

Apostles to the Apostles: The Role of Women in John

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The Gospel of John is characterized, among other things, as a Gospel of encounters. Jesus travels, meets, and interacts with all sorts of people across his public ministry, through his passion and glorification, and into his ongoing existence as the resurrected Christ. Notably, a number of these encounters occur between Jesus and various women, and often at key moments in the narrative of his mission. This journey begins with Jesus' encounter with his mother at a wedding feast in Cana (2:1-12), expands through his encounter with the woman at the well in Samaria (4:1-44), is deepened by his encounter with the woman caught in adultery (7:53-8:11), is deepened in his encounter with Mary and Martha of Bethany (11:1-12:8), is reprised when he encounters his mother again at the foot of the cross (19:25-30), and given new life through his encounter with Mary of Magdala by the tomb (20:1-18). Aware of numerous studies dedicated to this issue, beginning with Raymond Brown's essay in *Theological Studies*, later published as an appendix to his *Community of the Beloved Disciple*, what follows is based upon a larger project. That study investigates these vital encounters to suggest their role in John's story of the good news and discover the impact they have on both the narrative and the discourse of the Gospel. Today's paper will briefly explore Jesus' encounters with three of these women: the mother, the Samaritan woman, and Mary of Magdala; and make some preliminary suggestions.

The Mother of Jesus and the Model for Believing (John 2:1-12)

John 2-4 recounts a journey from Cana in Galilee, down through Judea, back through Samaria, before ending once again in Cana, which teaches the nature of authentic faith. All those Jesus encounters are affected by his word and deed. Jesus, too, is affected by them. With each ensuing encounter, Jesus' renown spreads and he pushes harder for believing in his word, *despite*

that renown. This is a dynamic process of ever-challenging and deepening belief in the word, based in relationship. Audiences of the Gospel likewise make this journey along with Jesus and the active characters.

Some scholars suggest that the pattern of temporal and spatial markers across 1:19–2:12 manifests the feast of Pentecost as the theological canvas of this narrative portrait. The revelation of the glory of God and the foundation of the covenant between God and Israel at Sinai were linked to the feast of Pentecost by NT times. The Qumran literature also relates this feast to the creation of a covenantal people founded in response to the word of God. This rich symbolic framework, marked by the temporal marker “on the third day” (Exodus 19), is the foundation upon which the dialogical encounter between Jesus and his mother at the wedding feast at Cana is built. The catechetical journey that follows this revelatory event is a journey of discovery and ever-deepening understanding of the process of believing in the Word.

What happens on this “third day” is a wedding feast in Cana, Galilee. There, in the midst of this celebration, was the mother of Jesus. Although she is never named, the mother of Jesus is given primacy of place as the first character introduced in this passage, indicative of her role in the events to come. Indeed, her designation as “mother” by the narrator (four times) is set in relief against how Jesus eventually addresses her as “woman” (v. 4). The action begins as Jesus encounters his mother in this environment. The narrator quickly puts forth the problem and provides the motivation for the dialogue between Jesus and his mother. Although the narrator explains the situation, understood to be a social crisis, the mother’s words focus the scene and bring her to center stage. She says to Jesus, “They have no wine.” Her brief statement, however, only magnifies the tension. Is she requesting something from him? A miracle? Or just a run to the market? Moreover, she virtually repeats what the narrator has just stated. Although it may

seem to be repetitive in the context of the narrative, she becomes the character who perceives the problem and makes it known to Jesus. This makes Jesus' response all the more challenging, "Woman, *ti emoi kai soi* (what is to you and to me)? My hour has not yet come."

This is one of the most difficult lines of the Gospel. His first words are ambivalent and followed by an apparent *non sequitur* about his "hour." The verbless clause is terse, even in the Greek. The question then becomes, what *is* between the two of them, if anything? If the presumption of negativity is set aside, we can note that, on the more personal level, the "what" of this expression seems to invoke the idea of relationship. Given the suggested symbolic context of revelation and the Sinai covenant celebrated at the feast of Pentecost, this idea of relationship language begins to make sense of the interaction between Jesus and his mother at the wedding feast. The second part of Jesus' response indicates what it is not: "my hour has not yet come." The theme of "the hour" is introduced to the Gospel. Jesus signifies that the hour of his full glorification has not yet arrived, and that part of his covenant must wait for its full expression.

