

# **WOMEN IN SCRIPTURE**

**By**

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## WOMEN IN SCRIPTURE

### INTRODUCTION

Although I've entitled this talk women in scripture, I'm going to look at the issue of women and Christianity a little bit more widely than from a purely scriptural perspective. Although I'm a man, I think the issue of giving women their due in the context of our faith is long overdue – they've been long neglected. Yet, I've had to approach the issue very carefully, if we attempt to redress this neglect by over-emphasizing the participation and influence of a few women here and there, we perhaps overload the importance of those particular women and skew the account – so I *am* going to look at particular women, but I'm going to start with a scriptural overview of the role of women, look at women in the OT, then look at Jesus' teaching and interaction with women and finally look at women in the NT and the early church. This is a huge topic, so I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to deal with all these issues as thoroughly as I would wish.

Let's set the scene with a few quick quotes on women from the early church:

“What women these Christians have!”

—*4th-century pagan philosopher Libanius*

“Many women have received power through the grace of God and have performed many deeds of manly valour.”

—*Clement of Alexandria*

“She was in the front line in condemning the heretics.”

—*Jerome, on Marcella*

“A woman, however learned and holy, may not take upon herself to teach in an assembly of men.”

—*the Synod of Carthage, 398 A.D.*

“You are the Devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first forsaker of the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach!”

—*Tertullian, to women*

“When [the women] came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven... But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.”

—*Luke 24:9–11*

“These people do not know that while Barak trembled, Deborah saved Israel, that Esther delivered from supreme peril the children of God ... Is it not to women that our Lord appeared after His Resurrection? Yes, and the men could then blush for not having sought what the women had found.”

—*Jerome, after criticism for dedicating his books to women*

So, let's move on to look at what the Bible has to tell us about the role of women generally.

## WHAT THE BIBLE TELLS US ABOUT THE ROLE OF WOMEN GENERALLY AND IN THE CHURCH

To understand God's intention about the role of women we have to go back to the beginning, the creation of women in Genesis chapter 2:

"The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (Genesis 2:18-24 NIV)

The word "helper" in verse 18 has often been used to argue for God's ordination of a subordinate role for women from the beginning – but in my view this is completely unjustified. The last part of verse 18 reads literally, "I will make him for him a helper as in front of him (or according to what is in front of him)." This last phrase, "as in front of him (or according to what is in front of him)" (*k<sup>e</sup>neḡdô*), occurs only here and in v. 20. It suggests that what God creates for Adam will correspond to him. Thus the new creation will be neither a superior nor an inferior, but an equal. The creation of this helper will form one-half of a polarity, and will be to man as the south pole is to the north pole. Furthermore the Hebrew word *'ezer* translated helper itself doesn't imply one who has subordinate status, because the same word is used to describe Yahweh's status in relation to Israel – which is certainly not subordinate. Woman's role was not be identical with the male role, but it was certainly not to be inferior.

Indeed I think that the giving of equal authority to rule over animals to both man and woman in Genesis chapter 1:

"Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:26-27 NIV) strongly implies the equality of men and women.

The text from Genesis chapter 2 then teaches us that the first woman, Eve, was created from the first man, Adam, thus becoming the first part of creation to be made from another living thing. Eve herself isn't taken from man it's simply that the raw material that God used to create Eve that was taken from Adam – from his 'side' is probably a better translation than the usual 'rib' – and again this doesn't in any way imply that Eve was inferior to Adam. Both were made in God's image, unlike the rest of creation. That's why Eve was a suitable companion for Adam whereas nothing else in the created order was.

Adam goes on to say that:

"[Eve] is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"

which is probably a covenantal statement, as Brueggemann argues, a pledge of the greatest loyalty in all circumstances. I think it's a counterpart to a modern marriage ceremony and this seems to be confirmed by the words of verse 24 which contain the elements of leaving, uniting and a public declaration.

Unfortunately this ideal state of equality as originally ordained by God was not to persist for very long because mankind rebelled against God in what is usually referred to as the Fall and sin entered the world. Now sin has consequences and God announced that there would be consequences for the relationship between man and woman:

"To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life." (Genesis 3:16-17 NIV)

The woman's penalty impacts her two main roles, child bearing and her relationship with her husband. As regards the latter, husband and wife would no longer co-exist in an equal covenant relationship, but rather the man would rule over the woman. I think this arises from the fact that the woman acted independently of the man in sinning, so now she will be dependant upon her husband – although some scholars argue that this dependant role is merely a consequence of the relationship having been corrupted by sin. Of course, it's absolutely fundamental here that God is speaking of husbands and wives, and saying that the husband shall rule over the wife. This is not a blanket authority for every man to rule over all women. I think it does imply that a male headship role over women will generally be appropriate, especially in relation to married women, but it is far, far short of an absolute command for all women to be subject to all men.

In addition, I think that the nature of the rule to be exercised by a man over his wife is very important. The word "rule" is used in various circumstances in the OT with very different meanings. Certainly it doesn't mean harsh domination here. Human jurisdiction over animals is expressed by the different verb "dominate" (*rādâ*; Genesis 1:28), suggesting that the man does not "rule" his wife in the sense that he subdues the animals. We cannot understand the divine word "he will rule over you" as a command to impose dominance any more than verse 16a is an exhortation for the woman to suffer as much as possible during childbirth. It is a distortion of the passage to find in it justification for male tyranny. I think it must be understood in the light of OT rules requiring aid and assistance to be given to those in weaker positions, such as widows and orphans.

There is no doubt that man misused his ability to rule over women, primarily by extending the rule to be one over women generally rather than being a rule over wives. Although there were one or two notable women figures in OT times, which we'll return to later, by Jesus' time women were generally in a very subordinate role, for example their evidence was not even considered acceptable in a court of law. Man's authority or rule over women was not intended to be a general rule and insofar as it was to be exercised in relation to wives it was always intended to be a loving, Godly, guiding authority modelled on God's rule over His creation as passages such as Micah 6:8 tell us. But, this misuse of authority doesn't change the fundamental fact that, following the Fall, God has ordained that man should have a loving, Godly authority over his wife.

Some feminists have argued that this may have been the situation up to the time of Christ, but that the New Covenant in Christ's blood has radically changed things. Well, of course

Christ's sacrificial death *has* radically changed things, but not, I believe, man's role vis a vis his wife – at least not before Christ's second coming.

Our guide to learning about the position under the new covenant is, of course, NT scripture – mainly Paul's various epistles, but also what the gospels can tell us about Jesus' dealings with women. Let's begin with Paul. Feminists often argue that Paul's positive message regarding women in Galatians 3:28 is his real message about women's role under the new covenant and that his negative comments about the role of women in Ephesians 5:22-24, Colossians 3:18, 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12 are merely directed to the local pastoral situation in those churches at the time of writing. I think that's too simplistic, but let's look at the passages in more detail.

Let's start by looking at the passage from Galatians:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28 NIV)

you can see why the feminists like that passage, but it comes after material relating to salvation by faith and the two preceding verses say:

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” (Galatians 3:26-27 NIV)

Thus I think there is no doubt that here Paul is speaking of our equality in and as regards salvation – a subject to which I shall return later – and not about our status in this world now. This view is reinforced by the fact that Paul speaks of “male” and “female” and not “man” and “woman”. So, this passage cannot be used as a justification for asserting God's pronouncement at the Fall has changed, and that a man should no longer rule over his wife.

So what about Paul's so called negative passages about the role of women, let's look at each one in turn. In Ephesians chapter 5:

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.” (Ephesians 5:21-24 NIV)

we see that here Paul is not speaking of submission by women to all men, but of wives submitting to their husbands. This is really a repetition of what we learned about the situation after the Fall from Genesis chapter 3, but with the addition that wifely submission is now seen as part of an orderly authority structure for the world in which Christ is the ultimate head. This supports what I was saying about Galatians 3:28 a moment ago. This submission in no way implies inequality or inferiority. The verb ‘submit, be subordinate’ can be used of Christ's submission to the authority of the Father (1 Corinthians 15:28; Matthew 26:39), which clearly show that this word, this concept, can denote a functional subordination without implying inferiority, or implying less honour and glory.

The motivation for the wife to be subject to her husband is spelled out in the final phrase of verse 22, “*as to the Lord*”. The general admonition of verse 21 for both men and women to be submissive in ‘the fear of Christ’ finds concrete expression for the wife in the marriage situation. As a wife is subordinate to her husband, so in that very action she is submitting to the Lord. Her voluntary response is not called for because of her role in society, nor is it to be understood as separate from her submission to Christ. Rather, it is part and parcel of the way that she serves the Lord Jesus. We see this in Colossians 3:23, which speaks of servants who engage in wholehearted work for their masters and in that very action serve their heavenly Lord.

Christ's headship over the church is expressed in his loving it and giving his life for it and this is the kind of rule and authority a husband is to have over his wife as verse 25 clearly shows:

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25 NIV)

Let's move on to look at the second reference from Paul's epistles that we noted – Colossians 3:18, although I'm going to quote slightly more of Paul's words here to give us the context: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” (Colossians 3:17-24 NIV)

Again Paul is re-affirming the male authority of husbands over wives that God expressed after the Fall and again Paul makes it clear that this male authority is to be exercised in a Godly way and that wifely submission is to be seen in the context of the submission of all humans to Christ. Paul is saying that this wifely submission is to be a voluntary submission. Also as Paul makes clear in verse 19 the wife's submission to her husband has its counterpart in the duty of the husband to love his wife – which was certainly not a part of the normal rules of secular culture in Paul's day. Indeed we don't know of any other code of behaviour from the ancient world requiring a man to love his wife. Moreover, the word used for “love” here is *agapaō*, which implies the kind of sacrificial, self-giving love whose model is Christ himself. Perhaps significantly, the only other occurrence of the verb “love” in Colossians refers to God's love for us, his people (Colossians 3:12). Paul's really imposing a very onerous and costly duty on husbands here.

