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Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition

and is an event not to be reenacted or celebrated, but simply remembered.[114] Mack has therefore suggested that this odd interpretation of the woman's anointing of Jesus contributes to Mark's interest of countering an enthusiastic Christ-cult by an increased focus on Jesus' service of death.[115] As for Jesus, he is the one who is anointed like a king at a banquet, but ironically he is really the one who has come to serve others by means of his death (Mark 10:45). The woman, like the women who "serve" Jesus in 15:40–41, is following Jesus' example of service by her deed. Accordingly, she becomes an excellent example of Markan discipleship.[116] As in other scenes, Mark does not emphasize the moral character of the woman but is occupied with other theological concerns.

Mark, Women, and Meals: Some Conclusions

Women figure prominently in the Gospel of Mark. They follow Jesus, receive healing, and are the only followers of Jesus in Mark's narrative depicted as acting out Mark's ideal of discipleship, taking on the humble stance of a slave, or "table servant."[117] Women also

[114] Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 311ff. The Last Supper in Mark is also not an event to be re-enacted but remembered (Klosinski, "Meals in Mark," 199–202).

[115] Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 311ff.; Robbins also connects the Last Supper and the anointing in Mark ("Last Meal," 35–36). Note also that Judas immediately exits stage left to work on the betrayal following both meals.

[116] Lee Klosinski sees this as a new assessment of social hierarchy. "Service at table," the lowly work of a slave, becomes the major example of Christian discipleship. This new social ethic would have undermined the Greco-Roman ideal of rank ("Meals in Mark," 206).

[117] Ibid. Except for the angels, who serve Jesus after the Temptation (Mark 1:13). Marvin W. Meyer has suggested another model disciple may have been present in an earlier version of Mark, that being the young man (νεανίσκος) present in the garden and the tomb (Mark 14:51–52; 16:5–6). Meyer has suggested that should the fragments of the *Secret Gospel of Mark* which feature this young man be considered as part of the original Markan narrative, then Mark would be depicting an ideal disciple throughout his story similar to the "Beloved Disciple" in the Gospel of John ("The Youth in the Secret Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 49 (1990): 129–53; see also "The Youth in Secret Mark and the Beloved Disciple in John," in *Gospel Origins and Christian Beginnings: In Honor of James M. Robinson*, ed. James E. Goehring et al. (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1990), 94–105). Meyer notes in reference to recent discussions concerning the women, that in comparison to the νεανίσκος, even the discipleship of the women falls short, as they too flee the scene, and tell no one about the resurrection ("The Youth in the Secret Gospel," 147). This observation was made to me by Winsome Munro. In personal correspondence she was gracious enough to share

appear in Markan meal scenes; however, Mark's tendency to use these scenes to underscore other theological points about discipleship, Jewish/Gentile relations, or the crucifixion shows his general lack of concern for the scandalous nature of his stories about women. Women disciples follow Jesus, but these female companions merit little comment from Mark. The woman's anointing of Jesus is not objectionable because of its impropriety, but on account of its cost. Likewise, the request of the Syro-Phoenician woman is rejected by Jesus not because she might be considered overeducated or "promiscuous," but rather because she is a Gentile. The Pharisees object to Jesus' dining with "tax-collectors and sinners," not because the group includes women, but because it includes Gentiles and therefore makes him ritually unclean.

Mark's use of these scenes to further his theological ends does serve a secondary purpose. Mark's redirection of his audience to other theological concerns obscures their undercurrent of scandal. Thus, the social conservatism of the Hellenistic world is not completely absent from Mark's Gospel. His encouragement to those who would be leaders to take on a subservient role does not set a tone for full egalitarianism. Women are never explicitly depicted as eating or reclining with men, and they rarely speak in public. On the contrary, the women around Jesus are set in contrast to the daughter of Herodias. These women may be wealthy, "liberated" ladies or "table-servants," but Mark does not call them πόρναι. Mark merely embraces the undertones of scandal by incorporating these depictions of women into his Gospel and skillfully uses them to further his other theological ends.

