

EVERY WOMAN IN THE BIBLE: CONTINUATION OF

JESUS' RELATIONSHIP'S WITH WOMEN:

The relative value of women:

In Rabbinic thought men were primary, women were secondary. The religious leaders, being men looked on women as “other”. Indeed their rules of religious law treat women as “other”. Indeed their rules of religious law treat women more as objects that men experience than as persons in their own right. While women were portrayed as weak-minded and fragile, men in contrast were viewed as courageous, strong and wise. This attitude is expressed in Genesis, which describes male-female differences. One of those differences is that “the man makes demands on the woman whereas the woman does not make demands on the man.

How startling then to see Jesus, making his way through the crowds at the request of an important man, to stop and respond to the silent cry of a woman! To Jesus the woman was at least as important as the man was, for both their needs were urgent.

The danger of “contamination” by women:

There is little doubt that her contemporaries would consider the woman in the story as *niddah*. This term was applied to women suffering a menstrual flow. During this period women were ritually unclean, and a husband could not have sex with his wife. Of course, any menstrual bloodstains on objects women came in contact with was held to pollute the objects, so Jewish women had to be especially careful in the kitchen and around the house.

The Rabbis went beyond the Old Testament teaching on menstrual uncleanness. They urged that a man separate from his wife several days before and after her period to avoid contamination. The Scripture, “You shall separate the children of Israel from their uncleanness”

(Lev.15:31): “You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them.

was used as a proof text for this ruling. Rabbi Yoshayah even warned men that they might die if they failed to keep away from their wives when they approached their periods. A later story illustrates this:

It once happened that a certain scholar who had studied much Scripture and *mishna*, and had served scholars much, yet died in the prime of life... I said to her: My daughter! How was he to you in your days of menstruation? She said to me: God forbid! He did not touch me even with his little finger. And how was he to you during your days of white garments?(from the end of the period to the time of ritual bathing)? He ate with me, drank with me slept with me in bodily contact, and it did not occur to him to engage in sex. I said to her. Blessed be the Omnipresent for slaying him!

Mere contract even after the flow of blood ceased was assumed to explain *and* justify the early death!

While some sages were willing to make distinctions between menstrual flows and discharges of blood from injuries of illness, only lengthy and careful examination of individual cases could lead to a declaration of cleanness. In most cases it was deemed better to err on the side of safety.

The horror of menstrual blood was viewed, in Rabbinic Judaism that reflected and intensified the suspicion and distrust with women themselves.

Against this background, it is striking to see Jesus' untroubled reaction to the woman's touch. Even more striking, rather than contaminating Jesus, this woman's touch released a flow of spiritual power *from* Him that cleansed her!

Christ showed concern for women's unique needs:

The New Testament never directly attacked the patriarchal structure of

first- century society. Nor does it ever imply that the differences between men and women are irrelevant. But the New Testament does call for a transformation of men's attitudes toward women, and thus seeks to reform rather than replace patriarchy. Certainly Jesus did not pause to talk with the woman simply because He felt power flow from Himself. He paused because He knew that the woman, fearful and trembling at her boldness in violating laws/customs imposed by the men who ruled her world, needed to hear Christ address her as “daughter”, tell her to “be of good cheer”, and then to receive His commendation for her faith.

Some people reading this story in the Gospels have viewed it as an “anti-Pharisee polemic” (a strong spoken or written attack) against someone else's opinion, beliefs, practices, etc. The attitude Jesus displayed in this encounter departs strikingly from the attitude toward women expressed in Rabbinic writings. Christ's concern for the woman as a person clearly condemns the dismissive and slighting ways women were viewed in that day.

Jesus at Mary and Martha's home:

(Luke 10: 38-42): As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, He came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. (39): She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said. (40): But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to Him and asked, “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

Luke is the only Gospel writer to relate a striking story about Jesus' visit to the home where Mary and Martha lived.

Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus feet and heard His work. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, “Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.”

And Jesus answered and said to her,

(Luke 10: 41): “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.