We also need to note the difference between wives being called to “submit” to their husbands and children and slaves being called to “obey”. This pattern is typical, though not universal, in the NT, and suggests that the NT writers put the relationship of wife to husband in a different (and less “authoritarian”) category than these others. “Obedience” describes a situation in which orders are being issued and in which the party obeying has little choice in the matter. Submission, on the other hand, suggests a voluntary willingness to recognize and put oneself under the leadership of another. To “submit” is to recognize a relationship of order established by God. But submission to any human is always conditioned by the ultimate submission that each believer owes to God: in any hierarchy we can imagine, God stands at the “top of the list.” This means, then, that a wife will sometimes have to disobey a husband (even a Christian one) if that husband commands her to do something contrary to God's laws. Even as she disobeys, however, she can continue to “submit,” in a sense, by recognizing that her husband remains her head – just not her ultimate head.

Secondly, the submission of the wife to the husband is inevitably and necessarily conditioned significantly by the demand that husbands love their wives, and, in so loving them, will often “submit” to the needs, desires, and wishes of their wives. The mutuality implied by the one-flesh union of husband and wife and the husband's love of the wife must be given full weight,

even as the need for wives to recognize the headship of their husbands is upheld. As I've already said this would have been quite revolutionary in Paul's day and was an extremely onerous and costly requirement.

Thirdly, I would tentatively suggest that, without removing all the relevant meaning of the word, "submission" may take different forms in different cultures. Paul's was a patriarchal culture, in which a man, husband of a wife, father of children, master of slaves, "ruled" the household. The NT does not seek to completely demolish this pattern, although as we've seen the "rule" involved is to be a Godly rule. Today we live in a less patriarchal culture in which a more equal sharing of the dimensions of the marriage relationship may be appropriate. Nevertheless, wifely submission and male headship over the family must remain real if we are to live in accordance with what scripture commands.

Finally I would point out that in my view the words at the end of verse 18 – "as is fitting in the Lord" – don't limit the degree of submission required of a wife, but rather explain why such submission is necessary. The wife doesn't submit because that's what secular social codes require in that time and place, but because this is the behaviour which is "fitting" to those who seek to live in a Godly manner.

Let's move on to the third passage we need to consider, 1 Corinthians 11:3-16:

"Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head—it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God." (1 Corinthians 11:3-16 NIV)

Paul's statement about male authority in relation to women is all contained in verse 3. The ordering of his statements seems a bit strange, but Paul's saying that the head of man is Christ, that man is head over women and that God is head over all. The hierarchy continues all the way up to God the Father. Although Paul refers here to men and women generally, I don't think we should read these verses as a new teaching that *all* women are to be subject to *all* men. I think this is really a re-iteration of the Biblical teaching about husbands and wives – although as I said earlier this teaching does carry a touch of the concept of male headship more generally.

The following verses show that Paul's real concern was behaviour in the context of worship (where men and women would be praying and prophesying), and for that reason as well it is natural to bring *God* into the discussion from the beginning. Those following verses will also discuss the need to avoid shaming one's head. By bringing up God's relationship to Christ as

his head Paul completes the line so that his following discussion about shaming one's head will be understood to have implications for bringing shame or honour to God, who stands at the top of the series of heads and is to be glorified and honoured in the Corinthians' worship, not dishonoured by it.

Further I believe that women covering their heads whilst praying or prophesying was a sign of submission to their husbands. It would most probably have been in accord with the social conventions of the times for women, especially married women, to cover their heads at public gatherings as a sign of modesty. Only prostitutes and disreputable women went bareheaded. Most likely the covering was in the form of a veil. I think it's likely that feminist movements had influenced and encouraged some of the women believers in Corinth to rebel against male authority, so that they refused to cover their heads at appropriate times. We'll be looking at some of the evidence for this in a moment. To blur this scriptural line of authority is not so much to challenge husbandly authority as to bring disrepute on God as the ultimate 'head'.

Clearly this was, firstly a situation which applied to the then social norms for women to cover their heads in modesty and submission, and secondly an indication of female rebellion against husbandly and indeed Godly authority. Thus I don't believe that we should see these statements of Paul as implying any general rule requiring *all* women in *all* times to cover their heads in church, but rather as comments addressed to a particular pastoral situation in a particular church. In cultures where women wearing a veil or a hat does not imply submission to their husbands, this should not be required. We must never forget that whilst Paul's epistles contain much theological material which is of general application they are also pastoral letters addressed to particular churches and particular situations at particular times.

Here it's particularly worthy of note that in his recent book *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, Bruce Winter director of the Institute of Early Christianity in the Graeco Roman World says that "in ancient Roman law you were what you wore" and "in the first century AD a new kind of woman emerged across the Roman Empire – a woman whose provocative dress and often promiscuous lifestyle contrasted starkly with the decorum of the traditional married woman." So what a woman chose to wear identified her as either promiscuous or modest. I hope this will help you to see why Paul would speak strongly about this issue.

Let's move on again to look at our fourth Pauline passage from 1 Corinthians 14:  
"And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church." (1 Corinthians 14:30-35 NIV)

Here I've quoted a longer passage than the verses usually referred to – verses 34 and 35 – to put the passage in context. At first sight it appears that Paul is directly contradicting his statements in chapter 11 of this letter that we just looked at where he said that women *could* pray and prophesy in church. But, I don't believe Paul is contradicting himself here. I think the earlier verses 30 to 33 put his statements in context. There he's talking about orderly behaviour and not interrupting others who are speaking, so in verses 34 and 35 I think he's addressing women who were interrupting and being disruptive in the Corinthian church. Again Paul is addressing a particular pastoral situation. Scholars have written many books on



this issue from many different viewpoints, but I'm fairly convinced that the explanation I've just given is the correct one.

So, now let's look at our final difficult Pauline passage from 1 Timothy 2:

"I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God. A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety." (1 Timothy 2:9-15 NIV)

Of all the passages we've looked at this is probably the most difficult to interpret. Let's start with Paul's apparently confusing statement in verse 15 that "women are saved through childbearing". I think that here 'saved' means 'kept safe' and not saved in a salvational sense – after all we're all saved through faith in Christ alone. Paul is saying that if a Christian woman is pregnant she should continue to carry the child. It was apparently common amongst upper class Roman women to avoid childbearing entirely, usually through primitive abortion techniques. Seneca likened this to murder of the unborn children. Even Ovid speaks graphically against abortion and he may well have lost a mistress to it. This is probably why Roman Emperor Augustus legislated so heavily on marriage and inheritance. Also, let's not forget that Paul was writing to Timothy in Ephesus, which was a centre of Temple prostitution. So, I suggest that this text indicates that a Christian wife would be preserved by continuing in her pregnant condition and, in due course, bearing a child instead of terminating her pregnancy. This will preserve her both physically and morally in the here and now.

Moving on, to obtain the correct meaning of verses 12 as regards women teaching, I think we need to look at the passage as a whole. Firstly, as I've just said, it was written to the church in Ephesus, which at the time probably contained a lot of wealthy Roman women. The first few verses referring to "gold and pearls" and "expensive clothes" indicate that this is probably the case. We've already spoken about the problems being faced in respect of wealthy Roman women. At the time a 'new Roman woman' was emerging (Towner, *Timothy and Titus* p190) who enjoyed a significant level of freedom and participation in public life far more than the traditional Greek woman (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, p190). This new level of freedom and participation in the public sphere for women in the Roman world influenced the role and status of women in the Christian communities as well (Winter, *Roman Wives*, 204). Thus, as a result of "cultural shifts" in the Roman world in the first century, some wealthy Christian women were able to gain a noticeable amount of influence in the churches (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, p191). I would also refer you back to the comments about Roman women from Bruce Winter's book I quoted a few moments ago.

Towner and Winter firstly claim that Paul was concerned with the "outer adornment and apparel and arrogant demeanour" of certain women in the congregation (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, p200). The adornment of these women, Towner argues, was associated with the transgression of sexual morality and the rejection of traditional family roles and structures such as childbearing (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, p220). Secondly, Towner posits a situation in which certain wealthy women were embracing and promulgating a "heretical teaching" (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, p200). Thus I believe Paul's prohibition against teaching by

women should be seen in the context of this cultural situation rather than as a completely general prohibition.

If we had no contradictory statements by Paul, I would be reluctant to accept this argument. But, we do have Paul's clear endorsement of teaching by women in Romans chapter 16: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was." (Romans 16:1-7 NIV)

where Paul endorses Priscilla who we know taught Apollos (Acts 18:24-28). Paul also endorses Phoebe who was a deacon in the church at Cenchrea, and indeed endorses Junia as an apostle. The supposed masculine form of the name 'Junias' which some have tried to insert here (to avoid the difficulty they see in a female apostle) is unknown in classical Greek (Tetlow *Women and Ministry* p120).