with me an unpublished copy of "Women Disciples: Light from Secret Mark," now in *JFSR* 8 (1992), 47–64. As young men were also commonly used for serving meals at banquets (See pp. 48–49.), the νεανίσκος could also be likened to the ideal διάκονος who "serves" at table (Mark 10:43–45).

beside the table.[186] Although not recumbent, she is not excluded. Even a seated woman in the context of a meal scene with such paedagological overtones is a rarity in Hellenistic literature. That others are not included in the narrative surely reflects Luke's interest in maintaining a Hellenistic public/private dichotomy as he does elsewhere.[187] Although the point of the text discourages Martha, it also encourages Mary, and as such it has encouraged Christian women throughout the centuries. As a prescriptive, rather than descriptive text, it also supports the view that there were indeed women leaders in communities like Luke's, but for social and theological reasons their active role was discouraged by developing ecclesiastical hierarchies.[188]

Luke, Women, and Meals: Some Conclusions

In his scenes involving women and meals, Luke upholds the traditional, submissive role for Greco-Roman women. Women do appear in large numbers in his Gospel, and women followers of Jesus support his work out of their personal wealth. Even former slave women and prostitutes, such as the woman who anoints Jesus, and other "sinners" respond to Jesus' message. Nonetheless, although Luke encourages the presence of women of varying social classes in his community, he uses meal terminology to encourage subtly the more traditional Greco-Roman role for women. For example, he discourages women from taking on active leadership roles in the early Christian mission in preaching and teaching. Although the role of a table servant (enacted by Peter's mother-in-law) is put forward as the primary role for early Christian leaders, Luke's vocabulary limits women to actual "table service" (διακονέω), or charitable giving, while reserving his terms for "ministry" (διακονία) and apostleship for the men. Luke's literary strategy involving "possessions" also brings the women, along with the rest of the community, under the leadership of Peter and the Twelve or under those the Twelve appoint

[186] A few commentators, unfamiliar with Mary's traditional posture here, suggest that she is not at the table, but seated away from it. See Plummer, *Luke*, 291; Ellis, *Luke*, 161.

[187] Love, "Women's Roles."

[188] So Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, Part 3; idem, "Theological Criteria," 8ff.

to preach and teach the "word." Although it is likely that Luke knew of women leaders of house churches, his portrayal of the conflict between Martha and Mary discourages women from seeing their role in the community as equal to that of men. Luke does mention women prophets, but even these women never say anything in public.[189] Thus, Luke's depictions of women in meal situations uphold the ideal, silent, submissive role of a Greco-Roman matron.

Luke's traditional depiction of women may be connected to his knowledge of Greco-Roman literature. He seems to have been well-read and aware of the literary structures and motifs of Greco-Roman literature.[190] His two-volume work is compared to ancient histories or biographies,[191] and more recently to the Apocryphal Acts.[192] As an author, then, Luke consciously uses various literary structures, forms, and motifs in an attempt to imitate the more serious literary works of his day and to cast his characters as respectable literary figures.[193] One of the literary conventions that Luke employs is the meal setting.[194] Of all the evangelists, then, Luke is indeed familiar with the literary images of women in symposia settings and the social criticisms of women's behavior at meals which these literary themes influenced. Luke's portrayal of women in the context of meals demonstrates his sensitivity to literary traditions which connected women to public meals or banquets. Hence, women and "sinners" do not join

[189] Although the author of Luke–Acts characterizes the new age of the Spirit by quoting from Joel 2:28–32 (Acts 2:17ff.), which promises both male slaves and female slaves will prophesy (δοῦλος/δούλη), the issue of public social protocol dictates the role of women. For example, the prophetess/widow Anna does not give one of the major speeches of Luke 1—2 (Mary and Elizabeth presumably speak out in the private home of Elizabeth). Likewise, even though Luke mentions the daughters of Philip, it is Agabus who warns Paul not to go to Jerusalem (Acts 21:9–14). This undoubtedly reflects Luke's interest in maintaining a public/private dichotomy with respect to women's proper behavior (so Love, "Women's Roles").

