spirit, believers see on the horizon God's final act of salvation for the whole of creation (Rom. 8).

Paul's bold statements about God's unfathomable generosity prompt some predictable questions. First, if God justifies sinners (i.e., makes things right with them), does that mean in effect that God is actually encouraging sin? The answer is an emphatic no, because God's justification means freedom from sin and freedom for a new obedience (6:1-7:6).

Second, does this gospel of God's free grace mean that the law of Moses is evil? Paul insists that the law is a good gift from God, but sin is so powerful that it can make use even of God's holy law in order to bring about death (7:7-25). Third, since most Jews do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah, does God reject Israel and thereby reveal God's own faithlessness to the ancient