Further in Titus 2:3 Paul endorses teaching by women:

"Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children," (Titus 2:3-4 NIV)

although admittedly this endorsement seems to be in the context of women teaching other women.

Along with Towner I hold that the best and most consistent interpretation of Paul's writings is that his prohibition about teaching by women applies to the specific situation in Ephesus, namely certain wealthy women transgressing traditional family roles and espousing false teaching. This "led Paul to put a stop to the teaching activities of Christian women" in that context (Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 220).

Other scholars also support this viewpoint. According to Witherington, 1 Timothy 2:11-12 contains no "universal prohibition of women speaking in church" (Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Early Christianity*, p196). Witherington also detects evidence that the author of 1 Timothy was responding to a situation of "women being involved in false teaching and being led astray into apostasy" (Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Early Christianity*, p196).

I think the view I've put forward that the prohibition on women teaching is not universal, takes seriously both the words of scripture and the contextual nature of the New Testament letters. I believe that women can both lead and teach in church where the cultural context permits as it does here in the Western world.

So how can we summarise the role of women both in the family and in the church. Firstly, women are to be submissive to their husbands – who are to treat them lovingly – in a way that is honouring to God. In this way both husbands and wives honour God and his purposes for us. As we've already said, that doesn't mean that women are to be doormats, but it does mean that they should recognise and acquiesce in a role of male leadership by their husbands

and husbands must exercise that role lovingly and wisely for the benefit of their wives and indeed the whole family. *Male chauvinism is no more biblical than feminism.* Both are perversions of God's plan. Secondly, wives are to demonstrate their submission in their role in the church. They can teach and preach, but should not take a leadership role over their husbands – or possibly even men at all, although the existence of Priscilla and the female apostle Junia – who we shall be looking at later – rather weighs against that viewpoint. Thirdly, they should dress and conduct themselves in a modest way which is fully in accordance with the norms for modest women in the culture of the time and which doesn't portray them as immodest or as feminist rebels.

You may remember that I said earlier we'd come back to the difference the New Covenant in Christ made to the role of women. Well as I've already said I don't believe it affects that role here and now, but I do think it has implications for us after the second coming of Christ.

Probably the first question we have to answer is will we still have sexuality after the bodily resurrection at the second coming. Along with Augustine I think the answer to that question is 'yes we will'. If you remember my earlier teaching, sexuality – God creating humans male and female – was part of the original pre-Fall pattern of creation. Our original embodiment included our sexuality (Genesis 2:7; 2:22) and so our sexuality is not incompatible with human life in a state of sinless perfection. Going further than that, God generated sexual being not only *as* good but also *for* good. At creation, human sexual identity not only is without sin – it is also created for the purpose of achieving something good. When God made Adam and Eve male and female, He had in view the achievement of some very good thing that can be achieved no other way – not even in terms of the relationship between human beings and God Himself. By creating male and female human beings in two distinctly separate acts, God made and focused attention on some good thing that can be achieved only because human life is sexually differentiated.

I believe our restoration at the second coming will essentially be to that original pre-Fall pattern of creation – which includes our maleness and femaleness, our sexuality. Expressing that idea slightly differently, it is only logical to assume that because God in creation made sexual identity a wonderful expression of, and indeed essential to, embodied human life before the Fall. Then absent specific revelation to the contrary we must assume that sexual identity will always remain essential to embodied human existence – including our embodied existence – after the resurrection. Further, because human sexuality existed without sin before the Fall, there is no moral reason for opposing the idea that we shall continue to be sexual creatures after God does away with all moral corruption – that is, after the entire created order (including human beings) is released from the curse imposed by God after the Fall as a consequence of sin (Romans 8:20-21).

I think a number of other scriptural ideas, in addition to the original embodiment that I've already quoted, support this view. It finds validation in the recognition of the identity of Jesus – his essential gender identity was preserved after his resurrection. Following Jesus's resurrection, the disciples recognized the same male human being they knew and loved before the crucifixion. Peter boldly declared that "God has raised this Jesus [i.e., the very same man] to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact" (Acts 2:32). This and other accounts show that all who saw Jesus after His bodily resurrection just assumed that He remained a male human being.

Lastly, the essentialist view of human sexuality is *perhaps* expressed in the way Jesus answered a group of Sadducees who tried to confound Him with a question about marriage after the resurrection. The Sadducees did not believe in a physical resurrection (or angels or spirits either) and thought they could confound Jesus with a question about seven brothers who were each in succession married to the same woman:

“When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away. That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. “Teacher,” they said, “Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?” Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”” (Matthew 22:22-32 NIV)

The point here is that Jesus didn’t say to the Sadducees that your question is irrelevant because there will be no male or female after the resurrection, but that there will be no marrying or giving in marriage after the resurrection. I think that points to an elimination of current practices as regards marriage and no doubt other matters after the resurrection, but not to an elimination of human sexual identity after the resurrection. Otherwise Jesus could simply have said what you are supposing will be impossible because there will then be no male nor female.

Now you’ll maybe remember that I used the word ‘perhaps’ when I began. Well I think the words that *might* tell against my view are that we “will be like angels in heaven”. The general view is that angels do not procreate, and I think that is probably correct since they exist for eternity and procreation is therefore unnecessary. However, I don’t think that this necessarily establishes that angels do not have sexual identity. One possible, interpretation of Genesis 6:4:

“The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterwards—when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.” (Genesis 6:4 NIV)

is that the “sons of God” referred to were angels, as this was the usual meaning of the term, and are the angels that have been condemned referred to in 2 Peter 2:4.

Accordingly, I think the best interpretation of the Matthew 22 passage is that Jesus is obliquely affirming and not at all denying our sexual identity after the resurrection.

So, having affirmed that we’ll have a sexual identity after the resurrection we need to address the question of the relationship between men and women after the resurrection. In my opinion, women will re-assume their equal role with men. That is things will revert to the pre-Fall situation in which men and women were created equal. I think this is obliquely affirmed by the passage from Galatians 3 we looked at earlier:

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26-28 NIV)

As I said earlier this refers to our equality in the resurrection – and therefore for me affirms the equality of women and men after the bodily resurrection at Christ’s second coming.

I also think that Jesus’ words to the Sadducees in Luke 20:36 imply the equality of men and women in the resurrection:

“Jesus replied, “The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection.” (Luke 20:34-36 NIV)

However, and more fundamentally, I think we can see the equality of men and women after the second coming, emerging from the fact that the New Covenant in Christ’s blood has restored our relationship with God and indeed restored the whole of creation to its ideal situation which existed before the Fall. Of course, not all of this is to be realised until the second coming and, as I’ve already implied, I think Paul’s writings make it clear that the restoration of the relationship between men and women is one of the things which won’t be restored until the second coming of Christ.

Thus in summary I believe that in heaven we will retain our identity as male and female and that the equality of relationship between male and female will be fully restored.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion then, we can say that as regards women generally, wives are to be submissive to their husbands – subject to all the caveats and qualifications we’ve looked at. This doesn’t mean that all women are to be subject to all men, although there does seem to be a small bias towards male headship. However, women will be restored to complete equality with men after the second coming of Christ.

As regards the role of women in the church, as I believe we’ve already seen, I think we can say that; firstly, women should dress and behave in a manner in accordance with their role as modest married or single women (as the case might be); secondly women remain subject to the general principles regarding women noted above; and finally women are able to pray and teach in church where the social context permits (as it does here in the Western world) although they should *probably* be subject to male headship.

## **WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

After the original creation ordinances in Genesis that we’ve already looked at, women are generally placed in a rather submissive role in the Pentateuch. Women were excluded from performing sacrifices and worshiping and were even excluded from the community during their menstrual period and after childbirth (Leviticus 12:2-5; 15:19-31). Indeed women are often portrayed as the property of their fathers or husbands:

- Fathers and husbands could overrule any vow made by a woman (Numbers 30:1-15).
- Fathers could sell their daughters as slaves (Exodus 21:7).
- Husbands who were displeased with their wives could send away their wives (Deuteronomy 21:14; 24:1); however, women could not divorce their husbands.

Furthermore, if a virgin was sexually violated, the offender had to pay compensation to the woman's father (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). She often was forced to marry the violator – only her father could refuse a marriage (Exodus 22:16-17).

On a more positive note there were rules to protect weak single women – widows and orphans – from undue exploitation (Deuteronomy 14:29; Leviticus 19:9-10).

In the historical books, women do have a more positive role, for example Deborah, Esther, Miriam and Ruth although there are a few negative exceptions, for example Jezebel. In the Wisdom literature there is a wonderful description of the ideal wife in Proverbs 31. Even in relation to the more positive cases, it's often argued that they are portrayed from a male patriarchal perspective<sup>1</sup>, although I think that's a little too harsh.

For reasons of time, we're just going to look at Deborah and Esther this morning.

## **Deborah**

Deborah was a judge in Israel during the time of the judges, before the inception of the Israelite Monarchy, and is the only recorded female judge. Deborah is also referred to as a prophetess (Judges 4:4) and is one of only two Israelite women in the Bible along with Huldah (2 Kings 22:14) to be so recognised. In the Hebrew her name means “honeybee” and in Judges 4:4 she is described as *lappidoth esheth* which probably means ‘woman of torches’ – suggesting that she was a charismatic figure.