[190] Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian*; D. Smith, "Table Fellowship," 613ff.; Talbert, *Reading Luke*; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1.91ff.

[191] David E. Aune, "Greco-Roman Biography," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1988), 107–26; I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Exeter: Pasternoster, 1970); Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 3ff.; D. Smith, "Table Fellowship," 613, n. 2.

[192] Pervo, *Profit with Delight*; D. Smith, "Table Fellowship," 613, n. 2. See Ronald F. Hock, "The Greek Novel," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament*, 127–46.

[193] Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 40, 77ff., 106.

[194] Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian*, 47–78; Delobel, "L'onction," 458–64; de Meeûs, "Composition"; D. Smith, "Table Fellowship"; Steele, "Luke 11:37–54."

Women and Meals in Matthew's Gospel: Some Conclusions

This analysis of the Gospel of Matthew, which takes into consideration women and meal imagery in his narrative, produces striking results. Matthew, the Gospel considered the most androcentric of the four, is the only Synoptic Gospel which portrays women reclining with men for meals. Only in Matthew are women allowed a place at the table. Women and children join the men for the miraculous feedings, which Matthew characterizes as Eucharistic feasts enjoyed by the Matthean church. Thus, Matthew portrays an egalitarian community which gathers together for meals like a household and awaits the messianic banquet. Even the future kingly meal with the Messiah is akin to a wedding, the kind of family celebration for which even young unmarried women prepare. Women who "follow" Jesus meet the Matthean-criteria for discipleship, and many are even held up as examples of true faith and Christian service.

The slander leveled against ancient religious and philosophical groups which enjoyed mixed gender dining underscores Matthew's mention of the presence of women accused of promiscuity as members of Jesus' own group and, by inference, his own. Only Matthew embraces such sectarian slander and records that Jesus' group inherits "courtesans" who were previously disciples of John the Baptist. Furthermore, Matthew includes Gentile women associated with harlotry in his genealogy and later narratives. "Sinners," a group including women, join Jesus and his disciples for meals. Given that early Christian groups were often accused of welcoming promiscuous women and suspected of partaking of lecherous nocturnal "love feasts," Matthew's bold affirmation of the presence of "sinners" and "courtesans" among Jesus' dining company is a significant rhetorical statement. By doing so it is possible that Matthew further betrays his penchant for an anti-hierarchical egalitarian ecclesiology, an ecclesiology which likens the church to an equal gathering of "little ones" or a household of "brothers and sisters." Matthew's understanding of the church as a "household" does not result in an emphasis on traditional gender roles. Thus, his call to disciple "all nations" is gender and class-inclusive.

Finally, there is reason to suspect that Matthew might have inherited this egalitarian aspect of his ecclesiology from an earlier source, namely Q. The pericope concerning "courtesans" comes from a layer of tradition that deals with the relationship of Jesus to John.

If there is indeed a trajectory from Q to Matthew which allows for the merging of the Q community into Matthew's own,[171] then part of Matthew's "own" traditions might have included the characterization of Jesus and John as Cynics who welcomed women into their circles. Future scholarship on Q 7 may well shed light on the possibility that Q included a reference to "courtesans." Thus, the observation that Matthew includes women in his meal scenes and embraces the term "courtesans" (πόρναι) for women in his community could have great significance not only for Matthean studies generally, but for studies of the historical Jesus as well.

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[171]As is now suggested. James M. Robinson, "The Q Trajectory: Between John and Matthew via Jesus," in *The Future of Early Christianity. Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 173–94.

