

THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL SURVEY OF JESUS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS FEMALES IN THE MATTHEAN GOSPEL

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ABSTRACT

This article studies Jesus' attitude towards females in the Gospel of Matthew. Through a theological-ethical survey, the article identifies a 9-item description of Jesus' encounters and interactions with females (woman/women, wife, mother, mother-in-law, daughter, virgin, widow, Mary, and Martha) in the Matthean Gospel. Comparison between Jesus' attitude towards females and the established attitude towards females in the Oriental culture reveals that Jesus' attitude was more favorable to females. The Matthean Gospel provides numerous scenes of Jesus' attitude of tolerance, affirmation, care, and non-discrimination towards females. For Christ, females were human beings who were equally disposed of knowing God, witnessing about God's presence, and who needed divine provision to resolve life difficulties just as their male counterpart. Thus the article concludes that Jesus' attitude towards females ought to be the norm from which adherents of the religion of Jesus regard females in all spheres of life.

INTRODUCTION

The debate over the optimal attitude towards women in Christianity continues to increase. Both sides of the debate do not hesitate to support their stances with biblical passages.² The Gospel of Matthew, for example, has been drawn into the debate. About the status of women, Matthew has been charged with portraying the female gender in ignominious terms. According to Leonard J. Swidler, Matthew's disreputable view of females is seen in the beheading of John, the Baptist in chapter 6:14-29.³

Similarly, E. Anne Clements indicates that Matthew's quick shift from Mary, the mother of Jesus, to the attitude of Joseph at the instance of Mary's pre-marital pregnancy in chapter 1:18-25 further proves that Matthew had an agenda that presents females as inferior to their male counterpart.⁴ Per the estimation of Talvikki Mattila, the strict patriarchal context from which Matthew wrote caused him to provide little backgrounds about female characters.⁵ Consequently, females in the Gospel of Matthew appear "more oppressed and devalued."⁶

In the context of the perceived inferiority of females in the Matthean Gospel, the article probes Jesus' attitude towards females. Using a theological-ethical survey, the article presents instances in which Jesus interacted with females or used them as characters in His teaching. Using a historical-grammatical approach, each of these instances is analyzed to indicate ways in which Jesus' attitude deviated from or accorded with the status of females conferred on them by the Matthean community. I intend to deepen the

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² Elaine M. Wainwright, *Toward a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 15.

³ Leonard J. Swidler, *Jesus Was a Feminist: What the Gospels Reveal About His Revolutionary Perspective* (Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 2007), 120.

⁴ E. Anne Clements, *Mothers on the Margin? The Significance of the Women in Matthew's Genealogy* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014), 249-250.

⁵ Talvikki Mattila, *Citizens of the Kingdom: Followers in Matthew from a Feminist Perspective* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 185-186.

⁶ Mattila, 185.

existing view that the attitude of Jesus towards females in the Gospels were favorable compared with the attitude of females enjoined by the overarching Jewish culture within Matthew's community.

MATTHEAN JESUS

Matthew describes Jesus as the Messiah (1:1; 12:23; 16:16; 26:63-64).⁷ Connecting his writing to numerous passages from the Old Testament,⁸ Matthew portrays Jesus as the Holy One divinely destined to rescue humanity, especially Jews from the ravaging effects of estrangement from God.⁹ Focusing on His Jewish identity, Matthew identifies Jesus' earthly descent to David (1:6, 17, 20; 12:23) and Abraham (1:2, 17). David L. Turner indicates that Matthew's intention in linking Jesus' lineage to Abraham was to impress upon his Jewish audience that Jesus fulfills "God's plan that originated in Abraham."¹⁰ Again, Matthew's record of Jesus' teaching ministry presents Him as One whose prominence surpassed Moses (5:17-19).¹¹ Matthew's emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount parallels the reception of the Law from Mount Sinai (5:1; cf. Ex 19:3).

Most importantly, Matthew presents Jesus as the sole authority to determine how divine laws were to apply (1:22; 7:29; 4:23; 7:28; 15:38; 22:16, 24). Matthew records the many tensions that ensued between Jesus' casuistic interpretations of the divine law and the traditional interpretations of the same law given in the Mishnah and Talmud (7:21-23; 13:14; 23). In all cases, Matthew portrays Jesus as one who was prepared to risk all in correcting myths and misconceptions about God maintained by Jewish religious leaders (23:23).

