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JESUS CHRIST'S INTERACTIONS WITH THE WOMEN OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Mary Jane Woodger

Abstract: In this paper, Christ's ministry is characterized by his relationship with the females found in the four gospels. The drastic differences between the ways Jesus and society treated women are emphasized. The culture into which Christ was born had degraded women for generations. Under Christ's leadership first-century priesthood brethren were shown how to treat women. However, after Christ's ascension Hellenistic philosophy pervaded the Christian Church's thinking and accelerated an apostate perception of women. This study explores Jesus's actions and teachings which restored women's true identity. In short, this paper focuses on the reverence, respect, and loving kindnesses, Christ showed women. By studying Jesus's example we are taught that women are an integral part of divine creation having individual worth.

Jesus Christ's interactions with women during His mortal ministry have been the subject of many articles and books, both scholarly and popular. Writers generally agree that Jesus treated people, including women, as individuals with respect and honor. In particular, Jesus often reached out to those often excluded or marginalized in society. Christ seems to have behaved in ways not generally demonstrated by many of His contemporaries, especially in His interaction with women. In this, He provided a model for His disciples to follow. It was a model of perfect equality in God's eyes — not the world's standard of equality but God's standard. Likewise, the women of the New Testament also give their modern counterparts a worthy pattern of how true [female] disciples of Christ are to act.

Contemporary Cultural

Identifying first-century attitudes about women is fraught with challenges. We know a lot more about elite women living in the cities than we know about ordinary women who lived in rural hamlets and villages in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire where Jesus walked

and taught. Numerous waves of changes swept the religious, social, and political landscape of Palestine in the centuries preceding the birth of Jesus Christ. Additionally, Hasmonean and Herodian dynasties had changed the physical landscape with building projects small and great — providing a Greco-Roman veneer to the several urban centers in Palestine and material culture — buildings, artifacts, etc. — shaping beliefs and perceptions.

Although there were exceptions, the dominant society often valued men much more than women. Elite women, like the wives of Pilate or Herod Antipas, enjoyed privileges unknown to most other women living in Palestine during the first century. Greek philosophy was hostile to women. Greco-Roman legal and religious culture, which favored men, and the Jewish subculture, which reflected a male-oriented society, were changing by the time Jesus began His ministry. Nevertheless, women were often voiceless, invisible, and undervalued.

Some general attitudes about women in the first century include:

- A woman came of age at about twelve years.¹
- The practice of exposing newborn children, especially daughters, was not unknown in the first century.²
- Men often exercised the power of life and death over their children and wives.³
- Some believed that “all women because of their lack of judgment should [then] be under the power of guardians.”⁴
- A man could, in some situations, divorce his wife “for reasons ranging from unchastity, to burning a meal.”⁵
- A wife rarely could divorce her husband.⁶

1 Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 425.

2 Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *Sisters at the Well: Women and the Life and Teachings of Jesus*, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993), 11–13; and, Ben Witherington III, *Women in Earliest Churches*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 8.

3 Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 17.

4 Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Pro Murena*, XXII, xxvii; see Cicero, *The Speeches*, trans. Lewis Lord (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 179–80, as cited in Holzapfel and Holzapfel, *Sisters at the Well*, 12.

5 Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus's Attitudes to Women and their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Ministry* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3.

6 Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 5.

- Many women had no real legal, civil, or financial voice.⁷
- Women may have been required to cover their heads, faces, or both in the presence of men.⁸

By the time rabbis appeared as a distinct group in the second century, some of them saw the woman's role as God's punishment for Eve's transgression. Because Eve's disobedience caused not only her own death but also the demise of every other mortal (*Ben Sira* 25.24), she became the "fundamental character and identity of all women ... through Eve's words and actions, the true nature of women was revealed." Most thought her nature was passed down to every daughter and included being "disobedient, guileless, weak-willed, prone to temptation and evil, disloyal, untrustworthy, deceitful, seductive, and motivated in their thoughts and behavior purely by self-interest." As scholar Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe informs, both then and now, "no matter what women might achieve in the world ... Whoever she might be and whatever her accomplishments, no woman can escape being identified with Eve, or being identified as her."⁹ Eve's transgression was the principle story used by the rabbis to identify the status of all women, and because of that status, women were not allowed to seek direct access to a rabbi.¹⁰ In fact, a rabbi could not speak even in public with a woman who was not his wife or daughter. Apparently, rabbis were forbidden to enter a woman's house to teach.¹¹ Although Jews revered Old Testament matriarchs, some Jewish men repeated daily in prayer, "Praised be God that He has not created me a woman."¹²

