



Tradition Makers/Tradition Shapers: Women of the Matthean Tradition

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IN RECENT YEARS, WE HAVE COME TO RECOGNIZE THE SIGNIFICANT ROLE OF THE creative imagination in the development of theological tradition. Indeed, Sandra Schneiders speaks of the necessity of a "paschal imagination"¹ for all Christians as they undertake the task of the ongoing telling and re-telling of their ancient story. That imagination is, however, profoundly shaped by the culture and the era in which a person lives.

One cultural characteristic is the construction of gender, and although there have been significant advances in contemporary societies toward the redressing of gender discriminations, this movement has only just begun. The dominant per-

¹Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Paschal Imagination: Objectivity and Subjectivity in New Testament Interpretation," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982) 52-68.

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Women played a much more active role in first-century Mediterranean culture than has previously been imagined. We can hear the voices of women among those who made and shaped the Matthean tradition.

spective across today's world is still male-centered. The way, therefore, in which contemporary Christians read their sacred story, construct its story world, and reconstruct its first-century context will be influenced by this androcentric perspective, unless they are conscious of possible gender biases.

This, however, is not the only consideration. Over the last twenty years other significant developments in Christian theologizing have taken account of its gender biases. In biblical and related literary, historical, and archaeological studies, in particular, these developments have been quite extensive. Just one result of these studies has been the realization that no biblical era or text can be understood to be monolithically patriarchal or kyriarchal. Women were often resistant to, not only compliant with, patriarchal/kyriarchal structures, just as they are today, and their texts carry traces of such resistance and compliance. It is important, therefore, to determine the ways in which the theological imagination can take account of both of these realities.

In this paper, I will give attention to gender differences between women and men and among women themselves and the ways these differences affect the reading of the gospel story, the construction of its story world, and the reconstruction of its first-century context. I include the latter because of the significant way in which the paschal imagination of Christians has been shaped by a belief that discipleship and leadership in both the gospel stories and the actual world of early Christianity were male only. Such a belief has shaped and continues to shape contemporary Christianity despite the fact that many churches now ordain women. A shift in imagination in relation to the context may enable the story to be re-read and re-told differently and so shape a new and more inclusive praxis across the churches.

I. TRADITION MAKERS AND TRADITION SHAPERS

Before turning to women *in* the Matthean tradition, it will serve the construction of a different imagination to consider women's possible roles in the production of the gospel, both as makers of the tradition as well as shapers of it in its ongoing retelling. The gospel named "According to Matthew" was produced over the decades following the death of Jesus, reaching a somewhat final form toward the end of the first century of the common era. This was a time in which there were significant advances in the status of women. They could own and control property, at times even without a guardian. They were able, therefore, to dispose of such property in ways which could bring them much more into the public arena of city and religious affairs, even their governance. Both cultic and leadership roles in the several religious traditions of the first-century world were also open to them.² In the light of these developments, it is not difficult to imagine women's participa-

²For a more extensive treatment of women's status at this time, see Ross Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University, 1992) and Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation*, 2d ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992), as well as Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996).

tion in the *making* or development of early Christian tradition, especially the incorporation of women into that tradition.³ Women had many contexts for storytelling—in their homes, around wells and communal ovens, selling their wares in the street if they were poor, and in domestic courtyards, to name but a few. They were also members as well as possible leaders of the communities receiving the traditions that were being molded into a gospel story. Given the oral/aural context of the first century, in which at least ninety-five per cent of the population could not read, one can also imagine women’s participation in the *shaping* of the tradition in response to its being read and heard. A significant example is the story of Justa, the Canaanite woman.⁴

II. TRADITIONS OF BIRTH AND GENEALOGY

The opening chapters of the Matthean Gospel are concerned with birth and genealogy, aspects of first-century Jewish life in which women were significant participants. The world constructed in these two chapters, however, is overwhelmingly androcentric. Thirty-nine times the phrase “[male] was the father of [male]” is repeated in the genealogy; Joseph is the dominant character in the story of Jesus’ conception, the escape to Egypt and return; and a struggle between the wise men, Herod, and the new-born male infant characterizes the second chapter. This is certainly the dominant narrative and story world; it would have shaped the religious and emerging Christian imagination of both women and men in the Matthean communities of reception—God at work in Israel’s ongoing story ordered patriarchally.