Background of Matthean Gospel

The Gospel of Matthew presents God's word concerning Jesus handed down to succeeding Christian generations through the preaching/teaching and healing ministries of the apostles. It has been held that the gospel of Mark was the source from which Matthew copied.¹² Matthew added on to this primary source from another source (Q) that was available to both Luke and him.¹³ Scholars have come to refer to this as the "two-source hypothesis."¹⁴

⁷ Unless otherwise stated, all scriptural references are from the New King James version.

⁸ 11:22; cf. Isa 7:14; 2:15; cf. Hosea 11:1; 2:17; cf. Jer. 31:15; 2:23; cf. Isa 11:1; 4:14; cf. Isa 9:1-2; 8:17; cf. Isa 53:4; 21:4; cf. Zech 9:9; 27:9; cf. Zech 11:12-13.

⁹ 1:21; cf. David Senior, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 41.

¹⁰ David L. Turner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 1*, edited by Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 33.

¹¹ Andreas, Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, & Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 191.

¹² See Delbert Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 175; Virginia Halbur, Brian Singer-Towns, Jerry Ruff, & Lorraine Kilmartin, eds., *Understanding the Bible: A Guide to Reading the Scriptures* (Winona: St. Mary's Press, 2008), 57; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The New Testament: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 44.

¹³ See Delbert Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 175; Virginia Halbur, Brian Singer-Towns, Jerry Ruff, & Lorraine Kilmartin, eds., *Understanding the Bible: A Guide to Reading the Scriptures* (Winona: St. Mary's Press, 2008), 57; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The New Testament: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 44.

¹⁴ John S. Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (London: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 15.

Arguably, the Gospel of Matthew was composed within the period AD 80-90.¹⁵ It has been generally held that the Matthean Gospel was written in Aramaic and Greek.¹⁶ Again, it has been generally conceived that Matthew wrote his gospel in "Palestine"¹⁷ to a Jewish audience.¹⁸

Some scholars believe that Matthew's gospel was composed by an unnamed second-generation Christian other than Matthew himself (Matt 9:9). The striking similarity between the gospel account of Mark and Matthew has been taken to mean that the latter copied from the former. This will not have been the case were Matthew, an eye-witness, to be the original author.¹⁹ Also, the "literary" structure, as well as the deep religiosity contained in the book of Matthew, seems to describe someone with deep "religious" and "literary" background other than that possessed by a tax-collector in those days.²⁰ Finally, the "theological concerns" contained in the book appears to suggest the theological viewpoints of a "second-generation Christian."²¹ However, references to themes of tax-collection and finances contained in the book (10:3; 17:24-27; 18:23-25; 20:1-16; 27:3-5; 28:11-15) have led Mark L. Strauss to subscribe to the Christian traditional viewpoint that the Gospel of Matthew was composed by Matthew, one of the disciples of Jesus.²²

STATUS OF FEMALES IN THE ORIENTAL SOCIO-CULTURAL MILIEU

The strict patriarchal overtone of the Gospel of Matthew provides a hint to understanding the Matthean community. Anthony J. Saldarini describes Matthew's community as an evolving group of people who were "part of the first-century Jewish community in the eastern Mediterranean."²³ Apart from the struggle to keep Christianity unique from Judaism, the Matthean community saw themselves as part of the Jewish community.²⁴ Thus insight into the status of females in the Oriental culture is key to understanding the place of females in the Matthean community. Joan Kelly-Gadol's model for assessing the freedom of women in any given society has been adapted into a six-model categorization of the status of females in the Oriental culture.²⁵ These are the sexuality of females, females' right of ownership and testimony, social influence of females, females and leadership roles, the religious roles of females, and females and education.

¹⁵ Pheme Perkins, "The Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles: Telling the Christian Story." In *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation.*, edited by John. Barton (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 250, 253; Gerd Theissen & Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, edited by John Bowden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 32; Barbara E. Reid, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 1, edited by Daniel Durken (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), 6; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 19; Dennis C. Duling, "The Gospel of Matthew." In *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament.*, edited by David E. Aune (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 298-299.

¹⁶ Helmut Köster, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (New York City: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 207; B. Ward Powers, *The Progressive Publication of Matthew: An Explanation of the Writing of the Synoptic Gospels* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2010), 39.