Women's economic lives often depended on their fathers before they married and subsequently on their husbands. A husband, with few exceptions, had complete control over his wife's person and property. In summary, New Testament scholar Ben Witherington suggests that a

7 Eva Cantarelle, *Pandora's Daughters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 113–23.

8 Holzapfel and Holzapfel, *Sisters at the Well*, 17.

9 Christopher L. C. E. "Eve and the Identity of Women: The Old Testament Women and Evil," Paper presented at the seminar Images of Women in Ancient Art, Sweetbriar College. <http://witcombe.she.edu/eve-women/6womenevil.html>

10 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 389.

11 Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 101.

12 Bonnie Thurston, "Questions and Commentary," *Women in the New Testament* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1998), 15.

“low view of women was common, perhaps predominant before, during, and after Jesus’s era.”¹³

Mary the Mother of Jesus

In His ministry, Elder James E. Talmage suggests Christ “recompensed women in rich measure for the injustice they endured” in the culture that surrounded Him.¹⁴ The Lord often displayed this recompense in the quality of His relationships with the women found in the Gospels, and his mortal “sisters” responded in kind. His treatment exalted the self-image of those women with whom He came in contact. In short, He treated women with respect, regardless of their station. Studying how Christ and the women of the New Testament interact can help everyone understand how He views and treats all women and how his true followers respond.

One of the most important relationships the Savior had with a woman in the first century was with His mother. Mary was one of her son’s most committed disciples. An interesting interaction between Jesus and Mary took place at the wedding in Cana, as outlined in John’s Gospel. Mary may have had some social responsibility at the wedding feast, and as a result, when the supply of wine had diminished, she approached Jesus. Christ responded, “Woman, what wilt thou have me to do for thee?” (JST John 2:4). Elder Bruce R. McConkie observed, “Christ’s answer to Mary was respectful and discreet. He agreed to do what she requested even though the hour for the heralding abroad of His miraculous powers was yet future.”¹⁵ In modern vernacular, it is as if Jesus were saying, “Mother, I can see you’re frustrated. What can I do to make things right?” Mary, still reluctant to give her son instruction, accepted His offering and the way He might do it and instructed the servants, “Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it” (John 2:5).

The Master of the Vineyard then turned water into wine — better wine than any previously served. His action filled six water pots, which is over 100 gallons.¹⁶ No wonder Mary was concerned, as “this wedding

13 Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 10.

14 James Harris, *The Essential James E. Talmage* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 132.

15 Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), 1:136.

16 John Peter Lange, *The Gospel according to John: An Exegetical and Doctrinal Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 106.

celebration was one of no small size.”¹⁷ Interestingly, Christ’s first recorded miracle was not a matter of life or death, sickness or health, or evil or righteousness; rather, it was to provide wine at a social gathering as a favor to His mother who may have had some responsibilities. Christ chose the one who had given Him life to be the first mortal to receive a miracle at His hands by meeting her concerns as a hostess. And perhaps He also indicates His love and respect for his mother and his willingness, as appropriate, to defer to a parent as required in the Commandments.

The Gospels do not give us much more about Jesus’s interaction with His mother. However, they do show Mary standing before the cross at the end of His life. Former General Relief Society President Elaine L. Jack describes her thoughts about this last interaction between Christ and his mother,

I can hear Mary comforting the baby Jesus with soothing words that come so naturally to us: “I’m right here.” And then at this most dramatic moment of all time, there was the mother, Mary. She couldn’t soothe his pain this time, but she could stand by his side. Jesus, in tribute, offered those grand words, “Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother!” (John 19:26–27.)¹⁸

Even in agony Jesus was concerned with the well-being of His mother and ensured that she was taken care of temporally by asking John the Beloved to take her home (see John 19:27). In these scenes Jesus the Christ can be viewed as the epitome of a noble son. He was noble because he was obedient to the Law and the Prophets.

