

“When Women Were Priests”

Rumyana Hristova, presentation at Life Together, May 12, 2019

The inferior status of women in Palestine during Jesus’ time:

“Praised be God that he has not created me a gentile; praised be God that he has not created me a woman; praised be God that he has not created me an ignorant man.”

Jewish men’s daily prayers (http://www.seniorreligion.com/new_page_478.htm)

Cultural bias that women were inferior to men both by nature and by law persisted over the centuries, largely based on the role of Eve in the Fall. Gender ideology in ancient Greece: *polis* (city), the male domain versus *oikos* (household), the female domain; cultural values of honor and shame, women’s sexuality.

“As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active power of the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of a woman comes from defect in the active power...”

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Q92, art. 1, Reply Obj. 1.
(http://www.seniorreligion.com/new_page_478.htm)

Women in the Jesus tradition

Jesus’ message and practice were radically egalitarian. Criteria for the followers of Jesus applied equally to both men and women:

- 1) personal decision, following the call to repentance;
- 2) conviction of the coming of the kingdom of God matched by an uncompromising praxis: no possessions; no firm place of residence; practice of celibacy; abandoning the usual social ties, primarily the family; commitment to the proclamation and realization of this conviction;
- 3) the individual, whether male or female, is judged only by their faith and good works;
- 4) tabu conceptions regarding the cultic ideal of purity (fertility, blood) are criticized and done away with; Jesus cares for the individual who suffers, whether man or woman;

5) all human beings are regarded as fallible and in need of redemption; no double morality; Jesus' compassion and concern for change relate to both sexes;

6) the virtue of courage – women are the first to receive the epiphany and the charge to proclaim the message of the risen Christ on account of their courage;

7) the renunciation of any form of the exercise of power; all are called to serve one another and live in a community of brothers and sisters; rank and status are transcended.

Heine, Susanne. *Women and Early Christianity: a Reappraisal*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, pp.79-81.

Women disciples. Main roles: witnesses (in the synoptic gospels and John); apostles (in John)

1) canonical gospels:

- auxiliary roles: women overhear Jesus' teaching while caring for the material needs of the group; they are cured from evil spirits and diseases; they are usually in the distance; they are not entrusted with a message - Luke (8:1-3; 10:38-42)
- women as recipients of teaching in their own right: an unnamed Samaritan woman (John 4:4-42), Mary sister of Martha (Luke 10:38-42), Martha sister of Mary and Lazarus (John 11:1-44), Mary Magdalene (Matt 28:9-10; John 20:11-18).

2) Gnostic texts - women as enlightened disciples; two widely debated issues are addressed: the validity of private teaching/visionary experience of the Savior; leadership and authority of women in *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Mary*, *Gospel of Philip*.

“...Therefore the women announced the good news to the apostles. ...That the women not appear liars but rather truth-bearers. ...Christ showed himself to the (male) apostles and said to them: ...It is I who appeared to these women and I who wanted to send them to you as apostles.”

Hyppolytus of Rome (quoted by Jansen, Katherine. “Maria Magdalena: *Apostolorum Apostola*” in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1998, p.58)

Religious activities and leadership provided by women in Jewish and Christian communities: “looking after the physical and material welfare of women, instructing catechumens, welcoming

strangers, placing orphaned children with foster parents, visiting the sick, mediating in quarrels, advising bishops and priests on the needs of their parishioners.”

Ample evidence exists for women’s roles as deacons, priests, presbyters, and even bishops in Christian churches (2st- c.14th century):

- Paul’s letters; Pliny’s report to the emperor, procurator of Asia Minor (AD 111); St. Clement of Alexandria (150-215); Origen (c.184-254); archaeology; lives of saints; pastoral handbooks and directives; Councils of Nicea (325), of Chalcedon (452), of Trullo (692) – ordination of women deacons was sanctioned for the universal Church; legislation under Emperor Justinian I of Constantinople (527-65) – equal position to men and women deacons; Byzantine liturgical books, and more.

Wijngaards, John. *Women Deacons in the Early Church*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2006, pp.11-18.

The Voice of the Good Women:

This holy baptism in the Holy Spirit, the Church of God has kept it from the apostles down to the present day, and it has been handed down this far from Good Man to Good Man, and [the Church of God] shall do so until the end of the world.

– Occitan Cathar Ritual of Lyons

“What we do know is that until the annexation of Languedoc by the French kings, these nuns [the Good Women] without enclosure lived in the heart of Occitan society. They set an apostolic example that was visible to all in the streets of the villages, and thereby implicitly helped to spread the message of a new spirituality, which made them precursors of the Mendicants orders’ practice of establishing convents in the towns.”

Brenon, Anne. “The Voice of the Good Women: an Essay on the Pastoral and Sacerdotal Role of Women in the Cathar Church” in *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity*. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1998, pp. 114-115.

ART representations:

Mary Magdalene as *apostolorum apostola* – ubiquitous image in the Middle Ages:

“Robert of Sorbon (d.1274) told his audience that the Magdalene was the *praedicatrix* (“a glorious preacher”) of the Lord’s Resurrection; therefore men should not disdain women’s words.”

Jansen, Katherine. "Maria Magdalena: *Apostolorum Apostola*" in *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity*. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1998, p.79.

'Mary Magdalene at the Sepulchre' – a water color drawing by William Blake, c.1805

(Source: <http://www.blakearchive.org/work/biblicalwc>)

"Jesus is the only God ... and so am I, and so are you." - William Blake quoted by Henry Crabb Robinson, "Meeting Blake for the First Time," (<https://thehumandivine.org/2016/11/13/meeting-blake-for-the-first-time-by-henry-crabb-robinson/>)

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