¹⁷ George Wesley Buchanan, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 1039.

¹⁸ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 85.

¹⁹ Reid, 5.

²⁰ Reid, 5.

²¹ Reid, 5.

²² Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 253.

²³ Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

²⁴ Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

²⁵ Kelly-Gadol's model consists of fourfold inquiry- societal regulation of females' "sexuality compared" with the "sexuality" of males; the females' rights to "property" ownership, secular and religious leadership "and education;" the authenticity of the social "influence" of the female gender; and societal respect for females compared with males. Cf. Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" In *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, edited by Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 176.

The Sexuality of Females

Female sexual issues involve the contraction of marriage, adultery, divorce, and rape issues. Although other forms of marital contract existed in the Oriental culture, betrothal marriage was the common system of marriage. This form of marriage consisted of mainly the offering of "dowry" to the groom's family after the bride's family had received the "bride-price."²⁶

Though the betrothal system of marriage defined the future life of the woman, females generally had no say in the marital contract.²⁷ Instead, men from both sides of the contracting families decided on the woman. Thus her "input in the decision" of marriage was not required.²⁸ Dwelling on the meaning of the Hebrew terms *bet'ab* (meaning, "father's/patriarch's house") and *ba'al* (meaning, "master, lord, or owner"), Etan Levine argues that the Oriental woman was an acquired "object of marriage" by the man.²⁹ However, in some instances, Hebrew women obtained the right to decide on whom to marry (Gen 24:5, 8; Num 36:1-6).

The Oriental culture emphasized the fidelity of the married woman than it did to men. While women received harsher punishment for marital unfaithfulness, their "men" counterpart were often unpunished.³⁰ The term "femme fatale" indicated that the woman was always blamed for marital infidelity.³¹ In most cases, the form of punishment received by the unfaithful wife was determined by her husband. Raymond Westbrook indicated that the Oriental culture offered the husband an opportunity to "revenge" his wife's infidelity.³² In line with this, the culture allowed husbands to claim a remedy for the "offense" committed against them.³³ This meant that the welfare of the unfaithful wife was at the "mercy" of her husband.³⁴ Apart from this, a wife's infidelity was considered as that which unleashed "divine punishment" if not properly dealt with. Westbrook has observed that these wives were sometimes "killed."³⁵

The sexual status of the woman in Oriental culture was also defined by societal response to issues of sexual assault on a woman such as rape. At the instance of rape, the Oriental culture enjoined the perpetrator to pay a fine or be killed. However, the decision to pay a fine or be killed was the sole prerogative of the husband or father of the victim of rape.^{36/37} The victim had no input in the decision. Thus the choice of punishment meted out to the perpetrator by either the father or the husband of the victim served only the purpose of maintaining balance in the family and the society. The psychosocial state of the victim was largely ignored. Instead, the woman, if married hides under a veil in the guise of protection. Interestingly, the Jewish society directed sexual restrictions to the male gender (see Lev 18; 20).

Like the fate of the woman at the instance of adultery, the Oriental culture limited the right to dissolve marriage to men. All the husband was required to do was to pronounce his intention to terminate the marital relationship in the presence of other persons. Samuel Greengus has termed this "verbia

²⁶ Samuel Greengus, "Bride-wealth in Sumerian Sources." In *Hebrew Union College Annual* 71 (1990): 72, 73; cf. Deut 22:28-29; Gen 24: 22, 30, 47, 53.

²⁷ David Novak, *Covenantal Rights: A Study in Jewish Political Theory* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 133.

²⁸ Beth Troy, *Legally Bound: A Study of Women's Legal Status in the Ancient Near East* (Ohio: Miami University, 2004), 38.

²⁹ Etan Levine, "On Exodus 21, 10 'Onah and Biblical Marriage.'" In *Zeitschrift Für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte*, 5 (1999): 135, 136; cf. Gen 18:12; Ex 21:22; Es 2:12-14.

³⁰ Troy, 53.

³¹ Marten Stol, "Women in Mesopotamia." *JESHO* 38, no. 2 (1995): 125.

³² Raymond Westbrook, "Adultery in Ancient Near Eastern Law." In *Revue Biblique*, 97 (1990): 576.

³³ Westbrook, 576.

³⁴ Westbrook, 576.

³⁵ Westbrook, 576.