For her part, the mother accepts this without qualification. Her next words confirm her acceptance and indicate the role that she will take. Resonating the words of the Israelites at Sinai, and again at the ritual that seals the covenant, "Everything the has Lord said, we will do" (Exod 19:8; 24:3, 7), she turns to the servants and says, "Whatever he says to you, do" (v. 5). She accepts his challenge just as the Israelites accepted the covenant at Sinai, and her imperative sets in motion the revelation. Her role fulfilled for the moment, she fades from the scene. Remaining verses are marked by further command and response as the servants respond to the mother's imperative by obedience to the commanding word of Jesus (vv. 7–8). As silent "doers" of the word, they implicitly partake of the relationship established between Jesus and his mother,

making her not just a participant, but a facilitator of his word. A continual acting out of this “doing” the word of Jesus follows, thereby resolves the problem at the wedding feast (vv. 9-10).

By v. 11-12, the narrator summarizes the event as a sign and affirms its effects: Jesus “began to reveal his glory and his disciples began to believe in him;” thus, clarifying the nature of Jesus’ ministry before “the hour.” It is manifested through “signs” and its purpose is to begin the revelation of his glory (see 11:4, 40). The full manifestation of the glory of God cannot be until “the hour” arrives and God becomes the agent of the revelation. This process of becoming is a journey for the disciples that will span the rest of the Gospel. At Cana, it has only just begun.

The narrative of the wedding feast at Cana thus captures the essence of the public ministry of Jesus as depicted in the Gospel of John. Stark dialogue and vivid imagery allow the evangelist to introduce the symbolic framework of the rest of Jesus’ earthly ministry and to foreshadow the hour of the glory of God. The foundation is covenant, the nature of which is manifest through believing in the revelation of God through the word of Jesus. The archetype for this covenant is presented through the dialogue between Jesus and his mother and the relationship established. Through her acceptance of Jesus’ challenge, she becomes the paradigmatic disciple in the time before Jesus’ hour. As Jesus’ journey, audiences hold her response as the model against which all further responses to Jesus are measured. Her presentation as both woman and mother further characterizes both this covenant and the vocation of the believer once the hour arrives. In his last discourse with his disciples, it is the woman whose character Jesus holds up as their model, “When a woman is in travail she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to a child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child has been born into the world” (16.21). Further, every time Jesus approaches and interacts with one he calls “Woman” throughout his ministry, the covenant with

this first woman will be called to mind. John 2:1-12 therefore not only introduces the narrative unit that flows from 2:1–4:54 on the process of believing, but the challenging encounter between Jesus and his mother inaugurates his entire public ministry. By responding to Jesus as she does, the mother becomes the model for believing, particularly before “the hour” of Jesus.

The Woman of Samaria and the Living Water of Discipleship (John 4:1-44)

In John 4, Jesus’ journey continues, now through a decision to leave Judea and return to Galilee by way of Samaria. This route is noteworthy as many Jews would have taken a longer and ostensibly safer route across the Jordan River through the Gentile region of the Decapolis to avoid Samaria with whose residents they have a long tradition of discord and animosity. That Jesus “had to go through Samaria” is, therefore, both a political expedience and a theological necessity (v. 4). He had made enemies in Judea and good judgment dictates that he moves on as quickly as possible. However, it may also be time for Jesus to journey out of Jewish territory and take on the wider world: he “had” to encounter a Samaritan woman at a well. So, Jesus and his disciples move into Samaria and make their way to the village of Sychar. Thus, the remainder of the journey from Cana to Cana moves through territory outside the world of Judaism.

This is another challenging encounter to interpret and much has been written on it across the centuries. Audiences familiar with the other gospels may notice that, like all the encounters in this section of the narrative, this passage is unique. Like the wedding feast at Cana, no other Gospel contains an encounter in this setting, with a woman at a Samaritan village at a well. Further, like the mother of Jesus with whom this section begins and the royal official with whom this section ends, this woman with whom Jesus has an even lengthier dialogue is never identified by name. I’ve suggested that this segment of the journey from Cana to Cana will teach us about the impact of Jesus and the availability of the relationship of faith with him outside of Judaism;

but what of *this* woman and her *Samaritan* ethnicity? The traditional interpretation focused on the Samaritan's gender and, more specifically, her sexuality; the implication being that this is simply a(nother) case of Jesus reforming a sexually promiscuous, outcast woman and bringing her back into community of faith. The rather brief discussion that follows builds on more recent interpretations focusing on her ethnicity and reclamations of her gender to draw out both her womanhood and her "Samaritan-hood" as integral the evangelist's teaching in this passage.