When Deborah was raised up as a judge, the Israelites had again offended Yahweh who had handed them over to Jabin, the Canaanite king of Hazor, and Sisera, his general, for twenty years (Judges 4:1-3). We meet Deborah judging Israel while sitting under the palm of Deborah between Ramal and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim – which is North of Jerusalem. Deborah begins to exercise her authority by summoning Barak (Judges 4:6-7) who was Israel's military commander (and was to succeed Deborah as Israel's next judge) and informing him that she has been commanded by God to do battle with Jabin's army and his general Sisera, saying that she will ensure that she will ensure Sisera is given into his hands. But Barak seems cowardly and interrupts Deborah with words of hesitation, saying he won't go without her:

“Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go.”  
(Judges 4:8 NIV)

Deborah agrees to accompany him, but says that this means that Barak will lose the honour of the victory and Sisera will be handed over to a woman:

““Very well," Deborah said, "I will go with you. But because of the way you are going about this, the honour will not be yours, for the LORD will hand Sisera over to a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh,” (Judges 4:9 NIV)

Barak gathers the Israelite armies and Deborah goes with him. God does indeed give Israel victory and Deborah's prophecy comes true (although perhaps not in the way she was thinking) as Jael, the wife of Heber, kills Sisera when he comes to her tent looking for shelter.

Deborah seems to have played an important role in the fighting, probably going into battle with Barak (the only Biblical instance of a woman participating in warfare) and her exploits

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<sup>1</sup> Fuchs, *Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative*

are told in poetic fashion in a victory song in Judges 5. She was clearly an extremely strong and charismatic woman who seems have served Israel well both as a judge and a military leader.

## **Esther**

Her name means “star” in Hebrew. We don’t know exactly who wrote the Biblical book of Esther, although it was probably one of the Jews of the exile who was a contemporary of Mordecai and Esther, and with Mordecai as a contributor (Esther 9:20). The book is unusual in that it’s the only book of the Bible in which God is not mentioned. This may be because it was intended to become part of the official Persian court record which would not have been able to refer to the God of a subject people. Mordecai may well be the *Morduka* mentioned as a court official in the reigns of both Xerxes and Darius.

One of the main purposes of the book is to explain the origin of the Jewish feast of *Purim* (Esther 9:16-28). Although God is not mentioned explicitly in this book, the theme throughout is of God’s protection of his covenant people even in times of great persecution. Esther was an orphan from the tribe of Benjamin who lived with Jewish exiles in Persia. She was reared by her cousin Mordecai, a minor government official and covert leader of the Jewish community (Esther 3:5-6) in Susa, capital of the Persian kingdom.

King Ahasuerus (better known to us as Xerxes) became displeased with Queen Vashti when she refused to obey his command to attend a festival to display “the splendor and pomp of his majesty,” (Esther 1:11-12) and Ahasuerus ordered Vashti deposed as queen.

Esther (Hadassah), a Jewish maiden, was among those chosen to fill her place, and she so pleased the king that she was made queen (Esther 2:1-18). Mordecai, her cousin and former guardian, overhears a plot to assassinate the king and informs him through Esther, an act recorded in the Chronicles of the King of Persia (Esther 2:19-23).

Shortly afterward, Haman, who has recently become prime minister, is infuriated by Mordecai’s unwillingness to pay homage to him, and obtains a royal edict decreeing the annihilation of the Jews because their peculiar laws have prevented total allegiance to the king (Esther chapter 3). Mordecai intervened through Queen Esther, and the queen called on the Jews in Susa to fast for deliverance (Esther 4:1-17). Esther’s intervention with the king led to a sleepless night for Ahasuerus (Esther 5:1-6:1). He reviewed the records of “memorable deeds,” and discovered that Mordecai’s earlier help had gone unrewarded.

Imagining himself at the pinnacle of his power, Haman ironically is commanded to pay homage to Mordecai, for whom he had ordered gallows erected, and to proclaim publicly his greatness in reward for discovering the conspiracy against the king (Esther chapter 6).

At another banquet, Esther unveils Haman’s plot against the Jews, and he is hanged on the very gallows he had erected for Mordecai (Esther chapter 7) and Mordecai is named Haman’s replacement as prime minister. A new edict is issued giving the Jews the right to defend themselves against any oppressors, and they begin to take vengeance upon their enemies. To celebrate their national deliverance the Jews planned a great celebration (Esther 9:17-10:3). That celebration became the festival of Purim, observed by the Jews to this day, a time of feasting and distribution of gifts to all, especially to the poor.

I believe the main message of this book is God's protection of his people through which he preserves and carries on his plan of redemption. The book of Esther prophesies the downfall of all those who oppose the kingdom of God and his Anointed. This does not mean that all of the actions of Esther and Mordecai are to be commended, for their feelings of hatred and tolerance of violent means of revenge are far from being good examples.

Esther appears as a woman of deep piety, faith, courage, patriotism, and caution, combined with resolution; a dutiful daughter to her adopted father, docile and obedient to his counsels, and willing to share the king's favour with him for the good of the Jewish people. There must have been a very special grace and charm in her aspect and manners, since 'she obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her' (Esther 2:15). That she was raised up as an instrument in the hand of God to avert the destruction of the Jewish people, and to afford them protection and advance their wealth and peace in their captivity, is also manifest from the words of this book of the Bible. She was a very special woman.

## **JESUS AND WOMEN**

As we've already said, by the first century AD, man had misused his authority over woman and had confined women to an extremely subordinate and submissive role which was not God's intention for mankind. In Jewish culture this deterioration in the treatment of women seems to have accelerated in the intertestamental period. Jesus rejected this misuse of authority and affirmed women in both his actions and his teaching.

Jesus included women where Jewish piety largely excluded them. Women were excluded from active participation in synagogue worship and only allowed to have a spectator role. They were forbidden to enter the Temple beyond the Court of the Women. A woman was not allowed to touch the scrolls of the Scriptures, lest she defile them. A man was not supposed to talk much with a woman, even his wife. Speaking to a woman in public was subject to even greater restrictions.

Jesus largely set aside such discrimination. He astonished His disciples by talking openly with "a woman" and a Samaritan woman – just to make things even more scandalous – at Jacob's well (John 4:27). His dearest friends included women, for example Mary and Martha from Bethany and Mary Magdalene. There were many women who were part of his band of followers, following Him from Galilee to Golgotha (Mark 15:41).

Having already affirmed Martha by accepting her invitation to dinner, He affirmed Mary's choice of sitting at His feet to hear Him teach (Luke 10:39). He did not question her right or competence to hear His word, but rather commended her for choosing what was better, declaring that "it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). Many have sought to take from women like Mary precisely what Jesus affirmed as rightfully theirs.

The story of the anointing of Jesus by "a woman who had lived a sinful life" is amazing (Luke 7:36–50). She showered her love and gratitude upon Jesus, and He affirmed her and her act. Without a hint of impropriety, Jesus let this woman thus touch Him and express her feelings toward Him. The pious Pharisees were scandalized that Jesus let her do this, and would have forbidden it even if the woman had been "good" and not "a sinner."

Equally amazing is the story of the woman with an issue of blood who touched Jesus (Mark 5:25-34). According to Jewish Law, a woman with an issue of blood was "unclean," defiling



everyone and everything she touched (Leviticus 15:19-33). Had Jesus followed this code, He would have denounced the woman for touching Him and demanded her punishment. Instead, Jesus had her stand up and openly identify herself; and then He publicly affirmed her: “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.” (Mark 5:34). As the fulfilment of the Law Jesus was able to override the requirements of the Law when he believed it was appropriate.

In his teaching, Jesus also rejected the double standard for marriage, divorce and adultery. He put marriage and divorce in new perspective in answering the question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (Mark 10:2). It would never have occurred to His questioners to ask, “Is it lawful for a wife to divorce her husband?” Under Jewish law, a wife could not divorce her husband.

In the first century a man could divorce his wife simply by issuing her with a certificate of divorce, but Jesus traced divorce to the hardness of human hearts, and said that it was not part of God’s plan for mankind and that divorce should only be permitted for marital unfaithfulness (Matthew 19:3-9). Further, Jesus corrected the then current understanding of adultery at two points. Firstly he said that adultery begins as lust in one’s heart, not just when it’s expressed overtly and secondly he taught that it was no more permissible for men to have sexual liaisons outside marriage than it was for women to do so. In the ancient world it was permissible for a married man to have liaisons with unmarried women (although not with married women which would have constituted adultery and an offence against their husbands), but a woman was expected to remain chaste before marriage and completely faithful after marriage. Jesus rejected this double standard, the command he cites makes no distinction; people of both sexes were to remain faithful to the marriage covenant. Specifically he speaks of the man as the adulterer (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). Jesus rejected the fallacy that adultery is a sin against the husband only, adultery can be committed against a woman.

Finally, Jesus affirmed women both in his crucifixion and after his resurrection. According to the Gospels, women were last at the cross (John 19:25-26) and first at the empty tomb, and the first to see the risen Christ (John 20:1-17). Peter and the other male disciples first heard of the resurrection of Jesus from women. The risen Christ, at the most important juncture for the Christian movement, trusted and commissioned women to proclaim to men the basic tenet of the Christian faith – He is not dead but alive!

The church for the most part has sought to deny to women an equal role in the ministry of the proclamation of the gospel. Jesus had no such reservation before His death or after His resurrection, although I don’t see Jesus’ actions or teaching as in any way contradicting the doctrine of wifely submission to husbands or the doctrine of male headship that we’ve already discussed.