Martha and Mary

Mary and Martha are well known in the Gospels, especially in John. Christ had come to the two sisters’ home in Bethany accompanied by many visitors. Having to fix a meal for the guests in her home, Martha was frustrated and complained to the Savior that her sister Mary, instead of helping her prepare food, was sitting at His feet being taught (Luke 10:40). In many accounts, Martha is sometimes portrayed as being more concerned with trivial matters than with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Before responding too harshly to Martha’s reaction, readers must look at what she was doing as her sister sat at the feet of Christ. Martha was serving the Lord.

17 McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:136.

18 Elaine L. Jack, “Relief Society: A Balm in Gilliad,” *Ensign*, November 1995.

Luke says, “Martha was cumbered about much serving” (Luke 10:41). Martha was filling the needs of others and doing service herself out of love for Jesus.¹⁹ How could the Savior be critical of such service? BYU Professor of Ancient Scripture Camille Fronk Olsen informs, “Luke never intended a conclusion that Martha’s service was unacceptable. Similarly, Jesus did not consider educating women as time wasted. He viewed women as intellectually and spiritually capable of studying and understanding God’s word.”²⁰

As Martha was bothered that her sister was untroubled with the many details of the day, she requested Jesus’s help. In response, disciples of today should envision the tone of the Redeemer’s voice to be entreating, not accusatory. As He twice repeated her name, Martha felt a softening of her stress. In a loving, tender tone, He acknowledged her many callings and duties: “Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things” (Luke 10:41). When the Savior used the word “careful,” He could have been suggesting that Martha was concerned with others’ needs — that she was cautious and considerate of others’ feelings. The important word in the next passage is the word “needful.”²¹ “But one thing is needful; and Mary hath chosen that good part” (Luke 10:42). When the Redeemer used the word *needful*, was He perhaps showing a concern for Martha’s personal needs? Could the Savior have been suggesting that sisters who so often put others’ needs before their own deserve to fill their own “well” once in a while? Was Christ perhaps suggesting that women have to take a spiritual break, listen to the gospel, and fill themselves with the “good part” before going out again and sharing with others?²² As Former General Relief Society Bonnie Parkin explains, “The Savior’s response strikingly clarified what mattered most. On that evening in Martha’s home, the good part was not in the kitchen; it was at the Lord’s feet. Dinner could wait.”²³ Though the Lord’s motives cannot truly be known, Christ most likely wanted Martha to keep a balance between serving a meal and gaining spiritual refreshment; and He was willing to facilitate that balance. Former General Relief Society President

19 Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 20.

20 Camille Fronk Olson, *Women of the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 155.

21 S. Michael Wilcox, *Daughters of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 190.

22 Wilcox, *Daughters of God*, 189.

23 Bonnie D. Parkin, “Choosing Charity: That Good Part,” *Ensign*, November, 2003.

Julie B. Beck views the Savior's "gentle comment. . . as an invitation to participate in the Lord's Ministry."²⁴

In this particular story, Mary's actions are different than her sister's. She was daring since we have no examples from Palestine of a male teacher instructing women. In this account, Mary acts like a male disciple, sitting at Jesus's feet to be taught.²⁵ As Bonnie D. Parkin informs the relationship between Jesus and Mary "breached convention, for at that time women were not usually able to discuss the gospel with men."²⁶ This story can be viewed as the basis of the "changed status of women thanks to Jesus and his teachings," showing that women could be independent disciples who were fully accepted by Christ "without male intermediaries such as fathers, brothers or husbands."²⁷

Though the above-related passage is an oft repeated scriptural account, this incident does not relate Martha's finest hour. Her behavior as a disciple of Christ can be observed when she loses her brother Lazarus, in death. As Lazarus takes ill, his sisters know that Jesus is in Perea and send for him. It would have taken one day for the messenger to travel to Perea. When the message finds Jesus, his reply is that Lazarus's "sickness is not unto death" (John 11: 4). The Lord then stayed two more days teaching and ministering without any seeming regard for Lazarus, and then took another day to reach Bethany. Martha's mindset was that she knew the omniscient Christ had full knowledge of her brother's condition and had done nothing to prevent his death. As soon as she hears that Christ is approaching their home, Martha runs to him (John 11: 20). She then acknowledges that what she has experienced has been difficult. She does not negate the impact of the sorrow she has felt and her first words to Jesus are "If thou hadst been here, my brother had not died" (vs. 21). The characteristic Martha displays as her beloved