The encounter begins as Jesus, tired from his journey, comes to rest by Jacob's well at midday (vv. 5-6). John thus associates this encounter with the patriarchs in general and Jacob who becomes Israel in particular. Generally speaking, in the first century CE, Samaritans held to a Torah-centered faith that focused on the patriarchs, centered worship on Mount Gerazim, and looked for a prophet-like-Moses messiah, while the Jewish people held to a broader scriptural tradition that included the prophets, centered worship in Jerusalem, and looked for a messiah-king in the line of David. Although sharing the same founding history, the two ethnic groups currently shared nothing else in common, including food, drink, or utensils. In this environment, Jesus takes a break alone as the disciples go for food and meets a Samaritan woman who comes to the well for her daily chore of drawing water (vv. 7-8). The scene is thus set for an encounter through which Jesus upends social convention and incorporates a woman who is also a Samaritan into his own. The evangelist can thus also teach that Jesus likewise fulfills the Samaritan expectations and reconciles this long-standing division.

Jesus initiates dialogue with the woman, a surprising move, by demanding, "Give me a drink" (v. 7). With the imperative he takes an authoritative tone, even as he takes the role of a supplicant requesting hospitality for a basic need from someone with whom his people deny kinship. He therefore implies that he is rejecting the religious and familial division between these

ethnic groups from the outset, not to mention gender conventions. For her part, the woman takes a strong tone by questioning his actions based on these long-standing divisions (v. 9). Jesus responds in his now typically metaphorical way with a reference to the gift of God and living water. By using the Greek term *pēgē* to identify this well in v. 6, the narrator indicates that it is a spring-fed well, fed by running, or living, water. The language of the prologue has introduced the “gift” of God as covenant (1:14-18). In putting forth the condition of knowing “who it is” speaking with her in terms of knowing the gift God, Jesus is once again challenging his dialogue partner, this time a woman from outside of Judaism, to new relationship available through him (v. 10). Further, he hints the coming revelation of himself as the “I AM” of God in v. 26.

The Samaritan woman’s response first points out his lack of a bucket and the deepness of the well, then makes what could simply be a mocking reference to the “living water.” But then she asks how he compares to Jacob “our ancestor” and giver of the well. On a more symbolic level, her question could be quite serious. Who *is* Jesus in relation to their shared history? Jesus responds, as is becoming his practice, not by answering her question directly but by challenging her to think further about what he gives on the theological level as it will become “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (vv. 13-14). Now it is the woman’s turn to demand water. She says, “Sir, give me this water...” Her answer is twofold again and this time, part two indicates that she is not quite there yet as she refocuses on the daily chore of drawing water (v. 15).

Jesus therefore redirects the dialogue with a new command, “Go, call your husband, and come back” (v. 16). So, we have a new start, this time with a focus on the woman’s married life and Jesus’ status as a prophet. But on a symbolic level, the language remains that of relationship. Jesus and the woman continue to explore covenant and the potentiality of relationship. The woman admits that she has no husband and Jesus affirms her truth but not until he articulates a

lengthy marriage history (vv. 17-18). Audiences might remember that Hosea, the prophet to the northern kingdom, primarily used the language of marriage, and broken marriage, to speak of the northern kingdom's covenant relationship with God and what he considered its breach of that covenant. Thus, Jesus is also articulating the current broken state of the Samaritans' relationship. The woman gleans this and begins to see Jesus is a prophet. This, for her as a Samaritan, opens the discussion to the possibility of Christology. Any mockery is gone as she opens herself to what Jesus may have to give. She pursues this by asking about worship and the divisions between them (v. 19-20). Her openness now allows Jesus to teach about the coming reconciliation of all worship in and through spirit and truth from the Jews by way of knowledge of the Father. She speaks of the role of the Messiah and Jesus responds with his first explicit acceptance of this title and self-identification with God, the Father of both Jews and Samaritans. The "I AM" of v. 26 is the "I AM" of the sacred name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14) and unfolds the promise of v. 10. In accepting her hope for the Messiah, relating this encounter with that between God and the prophet Moses, and identifying himself with the sacred name of God, Jesus presents himself to the Samaritan woman as the fulfillment of covenant, worship, and messianic expectations of both Jews and Samaritans. Although the woman makes no verbal acceptance of Jesus' revelation and challenge, she does, like many disciples before her, leave her belongings and earthly responsibilities where they lay and run to share her message. Seeking confirmation for her encounter, she also becomes an apostle sent to the village to share the news of the one coming to them (vv. 28-30).

