

The Representation of Jesus and Women in the Gospel of Mark

The Gospel of Mark offers valuable insight into the status and role of women in the early Jesus movement. Not only are there several stories of Jesus interacting with women in this synoptic gospel, but also there are many moments in Mark where the reader witnesses Jesus speaking to women's issues. These instances of female inclusion in Jesus' sermons, as well as his purposeful involvement of women in his miracles, leave the reader with the strong sense that Jesus is mindful of the plight of women. The reader also observes women being faithful to Jesus in Mark, despite none of them holding the position of "disciple," suggesting they too play a vital role in the story of Jesus. The final chapter in the Gospel that describes women fleeing in terror from Jesus' tomb, however, leaves open questions about the positive influence of women in the early Jesus movement. Looking closely at the words Jesus speaks concerning women's issues and briefly at the story of the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5, it can be determined that the Gospel of Mark purposely gives weight to the exchanges between Jesus and women to enhance its social justice theme as well as gives due importance to the role of women in the Jesus story, while still holding slight reservations about the real nature of Jesus' female followers.

Looking at the Gospel of Mark from a broad, thematic lens, a few specific subject matters emerge that distinguish Mark from the rest of the gospels. Specifically, it is marked by the frequent application of conflict to challenge the Jewish people's faith, as well as makes statements about the interconnectivity of sociopolitical and religious laws, which hints at a social justice theme. The introduction to the Gospel confirms this saying, "[I]n this story religion is inseparable from the social, political, economic, even physiological aspects of life" (Coogan 56). In a way, the stories and words of Jesus included in the Mark serve to emphasize the importance of social justice in God's will. The introduction mentions that in Mark, Jesus' challenges of the peoples' faith are constantly misunderstood, even surprisingly by his chosen disciples. However,

as the introduction also reads, “By contrast with the misunderstanding and faithless disciples, women, who play an increasingly prominent role in Mark’s story, serve as models of faithfulness ...” (Coogan 56). Indeed, women are featured in many stories in this gospel, and, more importantly, are included in many of Jesus’ sermons to the Jewish people about religious laws and social responsibilities. While women had been included in sermons and laws prior to the time of Jesus as well as in the other gospels, the Gospel of Mark seems to purposefully highlight women, enhancing this notion of the emphasis on social justice in the Gospel.

Looking at specific examples of this social justice theme in Jesus’ instructions to the Jewish people and other religious people, there is a fair amount concerning the equal rights of women. The reader first sees this in Mark 10, when the Pharisees and disciples ask him separately about the right of men to divorce their wives. First, to the Pharisees, Jesus quotes what Moses commanded them saying, “‘God made them male and female.’ ... ‘The two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” Clarifying this point, he tells the disciples, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (vv. 6-12). Thus, Jesus is witnessed giving equal weight to men’s and women’s actions in divorce. This passage suggests that he sees women as holding equal status to men in the eyes of God, which is an important statement concerning the status of women. The inclusion of Jesus’ words to disciples in addition to his words to the Pharisees shows that the author of the Gospel of Mark wanted to emphasize this position that Jesus takes.

Another instance in the Gospel of Mark where the reader witnesses Jesus making a point about the equality of women is in Mark 12. In this chapter, Jesus responds to the Sadducees’ concerns of Levirate marriages. They offer Jesus the example of a woman who has married seven brothers out of the conditions of Levirate marriages, and upon her death, still has not bore

a child. They ask Jesus whose wife she will be in resurrection. Jesus answers with, “For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (vv. 18-23). While it is not immediately obvious that this discussion between the Sadducees and Jesus concerns the equality of women, especially since Jesus—or the author of the Gospel—did not use the opportunity to condemn Levirate marriage, upon close inspection it appears that Jesus is making the statement that women are free from spousal obligation in death. Jesus is seemingly arguing that men and women are equal in the eyes of God, so women should no longer be a men’s possession when they enter God’s kingdom.

Other references concerning the importance of female justice in Jesus’ instructions are made throughout the Gospels. Even references as subtle as that in Mark 13, reading, “Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infant in those days! Pray this it may not be in winter” (v. 17), still make the point in the Gospel that Jesus was mindful of women’s concerns and poised to include both men and women in his sermons. In addition to Jesus’ words on women, there seems to be a steady inclusion of women characters in the Gospel of Mark, stressing Jesus’ desire to include all people in his miracles. A story in the Gospel that serves as good examples of Jesus wanting to include women in his healing power and treat women with kindness is the story of the hemorrhaging woman who touched an unsuspecting Jesus in Mark 5. The woman, who had been bleeding for 12 years, touches Jesus cloak while in a crowd, knowing its healing power. Jesus instantly feels her touch and asks who did it. Instead of slipping away unnoticed, the woman fesses up: “But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth” (v. 33). Instead of rebuking the woman, Jesus blesses her and continues on with his healing. He says to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of you disease” (v. 34). This story is important because it shows a seemingly “unclean” woman taking control of her own