A few moments ago, I mentioned that Jesus had women followers and disciples, citing Mark 15:41. But, there are a number of other gospel passages which are significant in this regard. Firstly, in Matthew’s gospel Jesus’ family appears and asks to speak with him and Jesus responds:

“He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”” (Matthew 12:48-50 NIV)

As Kenneth Bailey points out<sup>2</sup> it would not have been possible in a Middle Eastern context for Jesus to mention his mother unless the crowd included women. Therefore there were women amongst the disciples of Jesus.

Secondly, Luke records (Luke 8:1-3) that Jesus was travelling through cities and villages with a band of both men and women who were naturally known as his disciples:

“After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.” (Luke 8:1-3 NIV)

This implies that they were spending a number of nights in strange places. This is just completely outside the social norms of those times. Indeed even today in the Middle East women travelling with men would be required to spend their nights with relatives. Almost equally astonishing these women were providing for Jesus and his male followers out of their own means. It’s also astonishing that a man – Luke – freely admits to all this.

Thirdly, Martha’s sister, Mary, sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to his teaching as we’ve already mentioned (Luke 10:39). To sit at the feet of a rabbi meant that one was a disciple of that rabbi, so Mary became a disciple of the rabbi Jesus. Kenneth Bailey makes the point that Martha was probably not upset so much by the lack of assistance from Mary but by the fact she is seated with the men and has become a disciple. Again this would have been disgraceful in Middle Eastern eyes. The text clearly implies that Jesus understands this and knows that Martha is not just concerned about a lack of help, she’s concerned about *many* things: ““Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”” (Luke 10:41-42 NIV)

I think Jesus’ affirmation of women, both generally and amongst his followers, is expressed in his choice of imagery applicable to women in many of his parables: for example Luke 5:36-39 (where the mending of a garment is the task of a woman); Luke 18:1-8 (where a woman struggles with an indifferent judge); and Luke 15:3-11 (where a woman loses a coin). Jesus’ teachings were crafted to appeal to both men and women.

As we’ve already mentioned, Jesus’ interactions with women who were not his followers speak of his attitude towards women.

In the first of these interactions I’m going to look at, Jesus passed through Samaria and met a Samaritan woman at a well in the bright noonday sun. Jesus would have known that she was a social outcast because women in those times avoided the heat of the day by carrying water from the well as a group early in the morning and just before sundown. Jesus is sitting on the well waiting for her to come along and as she approaches he asks her for a drink. As we’ve already noted this was an incredible breach of social taboo. Jewish men simply didn’t talk to women especially in an uninhabited place with no witnesses. Jesus is also humbling himself and showing his vulnerability, which affirms the woman who is helping him. Jesus then moves the conversation on by telling her that he’ll give her living water so that she never thirsts. At first she doesn’t get the point, but Jesus then says:

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth E Bailey *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* SPCK 2008

“Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”” (John 4:13-15 NIV)

Jesus then asks her to go and be a witness to a man, her husband, and so to be a spring for others. If she is to be a spring for others, her family should be the first to benefit. Initially she hides behind a prevarication that she has no husband. She’s caught in sin and tries to hide by withholding information! But, Jesus exposes her lie by revealing the whole truth about her life. She then tries to change the subject into a discussion of where worship should take place, on Mount Gerizim or Jerusalem. Jesus doesn’t scold her for this, but moves the debate to a more profound level by telling her that things are changing and that soon God will not be worshipped in either place. Jesus treats the woman seriously and so elevates her as a person – and by implication all women with her. The woman responds by saying that one day the Messiah will come and clarify everything. Jesus responds with his first “I am” statement:

“Then Jesus declared, “I who speak to you am he.”” (John 4:26 NIV)

So Jesus reveals to the Samaritan woman the most important truth he could possibly impart. He’s not just the Messiah he’s none other than God almighty.

Just after this Jesus’ disciples return and are amazed that Jesus is talking to this woman, although they don’t dare to question him about it. Probably the woman feels their hostility – after all they are Jews and she is both a woman and a Samaritan, anyway she returns to the town and becomes the first female evangelist. She doesn’t just call her husband, she expands her mandate:

“Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”” (John 4:28-29 NIV)

and the people respond to her:

“They came out of the town and made their way towards him.” (John 4:30 NIV)

Indeed many believed because of her testimony:

“Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.”” (John 4:39 NIV)

and many more became believers as an indirect result of the woman’s testimony when Jesus stayed there for two days:

“So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.” (John 4:40-41 NIV)

The Samaritan woman originally came seeking well water, but she found something infinitely better and carried divine living water back to her town and so blessed many of her people. This outcast woman brought many to a living faith, she was the first recorded evangelist to the Samaritans.

There are many other interactions between, Jesus and women which have much to teach us; for example his exchange with the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28) who displays great faith and insight; his encounter with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) which we’ve already mentioned; his encounter with a woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50) where the attentions of this woman to Jesus anointing him with perfume and

washing his feet, contrast sharply with Simon's rudeness – and indeed many others. Unfortunately we don't have time to look at these in detail this morning.

In summary we can say that Jesus affirmed women in a way that was completely in accordance with the general scriptural principles we looked at earlier, but which was completely outside the cultural norms of his time – an age in which women were unduly restricted and oppressed.

## **WOMEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

In the four gospels fifteen women are named. Three are women from the OT included in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus: Tamar, Rahab and Ruth (Matthew 1:3-5) – Bathsheeba is also included (although not named) as the former wife of Uriah. One is the Herodian princess Herodias (Matthew 14:3, 6; Mark 6:17, 19, 22; Luke 3:19). Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist and Anna the prophet appear in the first two chapters of Luke, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, who is also included and named in the synoptic gospels (although not in John). The remaining eight named women are disciples of Jesus: Joanna (Luke 8:3; 24:10), the sisters Martha and Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:38, 40; John 11-12), Mary Magdalene (Matthew 27-28; Mark 15-16; Luke 8:2, 24:10; John 19:25, 20), Mary the mother of James and Joses (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40, 47), Mary the wife of Clopas (John 19:25), Salome (Mark 15:40, 16:1) and Susanna (Luke 8:3).

There are also a number of women referred to in the Gospels who are not named, for example the Samaritan woman that Jesus met at Jacob's well (John 4) and the Canaanite woman who approached Jesus that we've already mentioned. We'll return to look at some of the named women in more detail in a few moments.

Further, there are a number of women referred to in Acts and Paul's Epistles. Here I'm not going to give an exhaustive list but focus on the more important figures:

- Tabitha (also called Dorcas) (Acts 9:36-42). She was a female disciple always doing good and helping the poor, who was raised from the dead by Peter;
- Mary the mother of Mark and sister of Barnabas (Acts 12:12; Colossians 4:10). She gave the use of her house in Jerusalem to be a meeting place for the disciples;
- Lydia (Acts 16:14-15, 40). She was a seller of purple cloth from Thyatira in Asia, but also with a residence in Philippi where she became Paul's first convert in Europe. She may have taken the gospel to her home city of Thyatira, because we know from Revelations (Revelations 1:11; 2:18-24) that there was a church there although there is no record of Paul having visited Thyatira;
- Priscilla (Acts 18:1-3, 18-19, 26; Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 3:15). Priscilla is mentioned a lot in the NT always in conjunction with her husband Aquila, indeed in Acts she's mentioned first four of the six times they are mentioned indicating that she was a more important figure than her husband. They left Corinth with Paul and travelled with him to Ephesus, staying on when Paul left. They soon encountered a Jew named Apollos, who was an eloquent speaker but only knew the baptism of repentance of John the Baptist. They took Apollos aside and "explained to him the way of God more accurately" which indicates that Priscilla was a knowledgeable gospel teacher. We've already mentioned this in the context of women being permitted to teach in church. Paul greets or send greetings from Priscilla and Aquila in several of his epistles. In Romans 16 Paul says:

“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.” (Romans 16:3-4 NIV)

High praise indeed. They also apparently had a church which met in their house (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19);

- Phillip’s four daughters (Acts 21:9). Unmarried daughters who prophesied;
- Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2). A servant of the church in Cenchrea, who had apparently been of great help to Paul;
- Junia (Romans 16:7). Said to be an apostle and we’re going to look at her in more detail in a moment.

## **Women in the Genealogy of Jesus**

Let’s begin by looking at the OT women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheeba. The first question we need to answer is why are these women here at all, in a patrilineal genealogy of this kind women have no necessary place. Generally women only appear in OT genealogies where several children of one man are born to different mothers. It’s true that Judah had sons other than by Tamar and that David had sons other than by Bathsheeba, but that doesn’t explain Ruth and Rahab. Nor can we suppose that Matthew merely wanted to add some women, if that had been his rationale he could have chosen more famous and reputable women. Along with Bauckham<sup>3</sup>, I think the reason is that Matthew wanted to summarise the Bible story from Abraham on in his genealogy – so he annotated his genealogy as well as including notable women in it. Matthew also included Mary in his genealogy, otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to explain the relationship of Joseph to Jesus, but she’s not really related to the reason for the appearance of the other women.

I believe the reason why all of these women are included is because they are all Gentiles – the detailed arguments supporting that assertion are too long for us to go into today, but I do believe they are probably valid. Thus these four women were Gentiles who professed faith in Yahweh and became members of God’s covenant people. This shows the openness of God to including Gentiles within his covenants, an openness that Jesus the Messiah will confirm and greatly extend.

