

Was Jesus a Feminist?

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THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION, "WAS JESUS A FEMINIST?" depends on how you define feminism. Just as we have come to realize that there was not just one monolithic "Judaism" in Jesus' time, but many "Judaisms," so there are many varieties of feminism today, and Latter-day Saints, even liberal Latter-day Saints, will be more comfortable with some of these than others. For instance, there is a kind of Gnostic feminism, in the sense of viewing male and female as absolute polarities—men are complete evil and women complete good. Obviously, Jesus was not that kind of feminist.

DEFINING FEMINISM

So defining feminism is a problem. Some women and men embrace the word, giving it their own definitional resonance, breadth, and limitations; others are uncomfortable with it because it has been associated with perceived extremists in the women's movement. But many of the women who dislike the label would be angry if they were treated as second-class citizens because of their gender. Rebecca West wrote: "I have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat. . . ."¹

Much has been written on definitions of feminism. But for the purposes of this short essay, I am thinking of a moderate definition of feminism—the idea that women share psychological and spiritual equality with men and should be treated equally, that our civilization and social structures have been almost unconsciously built on the foundation of viewing women as less than equal with men, and that this is harmful to both men and women.² On the other hand, in my view, women and men

1. "Mr. Chesterton in Hysterics," in *The Clarion* (14 November 1913), reprinted in Rebecca West, *The Young Rebecca*, ed. J. Marcus (London: Macmillan, 1982), 219.

2. Elouise Bell, "The Implications of Feminism for Brigham Young University," a BYU Forum Address, in *Brigham Young University Studies* 16 (Summer 1976): 527–39, 530, has a

have some psychological differences, and these differences can complement each other.³ Furthermore, some feminism devalues women in the home, which, I think, can be just as unhealthy as anti-feminism that demands that women stay only in the home.

THE PROBLEM OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

There are also preliminary issues relating to the study of the historical Jesus within the context of his culture and environment that should be at least touched on briefly. First, it would be a mistake to see Jesus as calling for overt, immediate revolution in the structure of his political culture. In many ways he was working within a very patriarchal social system. So he did not choose a woman as one of the original twelve disciples or as one of the seventies. In the same way, he did not call for the immediate overthrow of slavery, although slavery is without question antithetical to the gospel. Jesus' teachings, in which the full humanity of the oppressed and outcast was often emphasized, were implicitly anti-slavery. As people became fully converted to Jesus' teachings in the early centuries of our era, they would quietly give up their slaves. In the same

similar definition: "In my understanding a feminist is a person, whether man or woman, who believes that historically there have been inequities in the education and treatment of women in several or many spheres of society and who is interested in correcting those inequities as he or she sees them." For an introduction to the different "feminisms," one can consult general surveys such as Julie Mitchell and Ann Oakley, eds., *What Is Feminism?* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1988); Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds., *Feminisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For the historical background of the term, see Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach" in *Signs* 14 (Autumn 1988): 119–57. For a feminism of motherhood, see Offen, 122–125. Virginia Woolf tried to destroy the word "feminism" by "symbolically incinerating its written representation" (Offen, 120, citing Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London, Hogarth, 1938), 184–250).

3. I am aware how problematic this issue is within the different currents of feminism. The most influential book supporting this view is Carol Gilligan's controversial *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). Gilligan was named by *Ms.* magazine as woman of the year; see Lindsay Van Gelder, "Carol Gilligan: Leader for a Different Kind of Future," *Ms.* 12, No. 7 (Jan. 1984): 37–40, 101. "Post-Gilligan, it will be much harder for researchers to equate 'human' with male and to see female experience as simply an aberrant substratum" writes Van Gelder (38). However, some feminists regard Gilligan as simply anti-feminist, and Susan Faludi flatly cites her as an example of the "backlash" against the women's movement (*Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 327–32). One interesting exchange on Gilligan is in a roundtable on conflicts within feminism, in which feminist critic Marianne Hirsch stated that "the hysteria around her [Gilligan's] work has prevented many from grappling with the radical potential it has in spite of its problems" (Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, Nancy K. Miller, "Criticizing Feminist Criticism," in Hirsch and Keller, *Conflicts in Feminism*, 349–69).

way, I will argue here that Jesus' teachings were often implicitly feminist, and, therefore, as people became fully converted, they would quietly understand and live the implicit message and change their personal actions and their social structures accordingly.