Jesus' time in Samaria closes with the Samaritan villagers believing in Jesus first based upon the witness of the woman and then because of Jesus' own word (4:39-44). The woman's mission is perfected in the authentic faith of the village based on their own encounter with Jesus

and his saving word: “we know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (v. 42). The word of Jesus is now proclaimed meaningful and effective, not only for Judaism, but for the entire world. Both the ethnicity and gender of the woman are thus reclaimed in terms of leadership through her response and new role as a disciple of Jesus and apostle to the rest of her community.

The Mother of Jesus and the Model of Believing, Reprise (John 19:25-30)

Scholars have long observed the characteristics of ancient Greco-Roman drama in the Gospel of John, and the Passion Narrative in particular as a five-act play within the larger Gospel narrative. Across John 18–19 the telling of Jesus’ passion moves through five distinct geographical locations: the garden across the Kidron wadi (18:1–11); the house of Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest (18:12–27); the Roman praetorium (18:28—19:16a); Golgotha, the Place of the Skull (19:16b–37); and the new garden of Jesus’ burial (19:38–42). As Jesus moves to each new location, the narrator describes the place as well as the characters and activity that will be involved there. Act Four sends audiences directly to the cross with Jesus. This is a powerful component of the narrative, as Jesus resolutely sees his mission to its fulfillment. This Act presents the completion of Jesus’ mission resulting from the revelation of truth and Pilate’s inability to stand on its behalf. It is presented in five scenes, framed by introductory verses of character and setting (19:16b–17) and concluding verses of reflection upon the consequences of the action (19:35–37). The central scenes narrate the inscription (vv. 18–22), the seamless tunic (vv. 23–24), Jesus’ interaction with his mother and the Beloved Disciple (vv. 25–27), the death of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit (vv. 28–30), and the piercing of Jesus’ side (vv. 31–34).

In a moment of profound dramatic irony, the third scene shows how Jesus’ last breaths on the cross establish the church, as symbolized by the garment that cannot be torn apart. Jesus is not alone with his enemies, but is still surrounded by some of his own, including his mother, his

mother's sister, Mary of Magdala, and the Beloved Disciple. The mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple come together "because of that hour" (v. 27). The gift of mother and son at the foot of the cross therefore stands at the center of this Act. The first to believe (Jesus' mother at the wedding feast in Cana) and the beloved model disciple are given to each other by Jesus to establish a new community in faith and love. Even on the cross, Jesus' primary concern is for his own as he gives them to each other to form a new family to nurture the children of God.

The earthly life and ministry of Jesus the Son of Man ends in the fourth scene when he declares, "it is finished"—the affirmation that all has been brought to completion and perfection. The fulfillment language of the entire Passion Narrative reaches its peak here. Only after the acknowledgment of his glorification and the completion of his mission, but still in full knowledge of God's plan, can he go. Jesus bows his head and "handed over the spirit" (v. 30). A new community is founded (vv. 25-27), made up of loving disciples and the believing Mother. In the handing down of the Spirit, Jesus gives the Spirit to this nascent church (see 7:37-39). The role of the mother of Jesus in John's Gospel began in John 2 but culminates at the foot of the cross (19:25-30) when her crucified son brings her together with the other model for believing presented in the Gospel, the Beloved Disciple, to form the new family of God in the church. This, therefore, becomes the initiating model of church, to live as the Word's own even at the foot of the cross. It is only then that the ministry of Jesus and the glorification of God is perfected (19:28-30) and life in that revelation can begin (John 20-21 and beyond).

Mary the Magdalene and the New Life of Apostleship (John 20:1-18)

Mary of Magdala comes into focus in John 20 as the one who discovers the empty tomb, the first to encounter the risen Christ, and the apostle to the apostles. She represents the faithful who, strong and independent in their own right, nonetheless experience a profound opening to a

new life through the Christ event. The post-resurrection encounters narrated in John 20 are also marked by journeys. Several disciples begin, continue, or conclude journeys of faith. Through their stories, the evangelist provides models for his audiences: this is what everyone goes through—the good, the bad, and the ugly—as they pursue life in the name of Jesus.

John reports that Mary of Magdala comes to the tomb “on the first day of the week.” In this Gospel, Mary of Magdala is alone, not with a group of women, and the audience is told “it was still dark.” For John, darkness is an indication of a lack: of faith, of knowledge, of the light, and that is exactly the case with Mary Magdalene. She will come into the light but has a journey to travel. She sees that the stone had been removed (v. 1), and she rushes to Simon Peter and the other disciple, whom Jesus loves, to report to them that the tomb has been emptied by someone, and they did not know where the executed Jesus has been placed. She associated the two disciples (“we do not know”) with her own absence of any Easter hope or faith. A dead body has been taken from the tomb (v. 2). The use of passive verbs (“the stone had been removed” and “where they have laid him”) indicates that someone else has entered the drama. The audience suspects that God may be the one involved, but Mary of Magdala is not there yet.