Conclusion

The presence and position of women in early Christian communities have been of great concern to biblical scholars during the past decade. The Synoptic Gospels in particular have been analyzed as to their perspective on women. Behind this endeavor lies the more modern controversy over the proper place of women in the contemporary church. Many modern Christian women still look to the New Testament for scriptural confirmation of a genuine religious call to ministry. This has led many Christian exegetes to emphasize the uniqueness of the Christian creed, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female" (Gal 3:28) to support the modern call of women to ministerial orders. Thus, the place of women in early Christianity suggested by New Testament books like the Synoptics is perceived by many to be the result of a uniquely Christian message which superseded an earlier, more restrictive Jewish code. According to this reconstruction, Hellenistic patriarchalism encroached upon this specifically Christian egalitarianism. This work challenges this reconstruction of women's place in early Christian groups and locates both the impetus of early Christian egalitarianism, as well as the erosion of that ethic, outside of Christianity altogether. The controversy over the place and position of women among early Christian communities is the result of larger social and economic forces affecting all of Greco-Roman society, including Hellenistic Judaism.

In order to substantiate my explanation of the presence of women in early Christian groups, I first investigated changes taking place in the meal customs of Greco-Roman women. Social anthro-

pological studies show that meal customs are resistant to change; as a result, fluctuations in those customs indicate an ongoing social renovation at a basic level of a society. Meal customs during the Greco-Roman period were indeed undergoing change, so that women were beginning to attend public meals with men, a behavior previously associated with prostitutes and slaves. This is an example of women's increased access during this period to the "public" sphere usually reserved for men according to ancient Greek social ideology. Although the "liberation" of ancient women was somewhat limited in scope, this freedom of movement of Greco-Roman women produced a kind of social criticism that emphasized ideal or "private" women's roles. Thus, women who attended public meals with men were labeled "promiscuous" or "public." This means that the presence of women in meetings of free association in early Christian communities and the language used to describe them, although noteworthy, are neither extraordinary nor unique. There were several religious and philosophical groups during the Hellenistic era apart from Christianity who welcomed women to their meals, and in turn received criticism for doing so. Notable among egalitarian philosophical groups include the Cynics, Epicureans, and the Stoics. Other religious groups open to women's participation include Hellenistic Judaism and the Isis religion.

Thus, Jewish groups were by no means unaffected by Greco-Roman meal customs or the fluctuations in the meal practices of Greco-Roman women. Jewish festive meals follow the pattern of all Greco-Roman meals, with a formal δεῖπνον followed by a συμπόσιον used in most cases for liturgical practices. This is true for the group at Qumran as well as for the Therapeutae described by Philo. Even Jewish Passover liturgy reflects this Greco-Roman meal structure and requires that Jewish women be present and recumbent next to their husbands for the meal. Sirach, the Hellenistic Jewish document written in Jerusalem around 180 BCE, in an extensive discussion of banquet etiquette, warns against dining with a neighbor's wife. Finally, the fortress of Herod at Machaerus contains two dining rooms side-by-side, one for men and one for women. That means that upper-class Jewish women may indeed have attended public meals with their husbands, but they sat separately, as was often the case for many Greco-Roman women. Furthermore, both Philo and Josephus show a concern to portray Jewish women as respectable in meal situations. The first section of this study establishes that not

only were Greco-Roman meal customs pervasive and undergoing change, but that other religious and philosophical groups besides Christianity, including Judaism, were equally affected by the changing meal customs of the Hellenistic world.

In a second section, this study demonstrates that the Synoptic Gospels themselves reflect both the fluctuations in Greco-Roman meal etiquette and an awareness that a social mixture of men and women for meals was at odds with Greco-Roman propriety. The Gospels reveal their familiarity with Greco-Roman meal customs and reflect Greco-Roman literary banquet themes. As a collection, the Synoptics present several positionings on the issue of women and gender-inclusive table practice.

Of all the Synoptics, Mark is the least concerned for the impropriety of the scenes involving women in his narrative, in spite of the fact that the majority of women in Mark's Gospel fit the "public" or "promiscuous" literary stereotype. Women appear as a sub-group of Jesus' disciples. Women are healed and receive exorcism. They are present at the cross and the tomb. Moreover, Mark describes the women who accompany Jesus as being present for meals, both as servants and as participants in the scene created by the slander that Jesus "eats and drinks" with "tax-collectors and sinners." Such a characterization reflects typical depictions of those known for banqueting with "promiscuous" women and pimps.