24 Julie B. Beck, "Fulfilling the Purpose of Relief Society," *Ensign*, November 2008.

25 Holzapfel and Holzapfel, *Sisters at the Well*, 105.

26 Bonnie D. Parkin, "Choosing Charity: That Good Part," *Ensign*, November, 2003.

27 Constance F. Parvey, "The Theology and Leadership of Women in the New Testament," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Reuther (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 141 and Adele Reinhartz, "From Narrative to History: The Resurrection of Mary and Martha," in *Women like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine. Atlanta: Scholars, 1991, 184 as cited in Camille Fronk Olson, *Women of the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 153-5.

brother lies in a tomb is that she keeps her testimony intact, despite trying circumstances. Martha's testimony includes knowing that her brother would be resurrected.²⁸ Though her faith had been tested to the utmost she still testifies:

But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee. ... I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believeth thou this? (John 11:22-26)

Though her brother's death had gone against her prayers, her testimony remained valiant. "She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world. And when she had so said, she went her way, and called Mary her sister secretly" (John 11: 27-28). Commenting on these verses Elder Bruce R. McConkie declares: "Women as well as men have testimonies, receive revelation from the Spirit, and know of themselves of the Lord's divinity. Martha's testimony of Christ's divine Sonship is as plain, as positive, and sure as was the same testimony born by Peter."²⁹ Martha accepted the will of the Lord. Her testimony of the Resurrection was strong enough to secure her through the ordeal of her brother's death, and her faith was soon rewarded with Lazarus's restoration to life.

In another account found in the Gospel of John, Mary's response to Lazarus's death is unlike her sister's. Although Martha seemed to keep her emotions in control as Christ came, Mary sobbed. Christ then exhibited remarkable sympathy. "When Jesus therefore saw her weeping ... he groaned in the spirit and was troubled. Jesus wept" (John 11:33-35). How different Jesus was than another first-century man who wrote of his wife: "Well aware of [her] own guilt, she invents complaints. ... She has tears by the gallon all ready to flow wherever and whenever she pleases."³⁰ In juxtaposition, Christ justified Mary's tears by displaying the epitome of empathy. Truly, empathy is at the heart of Christ's behavior. The scriptural account does not say Christ suggested to Mary that He would make everything right again or "fix it." At this point, He did not try to

28 Philip F. Esler, and Ronald Piper, *Lazarus, Mary and Martha* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 124.

29 McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:530.

30 Michael Massey, *Society in Imperial Rome* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 73.

rectify the situation. He simply showed empathy and was there for Mary physically and emotionally. This was also a transgression of gendered boundaries — then and now — of a man crying. Yet Christ's perfect example is for men to feel, express, and show empathy giving us another critical dimension of how one behaves toward women, and others.

In another passage from scripture, we find an interesting interaction between Mary and the Savior, again indicating to followers the proper attitude disciples of Christ display toward women. It would appear that Mary wanted to do something for the Savior in honor of His burial. Her conclusion was to sit at the feet of the Savior, take a pound of spikenard, uncover her hair, and wipe the Lord's dusty feet with the ointment. In her society, Mary's actions were inappropriate. For a woman to uncover her hair in the presence of men unrelated to her was scandalous and offensive.³¹ Biblical scholar Raymond Brown points out that in Jesus's day it was the head of the living and the feet of corpses that were anointed.³² The amount of ointment she used was the equivalent of an entire year's wages (see Mark 14:5).³³ She used so much spikenard that the entire house was filled with the fragrance. Elder McConkie suggests that "Mary at least foreknew and realized what her beloved Lord would soon face. ... [And she must have wondered] what act of love, of devotion, of adoration, of worship, could a mere mortal perform for him who is eternal?"³⁴ The act she chose to perform of dusting the feet with hair was a task performed only by the lowliest of slaves. Her choice of this act of service clearly shows that Mary knew Jesus was to die and live again.