Attention to aspects of the narrative that are less visible or that form that we might call the underside of the narrative sets up fissures, however slight, in the androcentric world created by the text. The naming of five women (Tamar, v. 3; Rahab, v. 5; Ruth, v. 5; “the wife of Uriah” [Bathsheba], v. 6; and Mary, v. 16) in the opening genealogy may have alerted some listeners, especially those women and some men who belonged to more egalitarian households, to the absence of women throughout the genealogy. It also breaks the dominant narrative pattern and hence calls for further attention. These women are not the traditional matriarchs of Israel, mothers of the famous sons; they are women who are anomalous or dangerous in relation to the traditional patriarchal family model where women are simply the vehicles for the bearing of significant sons and thus rendered invisible historically and narratively. Perhaps women were the makers as well as shapers of

³For a very good example of a reconstruction of the development of the story of the woman who anoints Jesus, see Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 149-181. See also my own reconstruction of such participation as a result of an extensive study of the female characters of Matthew’s Gospel: Elaine Mary Wainwright, *Toward a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew*, BZNTW 60 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991) 339-352. I want to make clear that I do not think that women were involved only in the shaping of traditions about women; but in this short paper I have chosen to place the focus on those traditions.

⁴The woman called Canaanite in Matt 15:21-28 is named “Justa” in the Jewish-Christian *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*. For a fuller explanation of the development or shaping of this tradition within the context of the communities of reception, see Wainwright, *Toward a Feminist Critical Reading*, 217-247.

this alternative tradition, constructing a female genealogy for Mary in whom Israel's God was doing a new thing that could not be contained within the traditional cultural constructs. For at least some of those hearing the genealogy these fissures could characterize Jesus, the anointed one (1:1, 16) as son of Mary, of Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba, as well as of David and Abraham (1:1), child of discontinuity as well as continuity.

III. TRADITIONS OF HEALING

Three unnamed women are among those healed in Matthew 8-9, a collection of healings and mighty deeds of Jesus which complement the collection of sayings of Jesus in Matthew 5-7. This entire section is framed by references to Jesus' teaching, preaching, and healing diseases and infirmities among the people (4:23; 9:35). The very brief account of what is commonly called the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-15) is an extraordinary story in that it combines two story-types—healing and vocation or call. The careful listener would be alerted to this in that Jesus takes the initiative on seeing the woman just as he does on seeing Matthew seated at the tax office (9:9). The woman healed rises up and undertakes *diakonia* or ministry directed toward Jesus, the one whose own ministry is so characterized (20:28). The tax collector rises up and follows after Jesus. Both are characterized by key aspects of discipleship—following and *diakonia*. The contemporary reader cannot help but speculate whether women both constructed and preserved the vocation aspect of this story, re-membering women's discipleship of Jesus.⁵ Later in this collection, two female healings are intercalated—the healing of a woman with a hemorrhage within the story of the healing of a ruler's daughter (9:18-26). One of the significant aspects of the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage is that it is the woman herself who takes the initiative. She reaches out and touches Jesus' garment, believing in herself that she will be made well (9:21). She also crosses the clean/unclean boundaries that her culture has constructed. Jesus merely affirms the power of her faith that has indeed made her well (9:22). Her action provides a pattern for Jesus' own action. He then reaches out and takes the hand of a young girl who has just died, also crossing clean/unclean boundaries, restoring her to life. She is raised up (9:25) just as Jesus will be raised up (28:6). Two women pattern in their bodies key aspects of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, indicating that the reign-of-God movement is characterized by both women and men together with Jesus. It is a communal movement, a communal story constructed by communities of women and men and shaped by later communities of reception who heard it as their story also.

