

Jesus' Relationship with Women in Jn

Home Retreat, Sept 2023

In recent weeks I have had occasion to devote time to the study of the gospel of John, and have been struck again and again by the special character of the presentation of Jesus' relationship with women. This I would like to share with you.

To begin with, the first historical scene of the life of Jesus and the last are both dominated in a way by Mary, his mother. The first scene is, of course, the Marriage Feast at Cana, the last the Crucifixion and Death of Jesus. In each of these Jesus addresses his mother with the strange term *γυναί*, that is the Greek for (roughly) 'woman'. It is not a rough term as it would be in English. Nor is it a smooth term, such as 'lady', which would be quite inappropriate. It is certainly not a common way for someone to address his mother. Jesus says to Mary, *Γυναί*, what is that [that they have run out of wine] to you and to me?' It is not rude; it is not even brusque. It is Jesus' minimal response to his mother, enabling her to express her entire confidence in him, a scene-opener, to which Jesus will respond by the highly symbolic action of turning the six (note: one short of seven, so the image of imperfection – like the devil's number, 666) water-jars of Jewish ritual purification into the plentiful wine of the messianic banquet. The scene is placed at the opening of the gospel as a symbol of Jesus' entire work, the beginning of the messianic banquet.

To this corresponds the final scene of Jesus' life, when he recommends his mother (*γυναί* again) to the Beloved Disciple. Only after this can Jesus say *τετελεσται*, it is complete. The Beloved Disciple is certainly a symbolic figure. He appears four times, at the Last Supper, the Eucharist, next to Jesus; here at the Cross, sharing the passion with Jesus; at the empty tomb, where he out-runs Peter both in movement and in faith and understanding of the meaning of the empty tomb; and finally by the Lake of Galilee, where he is designated at the source and guarantee of the tradition. He is carefully nowhere named, nowhere restricted to any one person; to my mind the BD is THE beloved disciple, that is, every Christian. He fulfills the Christian function of sharing the Eucharist, participating in the passion, acknowledging the resurrection and passing on the Christian tradition. There is no point in speculating who this BD is; we are not *meant* to know, or rather we are *meant not* to know; he is the generalized picture of the Christian disciple. The scene in which the Woman and the BD are recommended to one another is the foundation of the first Christian community. It is only after this that Jesus can breathe forth his Spirit (more accurately, 'hand over' his Spirit – presumably to the new community, the embryonic Church, just created).

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This bracketing of the gospel with the scenes of Mary are only two of examples of the interaction of the Johannine Jesus with women. A sharp contrast is the scene with

the Samaritan woman, so tenderly and reflectively described. We are prepared for the reality and humanity of the description by the note that Jesus is tired from his journey as he sits by the well. He certainly revives! The scene is a marked contrast to the previous dialogue, the dialogue with Nicodemus. These dialogues are a feature of Jn, running throughout the gospel. Note that they all follow the convention of Greek drama at the time, which does not represent more than two characters on stage at any one time, so it is always a dialogue rather than a generalized conversation. The dialogue with the Samaritan is in marked contrast to that with Nicodemus. With Nicodemus, THE teacher in Israel, Jesus is strict and rebukes Nicodemus for his lack of understanding, although, as often in Jn, Jesus' speech is inherently riddling. He almost provokes Nicodemus to misunderstand: how indeed can a man be born again? Must he re-enter his mother's womb? What is being 'born again from above'?

In the following dialogue with the Samaritan woman Jesus speaks in the same riddling way, but the whole dialogue is light-hearted and cheeky, firstly on the lips of the Samaritan woman herself: You are a Jew, and Jews don't associate with Samaritans. You have no bucket, so you can't give any water, let alone living water. If you know about my complicated marital situation you must be a prophet, are you? She answers her own question about whether Jesus is Messiah by running off to tell her friends about him and brings them along. Jesus enters into the spirit of the teasing by his reference to living water, welling up to eternal life, then his further revelation that he knows about her marital situation, and then teasing her about worshipping in the wrong place - or in any or no place. At the same time it is a vital revelatory dialogue, leading up to the first of the great 'I am / εγω ειμι' sayings.