Christ could have responded in a critical manner. He could have chided her, "Mary, I am not dead yet." From His gentle response, He obviously understood her motivation. Judas ungraciously responded to Mary's actions and mentioned that she was incurring a ridiculous expense (see John 12: 3-5). Christ's reply denounced Judas's brutish conduct, "Let her alone: For she hath preserved this ointment until now, that she might anoint me in token of my burial" (JST John 12:7). As Olson concludes, "Impervious to Judas's complaints, Jesus refused to rebuke Mary and instead defended her, received her act of discipleship,

31 Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 113.

32 Raymond Brown, E., Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, and John Reumann, eds. *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966-70), 1:454.

33 Holzapfel and Holzapfel, *Sisters at the Well*, 136.

34 McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:700.

and extolled her actions as prophetic.”³⁵ Christ allowed Himself to be the recipient of Mary’s affection, graciously accepting her offering. He let this sister serve Him in the way she knew how, even when others were critical of an action that could be seen as inappropriate. Yet it was something that was entirely appropriate in the Savior’s eyes.

The Woman with an Issue of Blood

Another biblical woman whom others criticized is identified only by her illness. Mark writes of an unnamed woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. Luke the Beloved Physician (Colossians 4:14) simply says that this woman had spent all her living on physicians. Mark is a bit harsher toward first-century doctors, declaring the woman had suffered many things at the hands of many physicians (Mark 5:26).

This woman’s concerns may have been more attached to the societal impact of her illness than to her physical limitations. In Jewish subculture, and in the larger dominant culture, illness was often associated with wrongdoing. Added to his underlying view of sickness, Mosaic law declared the woman perpetually unclean because she was constantly bleeding (Leviticus 15: 25-30).³⁶ Anything or anyone she had physical contact with would also become ritually unclean.³⁷ Given social and religious realities in first century Judaism, it would not be surprising to discover that she was marginalized in her village.³⁸ The text suggests the woman had exhausted all possible hope until she found Jesus. Christ’s response to this woman “with an issue of blood,” is far different than the societal norm. Her continual vaginal bleeding made her, in the eyes of the faith, perennially ritually unclean. Even today, orthodox Jewish women must ritually clean themselves after menses. This was man’s law, not God’s law, and Christ here is attempting to show what his true standard is. This specific societal misperception was countered by Christ. To Jesus, this women’s health concern was inconsequential as far as her worthiness or her value in God’s eyes.

This woman may not have felt she could ask the Savior to bless her through touching her or anointing her because that would make Him ritually unclean (Leviticus 15:19). Instead, she chose to exercise her faith as she pressed against the Savior in a crowded narrow street in Capernaum where she might go unnoticed. She may have said to herself

35 Olson, *Women of the New Testament*, 163.

36 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 426.

37 Thurston, *Women in the New Testament*, 71.

38 Holzapfel and Holzapfel, *Sisters at the Well*, 101.

in a statement laden with faith, “If I can touch His garment, I will be made whole.” The Savior was probably wearing a square upper garment mantle with corners and fringe which represented priesthood power.³⁹ As the woman made her way through the crowd trying to be inconspicuous, she finally dared to reach for one of those tassels. Amidst the throng, Jesus felt her faith and asked, “Who touched me?” (Luke 8:44). The disciples were surprised as everyone was pressing against Him. In this instance a key gospel principle is demonstrated — the necessity of faith for any and all disciples of Christ. Former Second Counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency Anne C. Pingree notes that in like manner current disciples of Christ “must [also] demonstrate that faith in the Lord has penetrated our hearts deeply enough to move us to action.”⁴⁰

Jesus’s response to this woman’s faith is interesting. He declared, “I perceive that virtue is gone out of me” (Luke 8:46). In the English translation, this may seem to be an odd statement. Modern usage of the word *virtue* often connotes chastity. However, virtue is a more inclusive term that implies goodness, loveliness, refinement, and being of good report (thirteenth Article of Faith). President James E. Faust of the First Presidency adds to the definition moral excellence, right action and thinking, or goodness of character.⁴¹

Fearing and trembling, with the knowledge that what she had done was revealed, she fell down before Jesus and told Him “all the truth” (Mark 5:33). Culturally, this interchange alarmed those witnessing this healing as the woman was unclean. Jesus responded to the woman, “Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole, go in peace, and be whole of thy plague.” Mark reports the conclusion to the story: “And straightway the fountain of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of that plague” (see Mark 5:29–34). By publically speaking with this woman and even calling her by the intimate term of “Daughter,” Christ’s shows his sensitivity to women’s feelings, emotions, and even health concerns.