Although Matthew does not represent Jesus as engaged in a mission to the Gentiles before his resurrection, he does give hints of this in the feeding of the four thousand – which was largely a Gentile crowd (Matthew 15:32-39) and in the preceding stories of mass healing (Matthew 15:29-31) and the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman which immediately precede it. Matthew seems to be indicating that these are not to be isolated incidents but the beginning of a Messianic blessing of the nations.

Returning to our four OT women, they became foremothers of the Messiah, even though a strict application of the Torah clearly seems to prohibit this. This precedent was gently but firmly taken up by Jesus and the precedent of the Canaanite woman was to be followed on a universal scale.

## **Elizabeth the Mother of John the Baptist and Mary the Mother of Jesus**

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Bauckham *Gospel Women* Erdmans Publishing Co 2002

There is an obvious parallelism between these two stories in Luke's gospel. Let's start with Elizabeth, whose name interestingly means "oath of God". Her story is entirely encapsulated in Luke chapter 1, she isn't mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. She was married to a country priest named Zechariah. There were priestly divisions so that no one group of priests would minister exclusively at the Temple and these priestly divisions served in sequence for one week at a time. Zechariah was serving in the eighth week of the year.

Luke says that Elizabeth and Zechariah were righteous and lived in accordance with God's commands, but Elizabeth was barren and they were both advanced in years. In those days childlessness carried a social stigma as it often meant the end of the family line. Elizabeth's life would have been particularly difficult as barrenness was usually believed to be the fault of the woman. Indeed the fact that Zechariah hadn't divorced her for this is a sign of his righteousness.

An angel informs Zechariah that Elizabeth will give birth to a son despite her old age and barrenness. Zechariah doubts the angel's words and is struck mute. Elizabeth duly conceives, but she keeps her pregnancy a secret for five months (Luke 1:24-25). When the angel Gabriel later tells Mary that she will give birth to the Messiah he cites Elizabeth's pregnancy as proof that "nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

Mary travels to visit Elizabeth and the baby leaps in Elizabeth's womb (Luke 1:41). Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth blesses Mary as the "mother of my Lord" and then exclaims: "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (Luke 1:45 NIV)

In this way Elizabeth and her child are the first persons to acclaim Jesus as Lord.

Luke 1:57-66 records that Elizabeth gives birth to a son, whom Elizabeth wants to name John, in spite of the fact that there is no family precedent for this name, and Zechariah insists on this name in accordance with the angels announcement to him. This son is of course John the Baptist the forerunner of Jesus who was to prepare the way for him.

Elizabeth may well not have lived to see her son grow into manhood as she was already old by the standards of those times. This fits with the possibility that John may have become a member of the Essene sect at Qumran, the origin of the Dead Sea Scrolls, as this was a group which adopted young children if their parents were dead. Perhaps it's just as well that she didn't live to see his adulthood as he was cruelly beheaded by Herod.

Let's now turn to Mary the mother of Jesus. At the time of her conception of Jesus, she was betrothed to be married to Joseph and, according to Luke, living in Nazareth at this time. Jesus was probably born in 5 or 6 BC towards the end of the reign of Herod the Great. The accounts of Jesus' birth are quite different in Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel. In Matthew, two crises occur and both involve Mary. Firstly, in response to the report of Mary's pregnancy prior to their marriage, Joseph plans to dissolve his relationship with her (Matthew 1:18-25). This would have had devastating social and economic consequences both for Mary and her unborn child. Secondly, in Matthew 2:1-23 King Herod attempts to have the infant Jesus killed. In both crises, the one initiated by Joseph and the other by Herod, angelic intervention rescues Mary and Jesus. Throughout the narrative, Mary speaks not a word and takes no independent action. She exists in the story to reveal the dangers surrounding Jesus even before his birth. Matthew adds to these facts by recounting that wise men from the East, under the guidance of a star, came to offer their gifts at the cradle of the infant Saviour; that

the children at Bethlehem were massacred owing to Herod's jealousy, Jesus and His parents having previously taken refuge in Egypt, from whence they returned on the death of Herod, and settled at Nazareth in consequence of a divine warning.

In Luke's Gospel, the account of Jesus' birth consists of a series of parallel scenes which compare and contrast the birth of Jesus with that of John the Baptist. Here Mary appears both more often and in more active roles than in Matthew. When the angel Gabriel announces to this unmarried young woman that she is to bear a child, she responds with the consent of a disciple:

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her." (Luke 1:38 NIV)

In the presence of her relative Elizabeth, Mary interprets the anticipated birth in prophetic language that borrows from the OT figure Hannah (Luke 1:46-55; compares to 1 Samuel 2:1-10). Following the birth itself (Luke 2:1-7) and the visit of shepherds to the infant Jesus, Luke reports that Mary reflected on the events (Luke 2:19, 51).

Luke draws attention to the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph. They conform to the Law by having Jesus circumcised, and they take him as a newborn to the Jerusalem temple (Luke 2:21-35). They also go to Jerusalem each year for Passover (Luke 2:41-52). Luke makes no further reference to Joseph, but Mary appears in Luke 8:19-21 (parallel Mark 3:31-35). In Acts Mary is among those followers of Jesus who gather in Jerusalem in anticipation of Pentecost (Acts 1:14).

John refers to "the mother of Jesus," but never uses the name Mary. John doesn't refer to the birth of Jesus at all, perhaps he thought this was well covered in the synoptic gospels. Mary appears in two scenes, first at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-12), where she sets events in motion by telling Jesus that there is no wine and by instructing the servants to do whatever Jesus says. Jesus' response to Mary:

"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." (John 2:4 NIV)

should not be seen as a rejection of his mother or of her involvement in her ministry, although undeniably there is a note of correction. Their relationship is changing. Still Jesus honours her trust and faith in him.

Mary appears again only at the Crucifixion. Along with three other women and the figure John calls the "beloved disciple," – I believe John himself – she witnesses the death of Jesus. Jesus presents John and Mary to one another with the words, "Woman, here is your son," and "here is your mother" (John 19:25-27). For me this is no more than a simple act of filial devotion and fulfilment of his final duties. I don't think we need to involve complex symbolism here.

I think we can easily see why John didn't refer to the birth of Jesus, but its much more difficult to see why Mark doesn't mention it as he was probably the first of the gospel writers. I'm forced to the conclusion that he didn't regard it as an essential part of the gospel message.

None of the remaining NT writings demonstrates an interest in Mary. Paul identifies Jesus as "born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4) and "descended from David according to the flesh" (Romans 1:3), expressions that serve to emphasize the normal means of Jesus' birth and his place in Israel. I think the abnormal interest that certain parts of the church invest in Mary is

not justified by the Biblical material, there is absolutely no scriptural justification for worship or even undue veneration of Mary. Such unwarranted veneration probably derives mainly from the largely fictional Protevangelium of James, written towards the end of the 2nd century. This draws on the language of the OT and the Biblical birth narratives to construct a story about the conception, birth, and nurture of Mary. Here, she is the child of the elderly and wealthy Anna and Joachim, and is raised in the Jerusalem temple so that her purity may be protected. At the onset of puberty, she is betrothed to the elderly Joseph. When she becomes pregnant, both Mary and Joseph undergo the test of bitter waters (prescribed in Numbers 5:11-31 only for women accused of adultery) to prove their innocence. So exceptional is Mary's purity that she remains a virgin even following the birth of Jesus. Although the Protevangelium of James consists largely of late tradition that has little claim to reliability, it has exerted great influence on Christian imagination.

We don't really know much about the rest of Mary's life. It would seem likely that Joseph died before Jesus commenced his ministry as he's referred to as Mary's son in Mark 6:3 (which would have been inconceivable if Joseph were still alive) and we have no evidence that Mary ever accompanied Jesus on his missionary journeys.

In my view Mary is the last in the line of a series of women who delivered God's people from their enemies, namely:

- Shiprah and Puah the midwives (Exodus 2:15-21);
- Deborah (Judges 4-5) whom we've already looked at;
- Jael (Judges 4:17-22; 5:24-27) that again we've already mentioned;
- Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2);
- Esther;
- Judith (2 Maccabees 7; 4 Maccabees 14-18) the mother of the Maccabean martyrs.

Elizabeth's role in Luke 1 can be compared with the Israelite mothers of sons important for God's purposes for his people, especially those who were enabled to bear children as a result of God's special favour:

- Sarah (Genesis 17-18; 21:1-17)
- Rebekah (Genesis 25:21)
- Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29:31-30:24)
- the mother Of Sampson (Judges 13)
- Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-2:10)

Of course, Mary also belongs in the company of the women in this list, not because she was sterile or barren, but because she was a virgin and so could not have born a child without God's miraculous intervention. So Mary's pregnancy belongs in the series from Sarah to Elizabeth in that it was enabled by a miraculous act of God, but it also transcends the series in that it was virginal. In Elizabeth and her son the OT culminates, whilst in Mary and her son the new creation begins.

Mary is called "Blessed ... among women" (Luke 1:42). This reminds us of Jael whom Deborah called "most blessed of women" (Judges 5:24) and Judith whom Uzziah called "blessed by the most high above all other women" (Judith 13:18). Mary will be called fortunate by all generations due to the eternal significance of her motherhood. Her child will: "..... reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end." (Luke 1:33 NIV). Jael and Judith both served God's purpose by violent acts, in contrast Mary does so by her



humble and willing acceptance of the role of mother of the Messiah – a motherhood which is of world changing significance.