Second, libraries have been written on Jesus' life, often from very different points of view. You need only read Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*⁴ to understand how scholars through the ages have read their own biases into the personality and teachings of Jesus—you have the Catholic Jesus, the Protestant Jesus, the rationalistic Jesus, the "liberal" Jesus, the "existential" Jesus, the "eschatological" Jesus. So one must always be careful to avoid reading one's biases into the record of the gospels. In the present case, one should be wary of making Jesus into an up-to-the-minute, *au courant* feminist—he was Jewish and lived in the first century of our era. Nevertheless, it is the argument of this essay that there is clear evidence in the gospels to show that Jesus went against the grain of his culture's pronounced patriarchalism in interesting, definable, and crucial ways. Again, this would be consistent with his constant, repeated concern for the full humanity of the oppressed and outcast.

Finally, in this short essay, I will necessarily pass over many problems of historicity and editorial construction in the gospels. The gospels, like all history, contain contradictions, editorial elaborations and accretions and biases, though the oral traditions of the historical Jesus lie behind them. I tend to have an "historicist" bias,⁵ but the story of the woman anointing Jesus (see below) shows how completely contradictory

4. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, 3rd ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1954, orig. 1906). This has been updated by Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus As a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); Charlotte Allen, *The Human Christ: The Search for the Historical Jesus* (New York: The Free Press, 1998); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Marcus Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1993). Recent influential books on the life of Jesus are John Dominic Cross, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991); a "radical" critic, and the more moderate John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1991–1994). See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); idem., *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Press, 1993); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); William E. Arnal and Michel Desjardins, eds., *Whose Historical Jesus?* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997); Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, eds., *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994); Harvey K. McArthur, ed., *In Search of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969).

5. In the controversy between those who accept the historicity of most events described in the New Testament and those who would interpret many of the actions and

some incidents in the synoptic gospels are. However, even when the gospels flatly contradict each other, and it is uncertain which is most closely historical regarding specific incidents and words, each gospel has individuality and validity as a record of specific oral traditions within early Christian communities.

JESUS AND FEMINISM

I became interested in the subject of Jesus and feminist issues years ago when I was sitting at the back of the Westwood chapel in Los Angeles just after another ward had departed, and I noticed a xeroxed article lying on one of the pews. I picked it up out of curiosity and found that it was titled, "Jesus Was a Feminist." I immediately read it, found it intriguing, but put it back down, and in just a few days I regretted that I hadn't written down where it appeared, because that brief reading had a deep impact on me.⁶

I have continued to think about that article and to ask whether Jesus was a feminist and, if so, what kind of feminist he was. This is a subject that is of overwhelming importance for us in the modern Mormon church. Our church has been standing at a crossroads and continues to stand at a crossroads—if feminism is part of the gospel, will we stand with neo-conservative or extremist conservative anti-feminist elements in America, or will we align ourselves with the kind of feminism that is just, compassionate, Christ-centered, and eternal?

Having asked that question, I now turn to the gospels for a brief overview of situations in which Jesus showed a high regard for the full personhood of women, rather than treating them as inferior or ignoring them. I believe that the gospels do portray Jesus as challenging his society's taboos in this respect. Central to Jesus' teaching and actions was his valorizing of "marginal" humans—non-Jews, Samaritans (who were viewed as Jews corrupted racially and religiously by Gentile influence), Jews who were viewed as Hellenizers (two of Jesus' twelve apostles had Greek names, which shows that these apostles' families had tendencies toward mixing culturally with Gentiles),⁷ sinners such as tax collectors and prostitutes, the disabled and sick, the poor, children, and women.

statements of Jesus in the gospels as non-historical, I lean toward the historicist camp. See preceding note—I would be more comfortable with Meier than with Cross, though Cross has much to offer.

6. I have subsequently identified that article tentatively as Leonard Swidler, "Jesus Was a Feminist," first published in *Catholic World* (Jan. 1971), 177–83; also in Kenneth Aman, ed., *Border Regions of Faith: An Anthology of Religion and Social Change* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 30–38.

7. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966, 1970), 1:82.

Time and time again his teachings and actions, as he treated all those people as fully human, fully loved by God, startled even his closest followers and angered his opponents in the extremist sects of the Jews. We should note in passing that many of these Pharisees and Sadducees were good people who were sincerely trying to follow a well-intentioned program of religious renewal. Today, the parable of the good Samaritan seems a commonplace to us, but it is difficult to comprehend how revolutionary it was in its time for Jesus to describe how a half-breed, heretic Samaritan (from a group that was hated and loathed with both a ritual and a racial contempt by typical orthodox Jews) was more truly a follower of God through his humane compassion than were temple-attending priests. It is still revolutionary today when we understand it fully. It is a moving story of compassion, but it is also a frightening analysis of apathy, spiritual coolness, and loss of true, divine, and humane feeling, of how people can use a religious life to cloak a lack of a true religious center.

I believe Jesus' teachings and actions with relation to women were just as revolutionary. As Jesus' concern for marginalized humans was central to his teaching, it makes sense that he would give women higher value than his surrounding culture would.