The Woman Caught in Adultery

39 Kelly D. Ogden, and Andrew C. Skinner. *The Four Gospels: A volume in the Verse by Verse series* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 252; LDS Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Hem of Garment,” 700.

40 Anne C. Pingree, “The Women with the Issue of Blood,” *Ensign*, November, 2006.

41 James E. Faust, “How Near to the Angels,” *Ensign*, May 1998.

Another woman experienced Christ's sensitivity when a group of men brought her to the temple mount at daybreak, charging her with adultery. Choosing to publicly challenge the Savior, their choice of location for this confrontation reveals a lot about this woman's accusers: "And the scribes and Pharisees brought [her to Christ]; and when they had set her in the midst, They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?" (John 8:3–5).

Their question is ridiculous because the power of the Jewish courts to impose the death penalty ceased around the year 30 BCE. They were tempting Him, hoping they would be able to accuse Him wrongly. These men used the woman to make a point. The interview was in no sense a request for guidance, nor were her accusers asking for a decision. They were not worried about this woman or the Law of Moses; instead, they were using her as an object in their plot to trap the Savior. It is an understatement to say they were the antithesis of respectful.

Christ, the transcendent respecter of women, would not let this woman be used in this way. His reaction to this query was to stoop down and start writing on the ground. When they continued to tempt Him, Christ lifted Himself up and prodded, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone. And again he stooped down and wrote on the ground" (John 8:7–8). Convicted in their own conscience, they went out one by one beginning at the eldest even unto the last, and Jesus was left alone with the woman. When He saw none but the woman left, he asked, "Woman where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?" The woman responded, "No man, Lord." Jesus then said, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:10–11).

Anyone who suggests that the words of the Savior here are negating this woman's need for repentance are limiting his teachings and lessening the real price of discipleship. The JST adds that "the woman glorified God from that hour, and believed on his name" (JST John 8:11). This experience can be seen as one of the most seminal events in the history of women, from Christ's day into our day. Here, Christ demonstrates what is expected of men with regards to women and also introduces key doctrines of His teaching. Historically, there has often been a sexual double standard. Women were, and are, held to a higher standard of sexual morality than men. Christ consistently decried this sexual double standard, even though under the law men were treated differently than women when they committed adultery. One can clearly see this in the fact that the woman's accusers did not bring the man involved in the

adultery before Christ to be condemned — just the woman. Christ very succinctly teaches the necessity of adhering to His standard of chastity; but, He also teaches the reality of repentance and complete forgiveness if any individual — man or woman — transgresses His law. Christ's interaction here indicates that the standard before us today should be both men and women alike are in need of repentance when they sin.

A Gentile Woman

Another outcast of society whom the Lord treated with respect was a Gentile woman. Some may accuse the Lord of being less than kind with this Gentile. However, a careful examination of the passage shows clearly that His graceful end justified His means. A certain woman's young daughter had an unclean spirit. Whether possessed by an evil spirit or bound by a mental or emotional illness, she was afflicted. Her mother had heard of Christ and somehow located Him. Seeking solitude, Jesus had escaped the crowds, and she interrupted His few minutes of rest. She was probably a rather intuitive person to even be able to find Him. Then, inappropriately, she showed up at mealtime. The woman was a citizen of a Gentile nation, a Syrophoenician by birth and a Canaanite by religion. In short, she was the wrong sex, the wrong citizenship, the wrong ethnic background, and the wrong religion to make such a request. Yet, she accepted Jesus as her promised Messiah.⁴² She was a "Persona non grata" in Jewish law and worthy only of at best contempt. In His own way, the Lord responded to her needs.