Mary also has many close parallels to Hannah as we've already mentioned, for example Hannah's prayer for a child was:

“ ..... "O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery [LXX lowliness] and remember me, ...." (1 Samuel 1:11 NIV)

whilst Mary says in the magnificat:

“for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. ....” (Luke 1:48 NIV) and the fact that both of their children are consecrated to God from before their birth. There are many, many more interesting comparisons, but we don't really have the time to look at that this morning.

Mary and Joseph were clearly both of a low social status, their offering of two doves after Jesus' birth (Luke 2:24) clearly establishes that; and Jesus birth in Bethlehem reminds us not of the royal King David from whom he was descended, but rather of king David's humble origins as a shepherd boy in Bethlehem. Mary's low social status is consistent is consistent with the kind of Messiah she is to bear – one who exalts the lowly and brings down the proud and haughty.

Scripture has nothing to tell us about Mary's later life or her death. although there has been much groundless speculation.

### **Joanna Disciple of Jesus and (possibly) Apostle**

I'm including Joanna this morning because she's obscure and usually ignored, but, I believe, extremely important. She's only mentioned twice in the gospels in Luke 8:1-3:

“After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.” (Luke 8:1-3 NIV)

and Luke 24:10:

“It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.” (Luke 24:10 NIV)

So, we immediately see that Joanna was part of a group of women who supported the mission of Jesus “out of their own means” and that she was one of the witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus who conveyed the message to the male disciples. I believe Paul also knew her and considered her an outstanding apostle, but we'll return to that later.

I believe that Luke's comments mean that we should see Joanna's role as continuing throughout Jesus's teaching ministry. The twelve were by no means the only disciples, Luke makes it clear that Jesus was continually surrounded by a large number of disciples (Luke 6:17; 19:37) and so could commission no less than seventy two disciples to send out (Luke 9:1; 10:1). I think it's overwhelmingly likely that some of these were women. Of course, the twelve are in priority, but the other disciples are important too and apart from the twelve their appears to be no hierarchy amongst them. Matthew and Mark don't mention women

disciples until Jesus going to Jerusalem for his crucifixion, when we suddenly learn that women had accompanied him and provided for him (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41), but Luke makes their role clear from the beginning.

The importance of the role of the women disciples and their role in Jesus's ministry is also made clear by the angel's statement in Luke 24:6-8:

"He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words." (Luke 24:6-8 NIV)

These words can only be a reference to Jesus's passion predictions in Luke 9:22 and Luke 9:44, which were only spoken to the disciples:

"Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?"" (Luke 9:18 NIV)

Taken together these texts make it absolutely clear that the women were considered amongst Jesus's disciples.

It's really amazing in the context of the first century that women were financially supporting the ministry of Jesus. The Greek used in Luke 8:1-3 means 'material possessions' or 'economic means'. Luke isn't telling us that they cooked the meals, washed the dishes and mended clothes – he's referring to financial support. None of the members of Jesus's entourage of disciples engaged in normal productive work. Sometimes they benefited from hospitality, but not always. However, I think it's important to say that I don't think this establishes any kind of model of discipleship for us to follow today. Also I don't think we can assume that all the disciples abandoned all their worldly wealth to follow Jesus, especially those who didn't follow him on his travels – like Martha and Mary or Zachaeus for example.

I think it's very likely that Joanna as the wife of Herod's steward Chuza was both wealthy and a major contributor to Jesus's ministry. Some scholars have argued that as a married woman she would have had no access to the family wealth, but they ignore the possibility that Joanna was a widow, the mention of Chuza doesn't preclude the very real possibility that Joanna was a widow. After all it's unlikely that a married woman would have had the freedom to disappear for months or years to follow Jesus. As a widow she could have acquired wealth as *ketubba* (money pledged by a husband in the event of divorce or death), as an inheritance or by deed of gift from her husband. I think Luke was highlighting Joanna's connections to the Herodian court simply to highlight her wealthy status and her ability to contribute to the ministry.

Because of her name Joanna (the female form of John) was probably from a prominent Galilean Jewish family, likely named after her father, whilst Chuza was probably a Nabatean<sup>4</sup>, a prominent member of Herod's court based in the administrative capital city of Tiberias. So the marriage was probably in the nature of a political alliance. Joanna would have crossed a huge, a really enormous, social gulf in becoming a disciple of Jesus. This may have been initiated and eased if Chuza was the Royal official of John 4:46, whose son was healed by Jesus and whose whole household came to believe in Jesus (John 4:53) – although this is no more than speculation.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Bauckham *Gospel Women* p151

We've already seen that Joanna was a disciple, a follower of Jesus, who was involved in economically supporting his ministry and probably also in proclaiming the 'good news' – but I think there is good reason to suppose that Joanna can be identified with Junia, referred to by Paul in Romans 16:7, whom Paul commends as an apostle:

“Greet Andronicus and Junia[s], my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” (Romans 16:7 NIV)

We've already seen that the NIV is almost certainly wrong in rendering this in the male form Junias which is unknown in classical Greek. Prejudice makes for bad translation. The REB and the NRSV now place Junia in the main text and relegate Junias to a footnote. Origen, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Theodoret, John of Damascus and many later commentators down to the twelfth century all used the female form, but in the medieval period scribes introduced the male form Junias because they didn't believe a woman could have been an apostle, especially an apostle recognised by Paul. Along with the majority of modern scholars I believe they were wrong.

Returning to the identity of Junia, Paul refers to her as a 'relative' (Romans 16:21). Here he probably means that she was a fellow Jew, Paul often refers to Jews as “my relatives according to the flesh”. The NIV also says that Junia was in prison with Paul, although the Greek could better be translated “fellow prisoners of mine” – which could have a non-literal meaning – although I think it's most likely that they did share in Paul's confinement, either physically with him or at another time and place.

Paul also says that Junia was “marked out, distinguished, outstanding, prominent” amongst the apostles. Paul's use of the term apostle is much broader than that of Matthew, Mark and Luke who restrict it to the twelve. For Paul the apostles of Christ certainly included Barnabas (1 Corinthians 9:6), the brothers of the Lord (Galatians 1:19; 1 Corinthians 9:5), Paul himself (Romans 1:1), possibly Apollos (1 Corinthians 4:6, 9) – and apparently Junia and Andronicus.

Finally Paul says that Andronicus and Junia were “in Christ before him”, thus they were almost certainly Palestinian Jews and probably members of the Jerusalem church. It seems likely that Andronicus and Junia were involved in the founding or early growth of the church in Rome. No one else referred to in Romans 16 is of comparable standing, and this would justify their status as apostles.

But why should a Palestinian Jewish woman bear the Latin name Junia? It was rare for Palestinian Jews to have Latin names, although they often adopted Greek names. However, we do find Jews with Latin names amongst the Herodian aristocracy, which Joanna certainly did come from. Also Junia and Joanna have a very similar sound in their native pronunciation. This adoption of similar sounding names is quite common in scripture, thus we have Paul/Saul, Silas/Silvanus, and Joseph/Justus Barsabbas. Thus I think it is not unreasonable to suppose that Joanna and Junia are one and the same – although we can't prove it. Joanna might well have adopted a Latin name when she became a Christian missionary in Rome where Junia was a common female name or she might well have been known by the Latin name Junia in the Herodian court.

But what of her husband Andronicus? The Greek name Andronicus could have been adopted by Chuza, but I find it much more likely that Joanna/Junia was widowed when she was supporting Jesus's mission and that Andronicus was a second husband.

Apart from her status as an apostle, Joanna was a witness to the resurrection as Luke tells us (Luke 24:10), where Luke reminds us that her witness spans the whole of Jesus's ministry from early Galilean times on. She was probably present at Jesus's post-resurrection appearance to the disciples (Luke 24:33) and whom he commissions to be witnesses of his resurrection (Luke 24:36-49). Thus she fulfils the criteria Peter specifies for an addition to the apostolic band in Acts 1:21-22, except for not being male. In Luke's writing the term 'apostle' is restricted to the twelve, but as we've already seen Paul uses the term more broadly. Certainly as a long term member of Jesus's band and as an eyewitness of his resurrection she would have been extremely well qualified to play a leading missionary role.

Luke probably had special affection for Joanna, she may well have been his source of information regarding Herod and other details of Jesus's ministry and especially about the resurrection (where Luke doesn't follow Mark's account, but clearly relies on another eyewitness). In his gospel Luke continually focuses on a much larger group of disciples than the twelve, a larger group of which Joanna was a part.

### **Women and the Resurrection – Their Witness**

In the gospel narratives the women disciples of Jesus are the first people to find the tomb of Jesus empty – they were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Moreover they were the *only* witnesses to the empty tomb who had seen Jesus buried and therefore the only witnesses who could truly testify that the empty tomb was the real burial tomb. According to two of the gospel accounts the women were also the first to meet the risen Lord. This is really incredible because in first century Jewish Palestine women were not reliable witnesses. Their testimony was not acceptable in court.

Paradoxically, I think the incredibility of their testimony back then makes their testimony especially credible today. The lack of credibility of these narratives in the first century means that they are more likely to be truly historical. For me the differences between the various gospel narratives means that the writers relied on a number of different historical accounts – which again I believe increases their credibility.