³⁶ Troy, 29.

³⁷ Carol Pratt Bradley, "Women in Hebrew and Ancient Near Eastern Law." In *Studia Antiqua* 3, no. 1 (2003): 29.

solemnia.”³⁸ According to Beth Troy and M. Stol, husbands who initiated "divorce" only paid fines or lost some items of monetary value; but wives who initiated "divorce" suffered monetary "loss" and sometimes "death."³⁹ /⁴⁰ However, belief in Yahweh conditioned the rate at which men carried divorce in Jewish culture alone (see Deut 24:1-4; Mal 2:14-16; cf. Mark 10:11-12; 1 Cor 7:10-11). Ze’ev W. Falk, indicated that Jews considered marriage as symbolic of the God-Israel "relationship."⁴¹ Both John J. Collins and Joseph Blekinsopp gave evidence of isolated situations where women could initiate the process of marital dissolution in Israel.⁴²

Females' Right of Ownership and Testimony

The Oriental culture did not allow women to own property. The closest a woman could come to property ownership was to manage the piece of property bequeathed to her either by her father or her husband.⁴³ Evidently, "sons inherited, and the daughters received maintenance."⁴⁴ However, some exceptions may be observed from the Jewish community. The scriptural passage in Numbers 27:6-7 indicated at least one instance in which Yahweh, through Moses, endorsed women's right to inherit their father's property. But this was in the absence of a male sibling. Again, a biblical passage provides evidence of a woman who was restored to own her property on her return from exile (1 Sam 25:2; 19:32; 8:1-6). Also, the testimony of women was doubtful. Stol has observed that females had no legal rights to be witnesses.⁴⁵ As such, women had to go through "River Ordeals" before their testimonies could be accepted.⁴⁶ /⁴⁷

Social Influence of Females

The societal task of the Oriental woman was limited to house-keeping. She was expected to tend the house. She managed the domestic property as well as trained the children at home (1 Sam 1:23-24; 2:19; Pro 1:8; 6:20). Generally, her domestic roles extended from doing the laundry to cooking and watering of the flock (Gen 24:11, 13-16; 29:9-10; Ex 2:16; 3:1). It was the decision of the males that shaped the family system and the domestic roles of the Oriental woman.⁴⁸ Women needed the protection of males to the extent that a lone woman on the street was easily considered a prostitute.⁴⁹ In some instances, females worked for a creditor for a given period. This was a situation in which the male could not settle the debt.⁵⁰

In numerous biblical references, the woman is idealized in Hebrew culture (1 Sam 25:3; 2 Sam 14:2; 20:16; Pro 11:16; 12:4). In Proverbs 31:10-31, one finds elaborative poetry that extols the dignity, decency, and hard work of the virtuous woman in Hebrew culture. The same poetry points to the limitation of the Hebrew woman (Pro 31:3). Everything she did was within the context of family enhancement, particularly for her husband and children (see Pro 31:10-11, 23, 27). Other scriptural passages revealed the gloomy picture Hebrew culture had about women (Gen 3; Micah 7:5; Eccl 7:28). In other instances, the

³⁸ Greengus, 514.

³⁹ Troy, 42, 48.

⁴⁰ Stol, 130.

⁴¹ Ze’ev W. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times* (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), 146.

⁴² Joseph Blekinsopp, "The Family in First Temple Israel." In *Families in Ancient Israel*, 65 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 65; John J. Collins, "Marriage, Divorce, and Family in Second Temple Judaism." In *Families in Ancient Israel*, 120. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 115.

⁴³ Troy, 51.

⁴⁴ Stol, 134.

⁴⁵ Stol, 136, 140.

⁴⁶ Troy, 52.

⁴⁷ Stol, 132.

⁴⁸ Troy, 53.

⁴⁹ Stol, 136.

⁵⁰ Stol, 136.

woman was the symbol of "contention" and "sin" (Pro 21:9, 19; 25:24; 6: 23-24; 2:16; Ezek 16:28). Few biblical passages indicated that the feminine figure as a symbol of despicable episodes in Jewish societal life (1 Sam 20:30; Pro 10:1; 2 Ch 24:7).