Matthew says that she was crying unto Him: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But he answered her not a word" (Matthew 15:22–23). Thus, He did not say anything; ignoring her request. However, she was not offended by His silence; or if she was, she apparently simply chose not to take offense.⁴³

Chagrined at her impulsiveness, the disciples suggested that Jesus send her away. Instead, Jesus responded to her persistence, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). In other words, "she was not fit for the feast prepared for the lost sheep of Israel." Christ was saying, "My mission is to the Jews not the Gentiles," and she was not fit to receive the blessings prepared for the House of Israel. However, she still continued to importune and worship, "showing greater respect than most of the Jews." She begged, "Lord help me." He

42 Thurston, *Women in the New Testament*, 72.

43 Wilcox, *Daughters of God*, 212.

answered, "It is not meet to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs (Matthew 15:26)."

Jesus's response might cause some to accuse the Lord of being unkind; however, "Jews were prone to label non-Jews as Greeks, pagans, sinners and even dogs because they were seen as not yet matured, prepared, and worthy to receive God's word."⁴⁴ He was merely trying to help her understand her position of being outside the covenant. What was her reaction? She took whatever the Lord gave her and acknowledged that she was not of the covenant people, so she was not asking to take away their blessings. Rather, she was merely asking for a small scrap, a small blessing, for herself. A great deal of "thy will, not mine" can be seen in her response: "Truth Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table (Matthew 15:27)."

The Lord gave a test of faith and patience to this mother, a test she passed with flying colors. Then, Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour" (Matthew 15:24–28). Because she was content to accept the Lord's will, He eventually gave her the desires of her heart, even though she was not entitled at that time as a nonmember of the house of Israel. His blessings came to this woman "just when the highest good for the petitioner" was accomplished.⁴⁵ Jesus taught his followers the correct view in regards to women's equality. His words indicate that women are equal in God's eyes if they have faith in his divinity. His teachings show that it is not all cultural mores and man-made Jewish laws that turn women into second class citizens. Rather, when Christ qualified women, He looked at their hearts and their faithfulness. Thus, women were equal before God because of their faith.

A Widow's Mite

On another occasion, Jesus was sitting against the treasury of the temple watching people give alms for the poor. His attention was focused on a vulnerable, husbandless woman. Just as the feminization of poverty is real today, it was also profound when Jesus lived on the earth.⁴⁶ It is "no wonder with his perfect regard for women [that] he is so insistent about

44 Olson, *Women of the New Testament*, 253–4.

45 P. C. Headley, *Historical and Descriptive Studies of Women in the Bible, from Eve of the Old to the Marys of the New Testament* (Auburn, NY: Derby, Miller & Co., 1851), 267.

46 James E. Faust states: "It is unfortunate that it is taking so long to bring full economic justice to women. The feminization of poverty is real and tragic." See

our obligations to widows.”⁴⁷ In Jewish Palestine, a widow often found herself at the mercy of her sons.⁴⁸ In fact, widows were often legally and financially defenseless in ancient society. With that backdrop, the account depicts a woman identified by scripture only as a widow who was donating two mites to the temple treasury. A lepton, or mite, was a tiny Jewish bronze coin worth anywhere from a fraction of a penny to fifty cents.⁴⁹

Yet her donation and witness show forth great power because as a widow she most likely was poor. Irony shows its face here. Should not those at the temple be taking care of the widow and not vice versa? As the Lord observed her, He called His disciples over and said to them, “Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living” (Mark 12:43–44) The Savior’s acknowledgement of the widow’s sacrifice shows that motive is more important to Him than the size of a gift. Here the Lord taught a visible lesson that “man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

Mary Magdalene

As with the unnamed widow, no matter the circumstances of a woman’s life, Jesus Christ was always gracious and kind. These attributes can especially be seen in His interactions with Mary from Magdala. All the Gospel authors mention Mary Magdalene as the first woman among the women following Jesus Christ. As her example shows, women were not only included in Jesus’s teachings but also were incorporated into His group of disciples. This indicates their intrinsic worth and value — their equal standing before God. Tradition holds that Mary Magdalene was a woman of considerable substance.⁵⁰ Even for a wealthy Jewish woman, to follow a teacher “through cities and villages” was not acceptable behavior

“A Message to My Granddaughters: Becoming ‘Great Women,’” *Ensign*, September 1986, 18.

47 Neal A. Maxwell, “The Women of God,” *Woman* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 94.

48 Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Source Book in Roman Social History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 22.