healing. As the footnotes read, “The initiative and actions are entirely [the woman’s], Jesus being a passive conduit through which the healing power goes forth” (Coogan 66). This not only shows female empowerment, but also it shows that Jesus is respectful of the woman’s bold actions. Undoubtedly, this story was included in Mark to show that Jesus was willing to share his miracles with woman and also was accepting of female authority, making a general statement about the equality of women in his eyes. Jesus’ recognition of women and the empowering action of women is repeated in Mark 14, when a female prophet anoints Jesus. While others scolded the woman for wasting ointment, Jesus is grateful. He says, “She has done what she could ... Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (vv. 8-9). Jesus accepts the woman’s deed and emphasizes that she is showing devotions, something many of the disciples struggle to do. This woman is representative of many women who served Jesus out of their faith and contributed to the Jesus movement. She and the hemorrhaging woman are likely included in Mark’s story of Jesus because they are influential females willing to do anything for Jesus, advancing the theme in this Gospel of the positive role of women and their steadfast devotion to God.

This positive aura of women in Mark, however, is obfuscated by the end of the Gospel. Starting Mark 16, after the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to Jesus’ tomb to anoint him (which again emphasizes the devotion and faithfulness of women in the story). However, when these women find the tomb opened and a man in a white garment tells them that Jesus has been raised, they are alarmed. The man says, “But go, tell disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (v. 7). The women’s response, however, was not continued devotion and trust, rather it was terror. The text reads, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement has seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (v. 8). While the statement

“they said nothing to anyone” is contradicted in the two alternate endings, with, “All that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter,” and “[Mary Magdalene] went out and told those who had been with him,” the statement still gives off an aura of the women recanting their faithfulness to Jesus and God. The women’s fear and initial silence suggest that they are not the ceaselessly devoted followers that previous statements in Mark suggest.

Juxtaposing this ending of Mark with the ending of the Gospel of Matthew, which portrays the women’s reactions to finding Jesus missing from the tomb in a much different light, it is clear that Mark is trying to make a point about the role of women with the words the author chooses in Mark 16. The Gospel of Matthew describes a situation similar to that in Mark, saying that an angel appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary at the empty tomb, who instructed the women to tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead. The reaction of the women is recorded in Matthew as, “So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him” (28: 8-9). So in Matthew, the women were still afraid of the empty tomb, but their joy and faith in Jesus allow them to ignore their terror and run to the disciples and worship Jesus. This is in great contrast to the fearful and concerned responses of the women in Mark, and it suggests that the Gospel of Mark is still questionable about the devotion of women to Jesus despite implying throughout the Gospel that women were devoted followers of Jesus. This is briefly mentioned in the introduction of the Gospel, which reads, “[W]omen ... serve as models of faithfulness until they flee from the empty tomb” (Coogan 56). So, just like the men in the story of Mark, women too have lapses in their faith and question their devotion to Jesus, just as Peter did when he denied being Jesus’ disciple. Thus, this abrupt and confusing ending to the Gospel of Mark disrupts readers’ impressions of women formed throughout the story. The ending leaves a lot of room for interpretation concerning the influence

of women in the story of Jesus and shows that the author of the Gospel still has reservations about the inclusion of women in Jesus' discipleship.

It is important to note that aside from these separate endings to Mark and Matthew concerning the role of women in telling the disciples about the rising of Jesus, similar passages concerning Jesus' interactions with women and views on gender equality can be found in Matthew. Specifically, his instructions to the Pharisees and disciples concerning divorce, as mentioned earlier, are close to those in Matthew 19. Also, the stories of the hemorrhaging woman and the female prophet are seen in Matthew and Luke. So it would be wrong to assert that the importance Jesus gives to women's issues and his positive interactions with women are specific to Mark, as they are echoed in the other synoptic gospels. In fact, it is arguable that the Gospel of Luke includes more references to women and statements about female justice than Mark does, especially looking at the story of the widowed woman arguing with an unjust judge in Luke 18 and Jesus' address to wailing women as the base of his cross in Luke 23.

Nevertheless, women are influential in Mark, especially serving as positive members of Jesus' following and being a main talking point in Jesus' sermons on social justice. Thus, the inclusion of women in Mark may not be unique to the Gospel, but the role of women is still noteworthy and important to Mark's story of Jesus. And what is arguably most important about the role of women in Mark's Gospel is the fact even after having steadfast devotion to Jesus throughout the story, women close to Jesus were still afraid of him and doubted their faith at the end. While it may never be known why the end of the Gospel of Mark was written the way it was, it can be said with assurance that women are viewed as equals to men in the Gospel, both in the eyes of Jesus as well as in their potential to question God's will and their faith.

Work Cited:

The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 3rd Edition. Michael Coogan, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2007.