Females and leadership Roles

The Hebrew woman appears to have a better opportunity of leading than other parts of the Near Eastern tribes. Several biblical references reveal that women served as prophets in Jewish culture (Ex 15:20; Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:12-20; Isa 8:3; Neh. 6:10-14; Ezek 13). At least in an instance, a woman was considered wise and consulted in times when the society was in a fix (2 Sam 14:2; 20:16-22). Deborah, for example, likely served as both a prophetess and a military authority in Israel (Judges 4:4).

The Religious Roles of Females

Women in other Oriental tribes such as Babylonia, Assyrian, and Ur played extensive religious roles than Israelite women. The cultic prostitution of the non-Israelite tribes involved women at its apex (Amos 2:7-8; Hosea 4:13-14). Generally, the religious role of the Oriental woman was tied to her domestic roles. She was expected to intercede for her husband and her family.⁵¹ Apart from being excluded from the office of the priest, the Hebrew woman variously played roles in the cultic practices of the Israelites (Ex 35:22-29; 38:8). For example, women sung, embarked on pilgrimages, and took active part in some Jewish festivals such as Passover, Feast of Tabernacle, and Pentecost (2 Sam 6:19; Ex 12:3; Deut 16:14; Ps 68:25; 1 Sam 1:3-5, 24-28; 2:1-11; 2 Kings 4:23; Ezra 2:65).

FEMALES AND EDUCATION

Apart from prophetesses who had some form of formal education in isolated instances, the Oriental woman generally lacked formal education. Perhaps, it was thought that formal education was too extravagant to the domestic roles they performed.

The Oriental culture restricted the woman from performing significant roles in the society as her man counterpart.⁵² To a large extent, the Oriental culture focused on the woman's virtue (Ex 15:20; 2 Sam 14:27; Job 42:15; Es 2:14; Pro 31) to the extent that it meted out "harsher" sanctions on women offenders.⁵³ One can argue that men controlled societal institutions and systems while women were the subjects of those decisions made by the males. However, a comparison between the status of Hebrew women and women in some Oriental tribes such as the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Urrian supports Elizabeth M. MacDonald's view that Hebrew women enjoyed better social status than their counterparts in other Oriental tribes.⁵⁴ Scriptural evidence reveals that Yahweh despised the abuse of the vulnerable among which women featured significantly (Micah 2:9; Amos 1:13; Isa 10:1-2).

Jesus' Encounter/Interaction with Females

A theological survey of the interaction between Jesus and females in the Matthean Gospel in the New King James Version of the Bible generated numerous instances in which Jesus either involved females (woman/women, wife, mother, mother-in-law, daughter, virgin, widow, Mary, Martha, etc) in some parables or interacted with them. These instances have been categorized under a 9-item description. Table 1 below indicates these 9-items and their respective distribution in the Matthean Gospel.

Table 1: Encounter/Interaction between Jesus and Females in Matthean Gospel

⁵¹ Stol, 139.

⁵² Bradley, 3.

⁵³ Troy, 53.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth M. MacDonald, *The Position of Women as Reflected in Semitic Codes of Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Studies: Oriental Series, 1931), 73

Item	Subject	Matthew
1.	A woman suffering from hemorrhage	9:20-22
2.	Women as subjects/images of women in Jesus' Parables/teaching	13:33, 10:35, 37 19:29, 25:1-13
3.	The Canaanite (Syrophoenician) woman who requested healing for her daughter	15: 22-28
4.	Protecting women in marriage	5:31-32 19:3-8
5.	A woman expressing gratitude (alabaster box)	26:6-13
6.	Female recipients of Jesus compassion (Peter's mother-in-law; Daughter of the synagogue leader (Jairus))	8:14-15 9:18-19, 23-26
7.	Mary, the Mother of Jesus	12:46-50
8.	Women who supported Jesus (Part of His disciples)	27:55
9.	Resurrection	28:1-10

Source: Results of the Author's Survey

Table 1 presents a 9-item description of the interaction/encounter between Jesus and females in the Matthean Gospel. Item 2 features about four times in the Matthean Gospel. Items 4 and 6 have two features in the Matthean Gospel. Items 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 9 have a single representation in the Matthean Gospel.

REFLECTIONS

Woman suffering from hemorrhage

Matthew records the experience of a lone woman who was suffering from hemorrhage (9:20-22). This woman touched the hem of Christ's garment, and she was healed. However, the woman intended to mingle with the crowd. The account indicates that she did that because of fear. It was the query of Jesus that caused her to render a public testimony of what had happened to her. While the restriction laid on women's public appearance, especially in their state of uncleanness (Lev 15:25) could be a reason for her "trembling," another twist could be inferred from the context.