WOMEN IN JESUS' CULTURE

It is important to understand that there were some pronounced anti-feminist currents in the Judaism of Jesus' time. The prayer of the grateful rabbi is often quoted in this regard: "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."⁸ Rabbi Eliezer taught, "Let the books of Torah be burnt rather than be given to a woman."⁹ He also said, "If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery."¹⁰ Rabbis did not have women pupils, did not teach them. The ritual impurities such as menstruation and childbirth that kept women from becoming priests also

8. Quoted in Swidler, "Jesus Was a Feminist," 31.

9. Y. Sota 3:4, 19a, as cited in Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 5.

10. Sotah 3:4, in Herbert Danby, tr., *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 296; cf. Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 6, 134n. The extent to which women were not supposed to formally study the Law is debated, but it is certain that they were not given formal or rabbinic teaching (Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 161–62). Though women were not explicitly denied synagogue attendance and observance, they were often not allowed to participate or were discouraged, "excused" from participation (see Wegner, 150–56).

kept them at a lower level of holiness by the standards of the era.¹¹ However, we should not think of the Judaism of that day as grossly misogynist. Rabbi Joseph said, "One who has no wife remains without good, and without a helper, and without joy, and without blessing, and without atonement."¹² However, while Joseph praises the woman as wife and housekeeper, he might agree that she should not learn Torah in a systematic way like men. One rabbi made this explicit: Rabbi Phineas ben Han-nah said that a woman atones for her house just as does the altar if she "keeps chastely within the house."¹³ There were rare occasions when women, through the force of their will, learned the oral and written law. In fact, "Rabbi Nahman's wife was said to vex him continually because of her expertise in Jewish matters."¹⁴ However, Witherington, author of an important book on Jesus and women, after his chapter survey on the subject of women in Jesus' culture, writes, "It is fair to say that a low view of women was common, perhaps even predominant before, during and after Jesus' era. . . . G. F. Moore's evaluation that women's legal status in Judaism compares favorably with other contemporary civilizations is also questionable . . . there was no monolithic entity, rabbinic Judaism in Tannaitic times and . . . various opinions were held about women and their roles, though it appears that by the first century of the Christian era a negative assessment was predominant among the rabbis."¹⁵

11. See Wegner, 162–65.

12. The Midrash, Rabbi Jacobs, commenting on Gen. 2.18, as cited in George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 2:119; cf. Ben Witherington *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 6, 7.

13. Mishnah Tanhuma Wayyishlah sec. 36, as cited in Claude Goldsmid Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 509, num. 1434; cf. Witherington, *Women and the Genesis*, 6.

14. Quoted in Witherington, *Women and the Genesis*, 7.

15. Witherington, *Women in the Ministry*, 10. Though not strictly applicable to the specific incidents I focus on in this paper, there were inequities in Jewish marriage law, in which men could obtain divorce easily while women could not. In addition, a daughter usually had little choice when her father espoused her. See Wegner 45–50. Witherington also cites polygamy as an institution that lessened a woman's rights and basic legal security (*Women and the Genesis*, 4; *Women in the Ministry*, 3–4). Though polygamy was not widespread in Jesus' culture, it was not unknown (S. Lowy, "The Extent of Jewish Polygamy in Talmudic Times," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 9 (1958): 115–38, 129–30). Jesus's injunction against divorce (Mark 10:9; Matt. 5:31–32; 19:3), though it seems impractical today, protected women from casual divorce. See Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 85: ". . . it seems probable that, in deploring divorce, he was defending the feminist interest." See also Witherington, *Women in the Ministry*, 28.

JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

First we will look at Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in John 4.¹⁶ Samaritans, of course, were the descendants of Jews who had intermarried with Gentiles, whom the king of Assyria had brought into Palestine. "Orthodox" Jews believed that Samaritans practiced a religion that syncretized Judaism and paganism—in other words, the Samaritans were racially mongrelized and religiously corrupt for the Jews. Samaritans, in return, tended to feel understandable hostility for Jews. So in his dealings with a Samaritan woman, Jesus broke taboos that were racial and religious in addition to taboos relating to her gender.

Jesus often traveled from northern Palestine, Galilee, to Jerusalem and back, and as Samaria was located in between, he had to travel through it. So one day early in his ministry his disciples left him at a well in Samaria while they went to find food. A Samaritan woman approached to draw water, and Jesus simply asked her for a drink, which surprised the woman. She answered, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"¹⁷ John adds a parenthetical explanation here: "(Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)" A Jew typically would have avoided eating or drinking with Samaritans. Now, as John relates, Jesus took this literal situation as an occasion for teaching spiritual symbolism. "Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'" The woman, like many characters in John, misunderstood Jesus's spiritual teaching in favor of a literal interpretation (his twelve disciples often did the same thing), but this should not cause us to forget that he is teaching a woman now, which was a very unorthodox thing to do. Jesus then testified that his water "will become in them [his followers] a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." She continued to see only the literal sense.