Unmarried women:

(John 11): Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary & Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the LORD and wiped His feet with her hair. So the sister sent word to Jesus, “Lord the one you love is sick.”

We do not know a lot about Mary and Martha, although we meet them again in John's Gospel. We know, however, that they were relatively well off and frequently hosted Jesus and His disciples when they came to Jerusalem. We also know that they were unmarried. We know because, even though Luke depicts Martha welcoming Jesus “into her house”, John tells us the two women lived with their brother, Lazarus. This means that the house had been their father's, and first-century Jewish inheritance laws required the home to pass to the son, not the daughters. If Mary or Martha had been married, they would have lived in the homes of their husband, not their brother.

In a society that emphasized marriage for both men and women, and where thirteen years and one day was the marriageable age for women, Mary and Martha's unmarried state was a disgrace. Although relatively well off, we would have to consider Mary and Martha disadvantaged persons in that society. Like so many other women we read of in the gospels, these two women were oppressed by the expectations of others – expectations neither had been able to meet.

Martha's view of her role:

(Luke:10:40): Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to Him and asked, “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!

Luke pictures Martha as a flustered homemaker. She rushed around the kitchen frantic to prepare and serve food for her visitors. Jewish society made a clear distinction between “women's work” and “men's work,” and the kitchen was the woman's responsibility. Martha did not question this view of herself and her role. She may not have been married, but she unquestioningly accepted society's definition of what a woman was and what a woman was to do.

Martha not only accepted society's view of her role; she became upset when her sister Mary did not. When Mary sat down to learn at Jesus' feet, Martha became angry. In first-century Judaism, *men*, not *women*, were supposed to learn from rabbis. It may well be that Martha's agitation is not so much a reflection of her need for kitchen help as it is anxiety at Mary's “inappropriate” behavior!

Finally Martha went to Jesus and asked Him to “tell” Mary to help her. She desperately wanted Jesus to confirm her idea of what was right and wrong for women to do.

Mary's rejection of the woman's role (Luke 10:39):

(Luke: 10: 39): She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said.

There is some debate today concerning how much Scripture Jewish women knew. There is evidence that the Rabbis deferred to women as far as rulings governing the kitchen were concerned. Evidence also shows that studying was considered inappropriate for women.

Commentary on Deuteronomy 11:9, “And you shall teach them to your sons, and not your daughters.” R. Eleizer has been quoted as saying, “They shall burn the teachings

of Torah rather than convey them to women. Rabbi Eleazer also stated, “A woman has no wisdom expect in handling her spindle, for it ritten, “And all the women that were wise-hearted did spin with their hands.” “While this Rabbi is the most hostile to the idea of Torah-study for women, there is no doubt that women were not expected, as men were, to probe deeply into God's word.

Mary, then in setting household tasks aside to sit as a disciple at Jesus' feet, was taking a bold step. (Yeah Mary!!!) She was claiming a right that those in first century Judaism assumed was for men only. In so doing she was abandoning the role that both men and women in her society had assigned her.

Jesus confirmed Mary's choice (Luke 10:42):

After hearing Martha's complaint, Jesus did what no Rabbi of His time would have considered. He affirmed Mary's action saying, “Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Luke: (10: 42): “ but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her.”

In making this statement Jesus was not denigrating the tasks women performed for their families. Rather, Jesus was opening the door to women to a privilege that had long been denied them. Women, like men, are called by God to explore the depths of His Word. Women, like men, are invited to listen to Jesus and to grow to spiritual maturity.

Today, in our churches many debate whether a woman can teach. Despite the intensity of the debate today, that issue is hardly as inflammatory as the issue Mary's bold action raised in the first century. Are women capable of mastering God's Word? Are women called to be students of the Scriptures and disciples of the Lord? Jesus' affirmation of Mary's eager desire to learn from Him opened a door for women that had long been closed.

Jesus' affirmation of Mary should lead those of us who deny the privilege of teaching to women to question whether our attitude toward women and the Word reflects the view of women held by the Pharisees or the view of women held by our LORD!!!

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