Although aware that his depictions evoke such slanderous clichés, Mark's storytelling reveals other concerns, such as Jewish/Gentile relations or the significance of Jesus' death and discipleship. Mark uses scenes involving stereotypically "promiscuous" women to underscore other theological points. Women "follow" and "serve" Jesus, yet their accompaniment receives little comment on Mark's part and is subtly incorporated into Mark's larger theme of discipleship. The woman's anointing of Jesus in the context of a meal is not objected to on account of its impropriety but its cost. Jesus at first rejects the request of the Syro-Phoenician woman not because she is "promiscuous," but because she is a Gentile. The Pharisees object to Jesus' "eating and drinking with tax-collectors and sinners" not because the group includes women, but because it includes ritually unclean Gentiles. Mark's redirection of his audience's attention to other theological matters also obscures the undercurrent of scandal in these scenes involving women, and thus, the concern for Greco-Roman propriety, though not emphasized, is not totally absent from Mark's Gospel.

Women, although present, are never explicitly depicted as reclining with men for meals.

Surprisingly, of all the Gospels writers, Luke upholds the traditional, submissive role for Greco-Roman women. Women appear in large numbers in both his Gospel and in Acts, and women are identified as the wealthy patrons who financially support Jesus' movement. Along with respectable Hellenistic women, Luke portrays lower-class slaves and repentant prostitutes as responding favorably to Jesus' message. In spite of their lower social position, however, Luke never calls any of the women around Jesus "prostitutes." Moreover, throughout his narrative Luke consistently avoids depicting women as reclining with men for meals. Luke's vocabulary limits women to actual "table service" or charitable giving, while excluding them from ministerial "service," a role reserved for men. His literary strategy involving "possessions" brings the women, along with the rest of the community, under the male leadership of Peter and the Twelve. Although Luke probably knew of women leaders of house churches, his portrayal of the conflict between Mary and Martha discourages women from seeing their role in the community as being equal to that of men. Rather, Mary is extolled for acting out the silent, submissive role of a Greco-Roman matron; she sits quietly at the feet of Jesus for a meal. Thus, Luke's portrayal of women in the context of meals indicates his sensitivity to literary traditions which connected women to public meals or banquets. Hence, women and "sinners" do not recline with Jesus for meals in the Gospel of Luke.

Even more surprising than Luke's maintenance of traditional Greco-Roman values, however, is Matthew's portrayal of women. Matthew, considered the most androcentric of all the Synoptics, is the only Gospel which portrays women reclining with men for meals. Only in Matthew are women allowed an equal place at the table. Women and children join the men for the miraculous feedings, meals Matthew characterizes as Eucharistic family feasts. Thus, Matthew portrays an egalitarian community which awaits the messianic banquet, a family affair for which even unmarried women prepare. The women who "follow" Jesus meet the Matthean criteria for discipleship, and other women in the story are held up as examples of true faith and Christian service. Furthermore, Matthew allows for the presence of women identified as "courtesans" among the followers of Jesus. "Sinners," a group which in Matthew includes women, join

Jesus and his disciples for meals. To foreshadow this development, Matthew includes women accused of harlotry within Jesus' own legal ancestry. In spite of the larger controversy over the "public" behavior of Greco-Roman women, Matthew affirms the presence of women accused of promiscuity among the followers of Jesus. Thus, in Matthew, the characterization of the church as a family or "household" does not result in an emphasis on ideal gender roles. Matthew's ecclesiology is gender-inclusive, as well as somewhat anti-hierarchical. There is reason to suspect that Matthew inherits this gender-inclusivity from earlier Gospel traditions.

Finally, several insights may be gained from examining women and meals in the Gospels. First, Greco-Roman ideas about meal propriety helped both to shape the identity of the Synoptic communities and to determine the position of women in these early Christian groups. This should not be surprising; recent research indicates that early Christian groups gathered around meals for their public worship and discourse. It is logical then that the evangelists' ideas about meals would also reflect their ideas about the place of women in their communities. Mark allows for the presence of women, but is not overly concerned about them. Luke encourages large numbers of women converts, but wishes to limit the behavior of women according to Greco-Roman ideals. Matthew encourages an open and egalitarian community in which women and men recline together for meals. Thus, the development of early Christian groups into communities "at table" greatly influenced the position of women in the Synoptic communities.