Dwelling on the Greek verb *φοβηθεῖσα* (*phobētheisa*, "fearing"), Marla J. Selvidge indicates that the fear factor was a spontaneous response to the divine act of healing.⁵⁵ Granted the possibility of this assertion, then, it could be inferred that the healing and subsequent endorsement of the act of this suffering woman teaches a deeper lesson on the acceptability of women's testimonies. It is a direct rebuke to the societal and religious restrictions laid on females by the Jewish culture.⁵⁶ Once a woman was able to acknowledge God's "presence" and testify of same to a large public, it follows that females can as well represent God in all aspects of life.⁵⁷ In an unconventional way, Jesus, a great rabbi, publicly endorsed the forbidden action of this woman (Matt 9:22).

Women as subjects/images of women in Jesus' parables/teaching

Matthew records at least five instances in which Jesus used female imageries in His teachings. Sub-themes common to these items are parallels between the kingdom of God and the yeast mixed by a woman (Matt 13:33), gospel-induced tension within the family unit (Matt 10:35, 37), reward for shunning family loyalty in favor of Jesus (Matt 19:29), parallels between the ten virgins and the kingdom of God (Matt 25:1-13).

⁵⁵ Marla J. Selvidge, *Woman, Cult, and Miracle Recital: A Redactional Critical Investigation on Mark 5:24-34* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1990), 110.

⁵⁶ Frank Stern, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus' Parables* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 140.

⁵⁷ Selvidge, 111.

Though Jesus' teachings do not lay explicit plans to reform the relationship between the genders in the Jewish community,⁵⁸ they lay a good foundation for a positive reconstruction of the patriarchal attitude of females. Most importantly, these parables indicate Jesus' aim of extending God's salvific activities to the marginalized, including women, within the Jewish community. Also, the inclusion of females in the teachings of Jesus is illustrative of the fact that both genders are the "objects" of the salvific activities of God.⁵⁹ Hence God's salvific activities could be adequately represented by females. In the thoughts of Jesus, either of the genders or both can be used to represent a whole class of people.⁶⁰

Again, the pervasive references to females contained in the teachings of Jesus illustrate that women were part of His public audience. This is based upon the assumption that Jesus got the female part of His audience involved in His teaching by using imageries that will be meaningful to them.⁶¹ Granted the possibility of this assumption, then, Jesus' welcome of women among His public audience was unconventional in the Jewish culture.

The Canaanite (Syrophoenician) woman who requested healing for her daughter

The Canaanite (Syrophoenician) woman's plea for healing for her demon-possessed daughter is recorded in Matthew 15:22-28. Matthew stresses the loud public plea of the woman to Jesus (Matt 15:22, 25). The Jewish cultural abhorrence of lone women addressing public figures or men in public is expressed through the voices of Jesus' disciples (Matt 15:23). Even more intriguing is Jesus' response to the woman (Matt 15:26). Though it is tempting to dwell on the demeaning term "dogs" used about the gentile world, Matthew reports the Jewish "cultural assumption" that underlay Jesus' words- the priority of Israel.⁶² In essence, Jesus' response to the request of the gentile woman reflects a divine schedule in which both Jews and non-Jews will have their taste of the gospel.

Stated differently, Jesus beckoned the woman to wait for her turn. Her response attests to the fact that she did not understand Jesus' response to be insulting (Matt 15:27). Rather, her response stressed the urgency of her plea to the extent that she could not wait calmly for her turn on the divine schedule.⁶³ Once again, Jesus' grant to her request is unconventional in the Jewish culture (Matt 15:28). Instead of rebuking the woman for breaching the numerous Jewish restrictions laid on her using her gender and ethnic affiliation,⁶⁴ Jesus publicly admired her persistence and wit.⁶⁵ This story is a clear indication that Jesus provides the needs of people without regard to their "social" placement.⁶⁶

Protecting women in marriage

Jesus' teaching on divorce. In two places, Matthew reports Jesus teaching as part of the Sermon on the Mount and as an answer to the query of the Pharisees. Jesus calls the attention of His questioners to the original marital plan of God (Matt 19:4-6). Again, Matthew indicates that divorce was allowed because of

⁵⁸ Julia M. O'Brien, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies, vol 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 391.