49 Stewart Huckaby, “The Widow’s Mite Coin,” *Coinlink Coin Collecting News*, September 20, 2010, <http://www.coinlink.com/News/ancients/the-widows-mite-coin>

50 Lee Anna Starr, *The Bible Status of Woman*, (New Jersey: Pillar of Fire, 1955), 170.

prior to Christ's ministry (see Luke 13:22). She and other women were physically and emotionally supportive of Jesus during His ministry, and at His death as they saw to His burial. Readers of the account should try to imagine what Mary felt when she found the stone rolled away and Christ's body gone. She was distraught. She wanted to find Jesus's body herself (John 20:16–18). She stood outside the sepulchre weeping, stooped down, and looked into the tomb again:

And seeth two angels in white sitting the one at the head and the other at the feet where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, Woman why weepest thou? She saith unto them because they have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid him. And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. (John 20:12–14)

Mary's reaction to this angelic revelation is incredible. She must have been in shock, as so many are when a loved one dies. She saw angels and still did not understand what had occurred. She was still asking the same questions even after the heavenly messengers had answered her queries. Then, "Jesus saith unto her, Woman why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away" (John 20:15). She did not know Him until He spoke her name. The Savior choosing Mary to be the first witness of his resurrection is not coincidental or insignificant. This occurrence tells us that women are not substandard disciples in the Kingdom of God but that they will also receive great blessings along with their male counterparts.

The Lord knows each of His spiritually begotten daughters and sons by their given names. Mary Magdalene recognized his voice: "Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master" (John 20:16). As they embraced, the Savior did not say "Touch me not!" as recorded in the King James Version. Those words seem cold compared to the correct Joseph Smith translation in which Christ says, "Hold me not." There is a big difference between someone saying to a woman "Don't you touch me" and asking something like "Don't hold me back." Here the Savior may have been asking Mary not to hold him back from ascending to his Father. She may have thought that He would return to his life as she had known him before. But now he was different, resurrected, and could not be hindered from what he needed to do as the Resurrected Christ. This first appearance to a woman was typical of His approach to females during His lifetime. In

that respect, “Jesus not only raised the status of women but put them on equal spiritual footing with men.”⁵¹

Many other examples of this approach are found in the four Gospels. He chose females as the subject of many of His parables, including The Leaven (Matthew 13:33), The Fig Tree (Matthew 24:42), The Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1), The Silver Piece (Luke 15:8), and The Unjust Judge (Luke 18:3) demonstrating that women’s concerns were as valid as men’s activities. He spoke of patching worn-out clothes, grinding wheat, making bread, and cleaning homes, concerning Himself with the goings-on in the daily lives of first-century females, and He brought the good news in terms with which they could identify. Using examples of women to portray gospel principles and practices, He taught that daughters of God are an integral part of divine creation and eternal progression as He showed great reverence and respect for them.

Conclusion

Jesus’s teachings relating to women and their roles in their original setting were “sometimes radical, sometimes reformational, and usually controversial.”⁵² Where “Bleeding Pharisees” would strike their heads on posts as they walked around with their eyes shut to avoid even seeing a woman, how controversial it must have been for Christ to seek women to teach and then to show them His loving kindnesses. By studying Jesus’s example, His disciples today are taught that women are an integral part of divine creation and have individual worth. “He never by word or deed, lent encouragement to the disparagement of women.”⁵³ The way that Christ consistently demonstrated treatment of women throughout his life is one of the things that made him such a radical. Such treatment was a far cry from Jesus’s contemporaries and his interactions with women indicate their intrinsic value in his eyes and their equality before God. With each incident described above there are specific cultural practices that are condemned and new patterns of belief and behavior that are to be engaged in by disciples in regards to women and by women. Every act of Christ was intended for a purpose. His acts towards women, because of the conditions of his day and thereafter — are intended to liberate women from false and more often than not, inappropriate and harmful treatment that diminished women. His behavior towards women

51 Thurston, *Women in the New Testament*, 160.

52 Ben Witherington and Ann Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 64.

53 Starr, *The Bible Status of Woman*, 165 and 175.

indicated their equality before God and with faithfulness and devotion their ability, alongside men, to inherit Eternal Life.

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