So how many women were witnesses to the crucifixion, Jesus's burial and the empty tomb signifying his resurrection? Well the various gospels name different women, look at the following table:

<b>Gospel Account</b>	<b>The Crucifixion</b>	<b>The Burial</b>	<b>The Empty Tomb</b>
Mark	Mary Magdalene Mary (mother of James the little and Joses) Salome	Mary Magdalene Mary (mother of Joses)	Mary Magdalene Mary (mother of James)
Matthew	Mary Magdalene Mary (mother of James and Joseph) Mother of sons of Zebedee	Mary Magdalene The other Mary	Salome Mary Magdalene The other Mary
Luke			Mary Magdalene Joanna Mary (mother of

			James)
John	Jesus's mother Mary (wife of Clopas, his mothers sister) Mary Magdalene		Mary Magdalene

Most of the gospel accounts make it perfectly clear that the women they name are not an exhaustive list of those present. For example Luke states that all the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee were at the cross (Luke 23:49) and at his burial (Luke 23:55) and he says that an unspecified number of women (which might include all the women from Galilee) went to the tomb on Easter Sunday (Luke 24:1). That the gospel writers, at any rate the synoptic gospel writers, make clear that the women that they name were no more than a few of the women who were there makes the divergences between the lists quite intelligible.

We must also resist the temptation to assume that a woman named 'Mary' in one gospel list is the same as another woman named 'Mary' in a separate gospel list. Here we have to remember that Mary was an extremely popular name in Palestine Jewish society where nearly a quarter of all women were named Mary. In my view the differences exist precisely to distinguish the women and we miss the point if we try and identify one with another. The women named in the gospel lists are intended to be a list of those who were known to be there as reliable witnesses to the events described. Each gospel writer had his reasons for naming the specific women that he does.

In conclusion then, there are five named women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Salome, Joanna and Mary of Clopas; together with two unnamed but specified women: the mother of the sons of Zebedee and the mother of Jesus. The fact that two or three are generally named probably arises from the Torah's requirement for two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). As I've already implied, I don't see any significance in the variations between the lists, the gospel writers are giving expression to the oral traditions they received from these female witnesses. Again I want you to consider how amazing it is that these witnesses were mainly women whose evidence was not generally considered reliable – but they were chosen by God to be witnesses to the most important events in history. As the first witnesses to the empty tomb, it's certain that their witness would have been extremely important in the early church.

## **WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

As we've already seen women played an extremely important role in the early church, consider for example Junia or Joanna the Apostle. In a letter to his wife, Tertullian (AD 155-240) gives us a glimpse into some of the ministries of church women in his time. He charges her, in case of his own death, to not marry a pagan:

“Who would be willing to let his wife go through one street after another to other men's houses, and indeed to the poorer cottages, in order to visit the brethren? Who would like to see her being taken from his side by some duty of attending a nocturnal gathering? At Easter time who will quietly tolerate her absence all the night? Who will unsuspectingly let her go to the Lord's Supper, that feast upon which they heap such calumnies? Who will let her creep into jail to kiss the martyr's chains? Or bring water for the saints' feet?”

In the 2nd century, Clement of Alexandria wrote that the apostles were accompanied on their missionary journeys by women who were not marriage partners, but colleagues: “that they might be their fellow-ministers in dealing with housewives. It was through them that the Lord’s teaching penetrated also the women’s quarters without any scandal being aroused. We also know the directions about women deacons which are given by the noble Paul in his letter to Timothy.”

Twice Ignatius sent greetings to Alce, whom he calls especially dear to him. He also greeted Tavia and her household; perhaps she was another house-church leader. Polycarp mentioned the sister of Crescens, who deserved special commendation when she and her brother arrived in Philippi to deliver the letter. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, written about 148 A.D., gives instructions that two copies should be made of the work and one given to Grapte, “who shall exhort the widows and orphans.” The other copy was to be given to Bishop Clement to share with the elders. It appears that Grapte and Clement represented the female and male leaders respectively.

Indeed Christians were not the only ones prompted to write about the female followers of Jesus. About 112 A.D., the Roman governor Pliny the Younger detailed his efforts to cope with the nascent church in Bithynia. He had found it necessary to interrogate the leaders, two slave women called *ministrae*, or deacons.

There are even a few scattered references connecting women to the priesthood. Pseudo-Ignatius’s *Letter to the Tarsians* commands that those who continue in virginity be honored as priestesses of Christ. The eldresses of Titus 2:3 must be “*hieroprepeis*,” a term that inscriptional evidence suggests should be translated “like a priestess,” or “like those employed in sacred service.”

In my opinion the exclusion of women from ministry within the church is a late practice which probably began in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century with the *Didascalia*, a church order dating to the middle of the third century. The earlier *Didache* is silent on the issue of women in ministry. As the church gathered power, culminating in it becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, so the issue of the power of women within the ministry of the church became more important and women were gradually excluded from ministry within the church. A situation which has only recently been rectified. Along with Karen Torjesen<sup>5</sup> I think it is likely that this change of attitude in the third century resulted from the activities of the church increasingly moving from the private sphere into the public sphere. In Greco-Roman society women had quite a free hand in the private sphere, but were severely restricted in their activities in the public sphere.

In conclusion then, it would seem that women had an active and effective ministry in the early church during the first and second centuries AD, but were increasingly excluded from ministry starting in the third century AD. This is a situation which has only recently been rectified.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>5</sup> Karen Torjesen *The Neglected History of Women in the Early Church* p29

As I said at the beginning this is a huge topic and I apologise once again for the fact that it just hasn't been possible to cover all the issues in as much depth as I would have liked in a single morning.

We began by looking at what the Bible has to say about the role of women generally and within the church. We were able to reach a number of conclusions. Firstly, women are to be submissive to their husbands – who are to treat them lovingly – in a way that is honouring to God. In this way both husbands and wives honour God and his purposes for us. As we've already said, that doesn't mean that women are to be doormats, but it does mean that they should recognise and acquiesce in a role of male leadership by their husbands and husbands must exercise that role lovingly and wisely for the benefit of their wives and indeed the whole family. *Male chauvinism is no more biblical than feminism.* Both are perversions of God's plan. This doesn't mean that all women are to be subject to all men, although there does seem to be a small bias towards male headship both generally and within the church. Women should also dress and conduct themselves in a modest way which is fully in accordance with the norms for modest women in the culture of the time and which doesn't portray them as immodest or as feminist rebels.

Secondly, wives are to demonstrate their submission in their role in the church. Women should dress and behave in a manner in accordance with their role as modest married or single women (as the case might be). Women remain subject to the general principles regarding women noted above; and finally women are able to pray and teach in church where the social context permits (as it does here in the Western world) although they should *probably* be subject to male headship.

We also considered the role of men and women after the bodily resurrection at Christ's second coming and we saw that it's likely that we will retain our identity as men and women after the resurrection and that complete equality (although not complete identity) between men and women will then be restored.

We then looked at the role of women as portrayed by the OT. We saw that women are generally placed in a rather excessively submissive role in the Pentateuch. God's intention was perverted by exploitative men. Women were excluded from performing sacrifices and worshiping and were even excluded from the community during their menstrual period and after childbirth (Leviticus 12:2-5; 15:19-31). Indeed women are often portrayed as the property of their fathers or husbands. But there were exceptions and we looked at two women who had very special roles Deborah and Esther. Deborah was an extremely strong and charismatic woman who seems have served Israel well both as a judge and a military leader and Esther was raised up as an instrument in the hand of God to avert the destruction of the Jewish people, and to afford them protection and advance their wealth and peace in their captivity.

We then looked at Jesus's teaching on women and his attitude towards them. By the first century AD, man had misused his authority over woman and had confined women to an extremely subordinate and submissive role which was not God's intention for mankind. In Jewish culture this deterioration in the treatment of women seems to have accelerated in the intertestamental period. Jesus rejected this misuse of authority and affirmed women in both his actions and his teaching. Jesus included women where Jewish piety largely excluded them.

In Jesus's time, women were excluded from active participation in synagogue worship and only allowed to have a spectator role. They were forbidden to enter the Temple beyond the Court of the Women. A woman was not allowed to touch the scrolls of the Scriptures, lest she defile them. A man was not supposed to talk much with a woman, even his wife. Speaking to a woman in public was subject to even greater restrictions.

Jesus largely set aside such discrimination. He astonished His disciples by talking openly with "a woman" and a Samaritan woman – just to make things even more scandalous – at Jacob's well (John 4:27). His dearest friends included women, for example Mary and Martha from Bethany and Mary Magdalene. There were many women who were part of his band of followers, following Him from Galilee to Golgotha (Mark 15:41). Jesus accepted women disciples.

Overall Jesus affirmed women in a way that was completely in accordance with the general scriptural principles we've looked, but which was completely outside the cultural norms of his time – an age in which women were unduly restricted and oppressed.

Next we looked at women in the NT and we saw that women did have a prominent and important role – we looked at:

- the four women in the genealogy of Jesus;
- Elizabeth mother of John the Baptist;
- Mary the mother of Jesus;
- Joanna a disciple of Jesus and probably an apostle in the early church;
- the women who were witnesses to the resurrection

These women who were the witnesses to the resurrection are absolutely amazing in an age where the testimony of women was considered unreliable and not acceptable in a court of law.

Finally, we looked women in the early church and how they were gradually excluded from ministry, at least until fairly recently.

So I hope this morning has given you both a god insight into what the Bible has to say about the role of women and helped to affirm their significance and importance. But remember we do need to keep a balance, neither male chauvinism or rampant feminism are truly scriptural attitudes.