⁵⁹ Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 36.

⁶⁰ W. Mark Tew, *Luke: Gospel to the Nameless and Faceless* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 57, 58.

⁶¹ Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 154.

⁶² See Matt 15:24, 26; and Craig A. Evans, *The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary: Matthew-Luke, vol. 1* (Colorado: Cook Communications Ministries, 2003), 306.

⁶³ Witness Lee, *Life-Study of Mark: Messages 17-33*, 1st ed., (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministries, 2002), 202.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth A. McCabe, ed., *Women in the Biblical World: A Survey of Old and New Testament Perspective, vol. 1* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 73.

⁶⁵ See Matt 15:28; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 52.

⁶⁶ Caldusch Benages Nuria, *The Perfume of the Gospel: Jesus' Encounters with Women* (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2012), 17; Abbey Adenigba, *The Overflowing Cup of GRACE* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2013), 92.

the "hardness" of the "hearts" of the Jewish community (Matt 19:8). Even with this allowance, women were largely the victims of divorce (Deut 24:1). However, Jesus limits divorce to instances of marital infidelity on the part of the female in Matthew 5:31-31.

Woman expressing gratitude (alabaster box)

Matthew reports the event of a woman who anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Matthew provides an economic reason for the harsh treatment given to the concerned woman by some members of the audience, especially by Jesus disciples (Matt 26:8-11). By implication, Jesus' attitude of allowing the woman to express her gratitude offended the Jewish cultural attitude of a degraded woman addressing and touching a religious leader publicly.⁶⁷ Yet, Jesus endorsed her attitude of gratitude (Matt 26:10). Matthew notes that the woman's attitude of gratitude was to be an accompaniment to the proclamation of the gospel (Matt 26:13).

Peter's mother-in-law/Daughter of the synagogue leader (Jairus)

Matthew records Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law in Matt 8:14-15. Again, Matthew records the healing of the daughter of Jairus upon Jairus' request to Jesus (Matt 9:18-19, 23-26). A trend in all these records is the quick response of Jesus to the two requests—the requests to heal Peter's mother-in-law and the request to heal Jairus' daughter. By His quick attendance to the needs of these females, Jesus expressed His positive attitude towards females. Actively, Jesus stresses the importance of the needs of females such that these needs cannot be regarded as secondary to other needs.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Matthew records an incidence that involved Jesus and some members of His nuclear family, especially His mother (Matt 12:46-50). The point of controversy among scholars' bothers Jesus' uncertain reply (Matt 12:48). A probable explanation could be that Jesus used the occasion of His family visit to teach about discipleship.⁶⁸ /⁶⁹ An often cited reason for understanding these instances lies within Jesus' attitude of preventing familial persuasions in His ministry.⁷⁰ His obedient character He expressed by following his mother after the exchange speaks against the slightest notion that Jesus disrespected His mother.

Women who supported Jesus (Part of His disciples)

Matthew indicates that some women were part of the company that followed Jesus (Matt 27:55). Though Matthew does not identify these women by name, the fact that these women "provided" for the welfare of Jesus and His disciples indicate their association "with" Jesus.⁷¹ By welcoming women into His fellowship and allowing them to accompany Him regularly, Jesus showed a more positive attitude towards women than conventional Jewish culture required from a "rabbi" of His stature.⁷²

⁶⁷ Margaret Starbird, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail* (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1993), ii; Ronald P. Byars, *The Sacraments in Biblical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 237.

⁶⁸ Pamela J. Erwin, *The Family-Powered Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 24.

⁶⁹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (North Carolina: University of Carolina Press, 1995), 45.

⁷⁰ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 138.

⁷¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 130.

⁷² Kristina LaCelle-Peterson, *Liberating Tradition: Women's Identity and Vocation in Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 60.