This is the occasion where in all the gospels Jesus' humour and light-hearted humour emerges most clearly. Another occasion, less explicit, more typical of the Synoptic Gospels is, of course, Jesus with the Syro-Phoenician (Mk) or Canaanite (Mt) woman, where Jesus calls her a dog (a hurtful term, used by Jews to refer to gentiles), and she comes back at him with the remark about dogs under the table wolfing the scraps. Again, Jesus seems to be more light-hearted with a woman than he is with men.

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Another aspect of Jesus' human relationships which comes out very clearly with women consists in his affection for the family of Lazarus. His affection clearly extends to the whole family, including Lazarus, but the accounts of events are centred on the two sisters. Jesus returns to Judaea from the far side of the Jordan, although he – and even more so, the disciples – is aware that this brings him into mortal danger - 'let us also go to die with him', says Thomas. Jesus' interaction is all with the two sisters. It is at Mary's distress that Jesus is 'distressed in spirit and profoundly moved', and actually weeps. Perhaps this is inevitable, because Jesus is well aware that he is going to rescue Lazarus from death by bringing him back to life. Nevertheless, it is the distress of the sisters rather than the situation of Lazarus that moves him. It was, of course, also this Mary who indulged in the extravagant and expensive loving act of anointing Jesus' head for burial, an act which is given its full value in Jn 12.3, since 'the house was filled with the scent of the ointment'. In Mark's account (Mk 14.3-8) Jesus replies with full generosity, promising that 'wherever

throughout the world the gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will also be told in remembrance of her.' The relationship of this anointing by Mary of Bethany to the anointing of Jesus' feet with an alabaster jar of ointment at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Lk 7.36-50) by the unnamed woman who had a bad name in the town is a complicated question which should not distract us. Personally, I think that Lk has used an outline-memory of the incident to illustrate his favourite theme of repentance (and non-repentance by the hosting Pharisee).

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Finally we must consider two stories where the silence of Jesus is the outstanding feature. The earlier of these, the story of the woman taken in adultery, is doubtfully Johannine. It is absent from the best papyri and from two of the three great fourth-century MSS (Sinaiticus and Vaticanus). It is highly non-Johannine in style and vocabulary. It is best classed as a separate, but historical incident, later inserted into Jn at this place as a comment on Jesus' insistence that no one should be condemned without evidence. However, it is now in the gospel of John, and we will take it as a historical record of Jesus' attitude.

The most striking feature of all is Jesus' consideration for the accused woman, his refusal to judge her, by contrast to the vociferous condemnation by her accusers, first of the woman and finally of themselves, and his silent insistence that she judge herself. It is Jesus insisting on the primacy of the individual conscience. From the personal point of view it is a lovely example of Jesus' tact and consideration. He has no need of advancing any argument or counsel. His presence is sufficient, and he uses this also to protect the accused from the onslaught of the righteously indignant accusers. He just stays there, doodling on the ground, until both the accusers and the accused come to their senses and judge themselves.

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My final example or instance of Jesus' relationship with women in the gospel of Jn is perhaps the most striking and the most beautiful. In the Johannine account of the empty tomb the first witness to the empty tomb is Mary of Magdala. She does not inspect the tomb but merely registers the fact that the stone had been moved away. Taking this as evidence that the body has been removed or stolen, she runs off to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple (Jn 20.1-2). Then seemingly she returns to the tomb and stands there weeping (20.11). In her obviously distraught frame of mind she sees someone whom she mistakes for a gardener. All Jesus needs to do is to pronounce her name, 'Mariam', the normal Aramaic or Hebrew form of what we translate as 'Mary'. The relationship between them provides all she needs to know. In an instant by that loving voice she is transformed from an unbeliever who had no conception or hope of resurrection into being the first messenger of the resurrection. The stunning element is the power of that single word. It is so spoken as to instantly transform Mary from unbelief into the belief which she will run to promulgate as the first apostle of the Resurrection. Whatever the prejudices at this period about the probative force of female testimony, Jesus has no interest in them.

All kinds of ridiculous explanations have been proposed for the Risen Christ's following command, 'Do not cling to me because I have not yet ascended to the

Father'. For instance, that he was naked and felt embarrassed. I see it as intended to show that any future contact with Jesus will not be on the normal bodily level: to cling to Jesus physically has no more point. Nevertheless, at this point Jesus is in a sort of hiatus-state, betwixt and between. Physical contact is no longer the way to express and practice belief. When he has ascended to the Father all contact with him will be through the Spirit whom the Father and the Risen Christ will send.