Then the conversation jumped to her marital history. After she told Jesus that she had no husband, he responded, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband;' for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband." Thus, this woman would have been seen as immoral—Jesus in talking to this "fallen" woman was breaking one more taboo. However, the woman answered, "Sir, I see that you are a

16. For the question of the historicity of the gospel of John, see John A. T. Robinson's challenging *The Priority of John* (London: SCM Press, 1985); C. H. [Charles Harold] Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963); and Raymond Brown's *The Gospel According to John*.

17. For quotations in this paper, I use the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible; see *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

prophet." Despite her literalism, this was an insightful statement. Jesus then continued to teach her concerning spiritual realities. When the woman said that she looked forward to the coming of a messiah, Jesus straightforwardly told her, "I am he."¹⁸

At this point, "his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman. . . ." This important statement shows that when Jesus viewed the woman as a possible disciple, as an intelligent, valued person, it took the twelve by surprise. In fact, the Greek word for astonished, "*thaumázō*," is very strong. The twelve were stunned that he would take the trouble to talk seriously with a woman—let alone a Samaritan woman of bad repute. Raymond Brown, in his commentary on John, translates *ethaúmazon* as "were shocked." Imperfect tense, he writes, shows more than a momentary shock; it continued for awhile. "Sir ix 1–9 describes the care to be taken lest one be ensnared by a woman; and rabbinic documents (*Pirqe Aboth* i 5; TalBab 'Erubin 53b) warn against speaking to women in public."¹⁹ Haenchen cites Rabbi Nathan as saying, "One does not speak with a woman on the street, not even his own wife, and certainly not with another woman, on account of gossip."²⁰

The woman, meanwhile, went to her village and testified that Jesus had prophetic insight and might be the Messiah. "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word." So the woman served as Jesus' messenger and helped to convert a number of Samaritans.

MARY AND MARTHA

A second tableau is the well known story of Mary and Martha from Luke (10:38–42).²¹ "Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.

18. Some scholars doubt that Jesus would openly identify himself in this way. However, Brown suggests that he might have identified himself to a Samaritan more readily than to a Jew because the Samaritan Messiah was less of a political figure (Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 1:173). The phrase, with its suggestion of the name of God ("I am"), is found in the synoptic gospels, which makes it less likely that it is a Johannine invention (*ibid.*, 538).

19. *The Gospel According to John*, 1:173.

20. Aboth Rabbi Nathan 2 (1d), in Ernst Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 1–6* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 224. Cf. Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, 6, who writes that the concept of modesty (Ps. 45:13 is often cited) led to women being sequestered in the home, having their movements and conversation limited. One thinks of the veil in Arabic countries today.

21. For a special study, see Barbara Reid, *Choosing the Better Part?: Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996), whose close reading of this

She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying." I interpret here from the context of the story that Jesus was not making small talk—he was teaching on religious matters. Note the phrase, "sat at the Lord's feet," which is typical of a teacher/student relationship.²² So here we have Mary breaking a taboo, acting as the disciple of a rabbi. Jesus is also allowing the taboo to be broken, as he often did. So there is room for a conservative challenge here. It comes, interestingly, from another woman: "But Martha was distracted by her many tasks. . . ." One imagines her preparing food in the kitchen, arranging the logistics of feeding Jesus and his twelve disciples.²³ She looks around for her sister, and she is in the front room with the men! She is angered by Mary's presumption and irresponsibility. Her next move shows that Martha was a force to be reckoned with—she goes into the main room and confronts not Mary, but Jesus himself: ". . . she came to him and asked, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work [*diakoneîn*] by myself?" She then gives Jesus orders as to what he should say and do. "Tell her then to help me." Martha did have some persuasive arguments on her side. The food did need to be prepared, possibly for fifteen to twenty people, and it may have been a daunting task.