Second, ample evidence from the Gospels confirms the presence of women among the earliest converts to Christianity. At an early layer of the Gospel tradition Jesus is slandered for his table practice, which includes the presence of "tax-collectors and sinners" for meals, and features "wine-bibbing" and "gluttony." Such characterizations reflect stereotypical slander used against those known for dining with "promiscuous" or "liberated" women. Other religious and philosophical groups were criticized in like manner for including women in socially mixed public meals. The children of the marketplace pericope from Q also highlights those who acknowledge Jesus and John by "wailing" and "piping," both activities of women and slaves hired for banquets and funerals. There is also reason to suspect that Q might have included a reference to the presence of "courtesans" among Jesus' followers, which would further connect Jesus to

Greco-Roman Cynicism. By incorporating these kinds of materials, the evangelists reveal the roots of their communities in earlier groups which featured corporate meals involving a social mixture of sexes. This may be particularly true in Matthew's case. Therefore it is Matthew who may be more in line with earlier Jesus movements insofar as his table etiquette is concerned.

Third, the results of this study should advance our general understanding of women in early Christianity and the New Testament. The controversy over women is not to be considered unique to Christianity. Rather, texts in the New Testament like the Gospels reflect varying positions on a larger Greco-Roman social controversy. Moreover, the earlier Gospel materials lean toward a more egalitarian direction, supporting Schüssler Fiorenza's reconstruction of the Jesus movement as a "discipleship of equals." One could argue that the early Christian concept of leadership as "table-service" was modeled after a social role often delegated to women. Those Christian communities still concerned with the biblical witness as the determining factor in modern definitions of a woman's proper place in the home and church should be cautious in overestimating the significance of ideal Greco-Roman women's roles for universal Christendom.

Fourth, by illustrating that the presence of women in early Christian groups was not due to a specifically Christian ideology, a major problem in current Christian feminist hermeneutics is solved. It is not necessary to devalue Hellenistic Judaism in order to appreciate the inclusivity and egalitarianism of early Christianity. On the contrary, it is more than likely that convivial inclusivity was one aspect of religious and social life that early Christianity shared with Hellenistic Jews, who were also accused of welcoming numerous women converts to their synagogues—women who were also accused of promiscuity. Jewish women were among those who joined men for public meals, particularly for the formal Passover seder. The conservative trend which affected Jewish women's lives as seen in later rabbinic writings, usually read back into the first century as being indicative of first-century Jewish ideology, is rather a reflection of the same conservative domestication of morals that affected Christian groups of the same period. The motivation toward convivial egalitarianism among both Jews and Christians and the conservative resurgence that emphasized ideal women's roles are neither specifically Jewish nor Christian, but Greco-Roman. Should this thesis gain acceptance, then the tendency among Christian exegetes towards an

anti-Judaic hermeneutic should be curtailed. Moreover, this analysis demonstrates that the most *Jewish* Christian of the Synoptic Gospels betrays the most egalitarian ecclesiology.

Finally, should the major tenets of this thesis gain acceptance, its wider implications are far-reaching. This study focused on the participation of women in early Christian groups. However, should that participation merely reflect a more general proclivity for Christian groups to participate in the wider Hellenistic mentality of their times, this has broader implications for the entire question of the social constituency of early Christianity. The presence of other segments of Greco-Roman society within Christian groups will need renewed analysis in light of these more general observations. For example, explanations for the predominance of slaves and freedpeople in early Christian groups, often attributed to the attractiveness of doctrines fundamental to Christian theology, will need reassessment. The social significance of major categories of even Pauline theology may need additional review. For scholars concerned with the variety of social issues faced by early Christian communities, there is much work to be done.

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