Mary Magdalene has run away from the tomb; Simon Peter and the other disciple reverse that flight. They run *to* the tomb (v. 3) and experience their own encounters with the empty tomb. They return home, and Mary of Magdala is again alone at the tomb, now weeping (v. 11). Her sorrow continues to show her lack of faith, and it takes spectacular encounters to bring her to recognize Jesus, and to profess her faith in him. In the first place, like the disciples, she bent over and looked into the tomb, but her experience is unique. She sees two angels, messengers of God, instead of the body of Jesus. The angels ask why she is weeping, but she can only repeat what she has said to the disciples in v. 2: someone has taken away the body of Jesus, and she does not

know where they have put it (v. 13). Turning, she finds that the risen Jesus is standing behind her, but again she does not believe. Thinking he is the gardener, she continues to insist that the body has been carried away and continues her search for a dead body. In a moment of intimacy, Jesus calls her by her Hebrew/Aramaic name: “Mariam.” She responds by using the Hebrew/Aramaic, “*Rabbouni*.” The evangelist translates that it means “teacher” (v. 16). In fact, it means “my teacher.” She seems to have embraced her former friend and teacher, and Jesus asks her not to cling to him. The days of human intimacy between Jesus and Mary are over. He must now continue to respond to God, and that means returning to his God and Father, because of the cross and resurrection now also the God and Father of his disciples, who are now called Jesus’ “brothers” (v. 17). Without a word, Mary Magdalene, who has taken so long to arrive at true faith, does as Jesus has instructed her: she goes to the disciples, describes what has happened to her: “I have seen the Lord.” (v. 18); thereby becoming the “apostle to the apostles.”

Conclusion: Women in the Gospel of John and the Good News

The portrayal of women in the Gospel of John begins in Judaism as related in John 2–4 with the inestimable role of the mother of Jesus and quickly expands into Samaria with the strength of the woman at the well. Through her acceptance of Jesus’ challenge, his mother becomes the paradigmatic disciple in the time before Jesus’ hour. By responding to Jesus as she does, she not only inaugurates Jesus’ public ministry, she also becomes the model for believing, particularly before “the hour” of Jesus. In the second half of Jesus’ journey from Cana to Cana, both the ethnicity and gender of the Samaritan Jesus again calls “Woman” (4:21), are reclaimed through her openness and new identity as a disciple of Jesus and an apostle to her community.

These early encounters between Jesus and women are followed in the narrative by two more in John 5–12, now in Judea. The encounter between Jesus, a woman caught in adultery, and

those who want to test Jesus to her harm is as popular today as it was in the earliest church. That said, a survey of the ancient manuscripts shows that this little vignette was not originally part of the Gospel of John, rather it found its place in John 7:53–8:11 at a much later date. Although not from the original hand of the evangelist, this profound vignette stood the test of time and found its way into the written tradition through the final form of John's Gospel. Standing now in the Tabernacles dialogues of John 7–8, it presents a powerful intrusion of open relationality through mercy and acceptance in the midst of opposition and closed-ness. As Jesus' public ministry reaches its peak, John 11 is widely identified as the raising of Lazarus, but when coupled with 12:1-8 the episode is framed by references to and the action of Mary, Lazarus's sister. Indeed, the majority of the dialogue is between Jesus and Mary and Martha, suggesting that although the raising of Lazarus is the climactic sign in this episode, the primary encounter and summons to new life in discipleship is between Jesus and the sisters. The scene culminates Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet and Jesus' affirmation of her action in preparation for his coming death.

As the Book of Glory moves inevitably toward its climax in the passion of Jesus, the gift of mother and son at the foot of the cross stands at the center of his crucifixion. Jesus' mother, the first to believe, and the beloved model disciple are given to each other by Jesus to establish a new community in faith and love. Thereafter, Mary of Magdala, who takes so long to arrive at true faith, goes as Jesus sends her becomes the "apostle to the apostles." These six women and their encounters with Jesus mark the progress of the Gospel's plot, anchoring Jesus' mission as Christ and Son of God while propelling it ever forward to its final glorification. The Evangelist puts forth a new community of empowered children of God (1:12; 11:52) who find their foundational models of faith, openness, discipleship, leadership, and apostolic integrity by proclaiming a counter-culture, upending societal dictates, and embracing its feminine side.