Resurrection

Matthew narrates Jesus' resurrection in Matt 28:1-10. Though Matthew mentions no female names, Matthew indicates that women were the prime-most witnesses to the event. Accordingly, Matthew notes that the women were tasked by angels to make known Jesus' resurrection to His disciples (Matt 28:7). Later, Jesus reinforced this task during His meeting with these women (Matt 28:9-10). Since these disciples were all Jews, it can be safely argued that their Jewish culture compelled them to scrutinize a woman's testimony before believing.^{73 /74}

Contrasting Jesus' attitude towards women with that of the Jewish-conditioned attitude of the disciples, it could be seen that Jesus' was a positive attitude. His choice to reveal Himself to women and subsequently use them as prime witnesses to the resurrection event was unconventional in the Jewish culture⁷⁵. Yet, He chose women to be His prime-witnesses.

IMPLICATIONS

Jesus' positive attitude towards females is evident in the Matthean Gospel. Instead of behaving toward females in accord with the dictates of the Oriental culture, Jesus interacted with females in a manner that was in direct opposition to it. Not only did Jesus allow lone and married women to be part of His male audience in public, He also granted them hearing and endorsed their witnessing about the presence of God publicly.

More telling is His allowance of women (both married and unmarried) to be part of the team that accompanied Him. Though explicit statement concerning the inclusion of women as part of His original twelve disciples is lacking in the Gospels, Matthew indicates that some women always followed Jesus. By allowing women to be part of the team that always followed Him, Jesus' attitude subtly hints that females could adequately perform the task of extending the Gospel in the society.

Also, Jesus' usage of female imageries in some of His teachings and other references strengthens the equity with which He regarded both genders. References to women in numerous parables as subtly points to the notion that females could fittingly serve as religious symbols.

Furthermore, Jesus' concern for the general welfare of females is revealed in the Matthean Gospel. Moreover, Jesus' attitude towards females was non-discriminatory. Arguably, His initial response to the Syrophenician woman was somewhat harsh from a modern perspective. Yet His swift grant of the request of the woman showed His unbiased attitude towards non-Jews, especially women.

From these portraits of Jesus' attitude towards females in the Matthean Gospel, one sees a tolerating, affirming, caring, and non-discriminating attitude of Jesus towards females. He saw females as human beings who were equally disposed of knowing God, witnessing about God's presence, and who needed divine provision to resolve life difficulties just as their male counterpart. If Jesus' life, teaching, death, and resurrection are normative to Christian religious faith and practice, then, it follows that Christians are to imitate His attitude of tolerance, affirmation, care, and non-discrimination towards females. This attitude ought to be expressed towards females in every area of life. Any deferring attitude will be a total misrepresentation of the religion of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

⁷³ Barbara A. O'Reilly, *Grace Under Pressure: The Roles of Women-Then and Now-In the Catholic Church* (Bloomington: WestBow Press, 2013), 121.

⁷⁴ Dean Phillip Bell, ed., *The Bloomsbury Companion to Jewish Studies* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 238.

⁷⁵ Katrenia Sneed Logan, *My Quest to Find a Woman's Place in a Man's World Via Dolorosa* (Maitland: Xulon Press, 2012), 198.

The article has focused on Jesus' attitude towards females in the Matthean Gospel. Generally considered as the founder of the Christian religion, Jesus' life, teachings, death, resurrection, and ascension are normative for Christian religious faith and practice. His outlook on life, mannerisms, and teachings generally reveal a positively-patterned attitude towards females. Such favorable attitude sharply contradicted the established attitude expressed towards females in the Oriental culture.

The Oriental culture laid restrictions on females. For example, females generally were not as privileged as their male counterparts in the most societies sharpened by the Oriental culture. Aspects of societal life in which discriminatory attitude towards females manifested included matters of sexuality, right of ownership and testimony, male-dominated and dictated domestic life, religious and ecclesiastical leadership, as well as formal education.

In contrast to the established attitude towards females in the Oriental culture, Matthew records Jesus' favorable attitude towards females. The allowance He gave to lone and married women to be part of His public audience; His endorsement of the testimonies women shared about God's presence in public; His inclusion of lone and married women in His team of constant followers; His symbolic usage of the female gender in His teachings; and His swiftness in attending to the needs of females all indicate that Jesus' attitude toward females was tolerating, affirming, caring, and non-discriminating.

By imitating Jesus' favorable attitude towards females, His followers are expected to express an attitude of tolerance, affirmation, care, and non-discrimination towards females in all aspects of life. It is expected that future research will compare the portrait of Jesus' attitude towards females with other portraits of Jesus towards females in the other three Gospels. Such a study will further strengthen the conclusion reached by this article.

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