But Jesus, of course, defended Mary. One imagines him smiling: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things [*merimnâis kai thorbázēi perì pollà*]; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." [*Mariâm gâr tē'n agathē'n merída exeléxato hē'tis ouk aphairethē'setai.*] Beyond Jesus' upholding the value of the "impractical" part of life, we should not lose sight of the fact that he was encouraging a woman to break out of a culturally defined gender role. Though service in the kitchen is not bad per se, a woman could also be a disciple and sit at the feet of a rabbi, a teacher. In fact, there is an imperative for a woman to do this. For a woman as well as for a man, becoming a disciple was overwhelmingly important.

passage is useful, but whose "pro-Martha" reading of this text I find unconvincing. Schüssler-Fiorenze also has a "pro-Martha" reading, in which Martha represents "active" women who were leaders in egalitarian early Christian congregations (*But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 51–78). However, I agree with Green that the contrast in this story is "not between 'service' (namely, women's active leadership in the community) and 'listening' (namely, the passive role of women in the community), but between 'hearing the word' (namely, discipleship) and 'anxious' behavior (namely, the antithesis of discipleship)" (Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 436n). See also Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke and Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

22. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2 vols. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1981), 1:739, on Luke 8:35.

23. The context suggests that this was the kind of work Luke had in mind.

In this drama, a conflict between a woman in a traditional household role vs. a woman taking part in a rabbi/disciple relationship, Jesus upholds Mary as the better model. Though this incident should not be interpreted as demeaning traditional household roles and service, Jesus is emphatic that these roles should not deny women their opportunity to be students and disciples.

In this connection, the women traveling with Jesus, Luke 8:1–3, come to mind: “Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out; and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them [variant reading, “him”] out of their resources.” For Luke, it was important that his readers know that Jesus traveled with women who, like the twelve, were disciples. Scholars have suggested that this raised eyebrows in Jesus’s environment. Witherington writes, “There is little reason to question the authenticity of the information that women traveled with and served Jesus and the disciples since this conduct was unheard of and considered scandalous in Jewish circles.”²⁴ Fitzmyer writes that this episode is “a recollection about Jesus which differed radically from the usual understanding of women’s role in contemporary Judaism. His cure of women, his association with them, his tolerating them among his followers (as here) clearly dissociates him from such ideas as that reflected in John 4:27 or early rabbinical writings. . . .”²⁵

Here we are introduced to Mary Magdalene (as usual, listed first; she was a charismatic follower and witness of Jesus), who becomes so important in the resurrection accounts. Scholars have debated about what the service was these women provided Jesus and the apostles. Some believe that these were wealthy women who gave financial support. But they probably also served in traditional roles for Jewish women, such as preparing and cooking food.²⁶ Some suppose that these women were generally single or widowed, but Joanna, the wife of Chuza, is an example of a married disciple.

Jesus did not include a woman as a member of the twelve apostles. Yet, as Paul shows, not all apostles (the word simply means “messenger,” “one sent”) were members of the twelve. We will see that Mary, as resurrection witness, certainly had apostolic functions. As Acts 1 shows, having known Jesus, as all these women did, was an important qualification for apostolic witnessing and missionary work.

24. Witherington, *Women and the Genesis*, 110.

25. *The Gospel According to Luke*, 1:696.

26. Witherington, *Women in the Ministry*, 118.

THE ANOINTING OF THE MESSIAH

The next tableau is the striking scene of Jesus being anointed (Mark 14:3–9; Matt. 26:6–13; John 12:1–8; Luke 7:36–50). The word “Christ,” *Khristós*, simply means, “the anointed [one],” or “he who has been anointed” (as does the Hebrew word “Messiah”). Anointing, of course, was a ritual that had many meanings, but it is essentially a symbol of transformation, changing from the dust of the road to the comfort of a home, from a lower sacrality to a higher sacrality—it was used to consecrate kings, but also to consecrate prophets and priests. For Jesus, of course, his role as political king was much less important than his role as priest, prophet, and revelation of God the Father.²⁷

Therefore, it is probably significant that this is the only record of Jesus actually being anointed, and the anointer is a woman. In Old Testament history, the anointer is invariably a priest or prophet. This is a point of contact with the women in early Mormonism, who were often washing, anointing, and blessing each other, and, on occasion, doing the same for men. It was for them an important part of their spiritual power, an integral component in some of the great charismatic experiences in Mormon history.²⁸

This story is told in Mark, Matthew, and John, and a similar anointing story in Luke is viewed by some Biblical scholars as a separate incident and by others as another version of the Mark/Matthew/John story. So we must consider variations in the retelling, which cannot be sorted out in detail here.²⁹ John locates the story in the house of Martha, who serves the dinner, a point of continuity with our last story. (In Matthew and Mark, it takes place in the house of “Simon the leper,” otherwise unknown. In Luke, the host is a Pharisee named Simon. All except Luke place the incident in Bethany, as Jesus’ death was approaching.) In John,

27. For Jesus as revelation of the Father, see Matt. 11:27; John 5:19; 15:9–11.

28. See Linda King Newell, “Gifts of the Spirit: Women’s Share,” in Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds., *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 111–50; Claudia Lauper Bushman, “Mystics and Healers,” in Claudia L. Bushman, *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997), 1–24. For the influence of this passage on Mormon ritual, see Heber C. Kimball journal, April 1, 1844, as cited in Gregory Prince, *Power from on High* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1995), 177.

29. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 128, correctly states that the traditional history of this story “is far from being adequately resolved.” Ernst Haenchen, *John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 7–21* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 88, speaks of two stories “interpenetrating” each other at numerous points. Other scholars see one original story. See Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke 2:684–92*, in whose view Luke is not reworking Marcan material, but is reporting one of three strands of oral tradition (Mark/Matthew, Luke, and John). Fitzmyer regards the anointing of the feet as the most primitive version of the story, arguing from its oddity, but other scholars accept the more natural anointing of the head as the more primitive element.

Mary then anoints his feet. (In Mark and Matthew, a nameless woman anoints Jesus's head.) In John, Judas objects to the costly perfume being expended; in the other accounts all of the disciples "scold" her. But Jesus defends her as anointing him for his approaching death. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus gives her one of the most positive tributes he ever awarded to a man or a woman in his earthly ministry: "Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

For our purposes, in Matthew and Mark, we have the theme of the woman (possibly Mary, as in John) criticized by the twelve disciples, but Jesus upholding her spiritual insight. Not only that, he clearly sees her anointing of him as an event of extraordinary significance. Wherever the gospel is preached, her anointing will be recounted, and she will be remembered. Massey writes that if Matthew and Mark correctly record that [Mary] anointed Jesus on the head, "Christ may have regarded the incident as a symbolic anointing to the spiritual offices of prophet, priest, and king. If such was the case, Mary's humble and obscure ministry to Christ must be regarded as highly significant, for she officiated in a great ceremony of initiation."³⁰

In the Lucan anointing tradition, Jesus had been invited into the home of a Pharisee, Simon, to eat—a situation charged with possible drama. As they recline at the meal, a woman "in the city, who was a sinner" gains entrance somehow and anoints Jesus's feet with ointment, then with her tears. The Pharisee thinks to himself that if Jesus had really been a prophet, he would have known that the woman was a sinner. (This shows the cultural assumption that Jesus would never have anything to do with a sinner, would never allow himself to be defiled by one who was impure.) Jesus, as he often did, then tells a pointed parable in which a debtor who is forgiven of a large debt is more thankful than the debtor forgiven of a smaller sum. Then he turns to the Pharisee: "You did not anoint my head with oil [which is a typical courtesy of hospitality], but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little." Jesus tells the woman her sins are forgiven, and "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

"[A] woman in the city, who was a sinner." It is possible that this woman was a prostitute,³¹ and it is certain that reformed prostitutes

30. Lesly Massey, *Women and the New Testament* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., Inc., 1989), 21. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 3:445 also regard anointing on the head as a royal motif.

31. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 267; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 207.

were numbered among Jesus' converts (see Matt. 21:31). However, there are other possibilities. A sinner could have also been a person who had a job in which he or she dealt with Gentiles.³² But you can make a good case that she was a prostitute. Simon's instant recognition of her might argue for that.³³ In any case, Simon regarded her as unclean and expected Jesus to shun her. But Jesus accepted her touch, her anointing, and forgave her sins. Then he frankly contrasted her humility with the Pharisee's pride and lack of contrition, as well as with his simple lack of hospitality.

This story brings to mind the story of the woman taken in adultery, John 8:1–11, probably an authentic tradition of Jesus that was not written by John, but was later inserted into his gospel.³⁴ An extremist faction of Pharisees wanted to use her to set a trap for Jesus, so dragged her before him to have him pronounce the death sentence. The man who must have also been taken in adultery (who is also condemned to death, Lev. 20:10) is not mentioned. Jesus' response is well known. When her accusers disappeared, he asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again."

In these two cases of women who have sinned, we are, of course, dealing with the issue of Jesus and sinners, and the gender of the sinner might be seen as a side issue. However, society often treats the female sinner with special harshness and injustice, as the story of the woman taken in adultery shows, so we should not forget gender dimensions of these incidents.

JESUS AND WOMEN VIEWED AS RITUALLY IMPURE

As we have seen, Jesus often ignored cultural barriers that prevented orthodox Jews from associating with women. In Judaism, these barriers were often based on women's being seen as ritually impure because of menstruation and childbirth (e.g., Lev. 15:19–32).³⁵ However, Jesus systematically reinterpreted the purity codes of contemporary Judaism, even to the extent of rejecting them (Matt. 15; Mark 7:1–23; Luke 11:38–41). Often, these codes were "the traditions of the elders,"

32. For sinners in the gospels, see Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 127–28; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 264–68; literature cited in my "Heaven and Hell: The Parable of the Loving Father and the Judgmental Son," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 29, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 31–46, 32.

33. See Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke*, 2:689.

34. See Massey, *Women and the New Testament*, 16; Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2:333; Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 96.

35. See Wegner, *Chattel or Person*, 162–65.

elaborate oral laws that had been added to Biblical practices.³⁶ Jesus' rejection of these codes would logically allow him to have more frequent association with women. So some scholars, reasonably enough, suggest that Jesus' rejection of the strict purity code was the basis for his openly traveling with women, teaching them, and healing them, treating them as fully human.³⁷

Witherington notes that Jewish women were excluded from most synagogue worship and from many religious feasts, probably because of purity issues.³⁸ We remember that in the hierarchy of sacred space in the temple, we have 1) Holy of Holies (open to [male] high priests alone); 2) inside the temple (for [male] priests); 3) court of the (male) priests; 4) court of Israelite men. Only then do we have, 5) court of Israelite women. Only 6) Court of Gentiles is lower in sacrality.

Funk writes, "Among the more obvious things that defiled were the touch of an unclean person, such as a 'leper,' or a woman suffering from vaginal bleeding, or a corpse. . . . There were also restrictions on the ingestion of foods deemed unsuitable for consumption, either because they were inherently unclean or because they had not been properly prepared. By extension, observant Judeans refused to share a common table with those who did not follow purity regulations, for fear of contamination. . . . [Jesus] ignored, or transgressed, or violated purity regulations and taboos."³⁹

Clearly, if you were not supposed to touch the diseased or women who might be menstruating, this would have prevented healings Jesus performed in which he often used touch. The miracle story of the woman with "chronic uterine hemorrhage"⁴⁰ (Mark 5:24–34; Matt. 9:20–22; Luke 8:42–48) is often discussed in this connection. Because she suffered from this condition, she was always ritually impure and had been for some

36. See Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees*, 3 vol. (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 3:288; John Bowker, *Jesus and the Pharisees* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 98; Marcel Simon, *Jewish Sects at the Time of Jesus*, tr. James H. Farley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 36.

37. For Jesus' reinterpretation or rejection of purity codes, see Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), 73–144, 96–99; John P. Meier, "Reflections on Jesus-of-History Research Today," in *Jesus' Jewishness: Exploring the Place of Jesus in Early Judaism* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996), 84–107: "This practice of sharing meals (for Orientals, a most serious and intimate form of social intercourse) with the religiously 'lost' put Jesus in a continual state of ritual impurity, as far as the stringently law-observant were concerned." James H. Charlesworth points out how offensive it would have been for orthodox Jews when Jesus stayed at the home of a leper before entering Jerusalem (Mark 14:3), (*Jesus and the Jews: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 73).

38. *Women in the Ministry*, 78.

39. Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 204.

40. See Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:709.

twelve years, so some scholars suggest that she might have been shunned by her community. Therefore, she did not dare to ask for a healing, but felt that if she touched Jesus' clothing, she would be healed. As part of a crowd, she touched Jesus' robe and was healed, but Jesus immediately recognized what she had done. When he asked who touched him, she confessed, and instead of rebuking her for breaking the taboo and making him impure, he commended her for her faith, singling her out for public approbation.⁴¹

The story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31; Matt. 8:14–17; Luke 4:38–41) presents a case where Jesus intentionally broke ritual codes for the greater good of helping the sick. When Peter's mother-in-law suffered from a fever, Jesus, after preaching on a Sabbath, healed her immediately, without waiting for sundown (thus, breaking a Sabbath taboo); he also touched a person who was ill and healed a woman by touching ("He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up"), thus, breaking a taboo against touching women.⁴² When the woman then began to serve Jesus ("she began to serve them"), this possibly again broke a taboo against working on the Sabbath.

MARY AND OTHER WOMEN AS RESURRECTION WITNESSES

The resurrection narratives are enormously complex, full of contradictions and difficulties (including two endings for Mark, the earliest gospel). Nevertheless, they are of transcendent beauty and their contradictions somehow contribute to their enigmatic power. Their variations in emphasis and detail show different theological currents in the early Christian communities, some of which are clearly more "feminist" and less "authority-oriented" than others.

For our purposes, we can only note briefly that Mary Magdalene and the other women occupy center stage as the original prophetesses and messengers of the resurrection. In all four gospels, women receive the first revelations that Jesus has been resurrected. By the account in John, Jesus appeared to Mary first, before any of the twelve, a very non-hierarchical, non male-centered action. This appearance certainly was built on a close relationship Jesus had with Mary when she was his disciple before his death.⁴³ Luke even goes to the lengths of portraying the disciples as disbelieving these prophetic women, for their words "seemed to them

41. See Swidler, "Jesus Was a Feminist," 35; Witherington, *Women in the Ministry*, 72–73.

42. For taboos against touching women, see Witherington, *Women in the Ministry*, 67.

43. See Gerald O'Collins and Daniel Kendall, "Mary Magdalene as Major Witness to Jesus' Resurrection," *Theological Studies* 48 (1987): 631–646. Also, Reid, *Choosing*, 203; Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993); Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 139. There is an intriguing gnostic tradition that Jesus

[the twelve] an idle tale." The Marcan appendix also portrays the apostles as disbelieving the women's good news (Mark 16:11), for which lack of faith in the women and their general faithlessness Jesus later up-braided them (Mark 16:14).

From the viewpoint of hierarchy and male-centered organization, the resurrection is as paradoxical as many of Jesus' parables and teachings. The first come last, and the last come first. The women come before the men, and the men after the women. Jesus obviously did not reject the apostles; he energized them, and they became powerful missionaries and leaders. He appeared to them a number of times. But we should also not forget or underrate the importance of women as first revelators in this transcendent event.

CONCLUSION

For these and many other reasons, I accept Jesus as what we would call feminist (by my tentative definition of feminism), accepting women as whole human beings in social situations when they were not typically noticed or valued or in which they were even despised and avoided as unclean. Jesus' actions in this regard continually challenged, surprised, and even shocked his followers—he even defended one woman as having the right to be a disciple in a rabbi/disciple relationship when another woman wanted to pull her back into a traditional gender role of kitchen work.

As further support for the thesis of this paper, I quote from two writers who are not in the mainstream of Biblical criticism—first, Michael Grant, who reviewed the gospels from the standpoint of a Roman historian. He wrote,

As every Gospel agrees, Jesus' female followers remained conspicuously faithful to him right up to and after his death, exceeding in loyalty and understanding not only the single apostle Judas who betrayed him but all the other apostles as well, including Peter who was declared to have denied him three times. Since this superiority of the women's behavior was so embarrassing to the Church that its writers would have omitted it had it not been irremovable, there is every reason to regard it as authentic, setting the seal on the exceptionally close relations they had enjoyed with Jesus throughout his ministry, which has been reflected in the leading part women have always played in Christian worship. "In Jesus' attitude towards women," C. G. Montefiore rightly remarked, "we have a highly original and significant feature of his life and teaching."⁴⁴

married Mary Magdalene, but the gospels are silent on such a marriage, and there is no solid Biblical evidence for it.

44. *Jesus: An Historian's Review*, 85.

Second, the distinguished Canadian novelist, Robertson Davies, who when asked if he believed that religion had fostered discrimination against women, replied, "The Jewish and Christian religions have been hard on women. When you read how Orthodox Judaism looked at women you realize what a gigantic revolution was ushered in by Jesus."⁴⁵

Jesus' teachings and actions give clear support for action. For instance, one tenet of contemporary anti-feminism is that married women should stay in the home only, instead of having the choice to work. In recent years, there have been moments when neo-conservative currents in Mormonism have caused women to drop out of school and plan only for life in the home. However, the Martha and Mary incident shows that Jesus would not confine women to domestic roles. Judging from this encounter between Jesus and the sisters, one would expect that he would encourage women to be fully educated in order to serve fully. One remembers nineteenth century Mormon women gaining doctor's degrees in the east, then serving as doctors in Utah.⁴⁶

The traditions in the gospels also give us the basis for believing that women should be disciples and serve as significant disciples, fully as much as men. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that women would have equal organizational status, a situation that is far from realized in the LDS church. The argument that the church does not need women's formal insights and talents organizationally clearly has no merit; and the argument that is sometimes used to justify this—women do not have the priesthood because they are more righteous than men and, thus, do not need priesthood—is also sorely lacking. (By this argument, the best people are excluded from influence.)

If Jesus were living and teaching among us today, his feminism would probably surprise and even shock us just as much as it shocked his disciples during his earthly ministry. Jesus' radical inclusiveness, his viewing all humans as equally valid, including sinners, the disabled, children, the poor, and women, remains a challenge for us today. Whether we follow Jesus' quiet, yet profound feminism or fall back on a neo-conservative anti-feminism is one of the most important choices our church will make in the new millennium.

45. J. Madison Davis, ed., *Conversations with Robertson Davies* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 138. Davies went on to remark that contemporary Christianity was in need of a further revolution: "I think that the bringing of the feminine principle, feminine values and insights into greater prominence in Christianity will be the greatest revolution in the faith in the last 1,000 years."

46. See Chris Rigby Arrington, "Pioneer Midwives," in Bushman, *Mormon Sisters*, 43–66, 58–61.