IV. TRADITIONS OF LEADERSHIP

The Matthean tradition of leadership has produced considerable tension. Within close textual proximity, two modes of leadership are reported—the single

⁵For a brief outline of this parallel, see Elaine Wainwright, "The Gospel of Matthew," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 673-674.

male leader of Matt 16:13-20 and the leadership of the community in 18:15-20. Associated with each is the commission to bind and loose (16:19; 18:18). Another mode of leadership is also visible in the story of Justa, the Canaanite woman. Rather than analyze her story,⁶ we can draw on the creative imagination evoked at the beginning of this essay and listen to Justa's own voice.

I am Justa, the woman from the coast of Syro-Phoenicia, whom the Matthean community called Canaanite. Now why did they do that to me? It seems that some in the community did all in their power to marginalize me in their telling of my story. I was fortunate that there were strong women leaders for whom I was a foreshadower. They struggled with others in their communities in the shaping of my story. Their struggle is still visible in the story which was finally incorporated into the community's gospel. My story also captures another struggle—that between myself and Jesus as I sought healing for my daughter.

Jesus was grounded in the religious and cultural mores of his context and to be faced by a gentile woman confronting him in the male public arena clearly challenged his vision. Some among the makers of the tradition have, however, made Jesus' response more severe than I remember it, presumably to support their position that would exclude any foreigners from the gospel community. Women shapers of the tradition have, however, struggled to represent my courage and in doing this they have also incorporated into my story their courageous leadership in the theological and liturgical tradition-making of their community. My struggle was for my daughter who was locked in a world that our culture named demon possession. The Matthean community has given me their voice. At times it is the voice of the dominant community giving me the metaphoric titles for Jesus that they were developing—*Kyrios* and Son of David. At other times it is the voice of the marginalized as I claim a right to the bread of the table. My voice, my debate with Jesus shapes a new tradition, the inclusion of those outside Judaism within the reign-of-God movement and the inclusion of women within its liturgical and theological tradition. The release of my daughter from bondage symbolizes the release of our daughters' daughters down through the ages from all that binds them, physically, socially, culturally, psychologically, racially, and religiously.

V. TRADITIONS OF DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Stories of women frame the Matthean communities' tradition-making around the death and resurrection of Jesus (26:6-13; 27:55-56, 61 and 28:1-10). Women are clearly central characters in the unfolding drama, together with the

⁶I have done this in a number of places—*Toward a Feminist Critical Reading*, 102-116, 217-247; "A Voice from the Margin: Reading Matthew 15:21-28 in an Australian Feminist Key," in *Reading from This Place*, vol. 2, *Social location and biblical interpretation in global perspective*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 132-153; and *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Re-reading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998) 84-100.

male disciples and male Jewish leaders whose stories also frame this story of Jesus' last days (see 26:1-2 and 28:16-20; 26:3-5 and 28:11-15). It is in these stories that the contrast between male and female responses to Jesus becomes most marked.

Marianne Sawicki has argued quite convincingly⁷ that the story of the anointing woman may have had its origins among upper-class hellenistic Jewish women in Jerusalem following the death of Jesus. She imagines these women drawing on their tradition of pouring out good things like sweets and nuts over the head of a guest to honor that person. Enactment of this tradition over the memory of their friend Jesus, who had just been shamefully crucified, was the beginning of restoration of his honor. Their re-membering of Jesus became focused in a single anointing woman as the story spread to male gatherings and to other women's gatherings where Jesus was likewise re-membered.

This story developed over decades as the memory of Jesus was restored and proclaimed in a variety of early Christian communities. It was incorporated into the Matthean gospel narrative as an introduction to the story of Jesus' passion. There are several elements of this story that require attention. First, the Matthean story-tellers have shaped the story such that the woman pours an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment over the head of Jesus (26:7). Such an action must surely have evoked reaction among some segments of the community, captured in the story perhaps by the indignation of the discipleship group. To anoint the head of a person was the role of prophets and priests, who anointed kings. The woman is characterized as prophet, a role more generally preserved for males but perhaps indicative of women's prophetic role in the early Christian communities—a role which may have been under threat by the end of the first century.

Second, Jesus interprets the woman's action in a way that highlights its threefold nature. Initially, the words of Jesus highlight the action—she has done a good deed [*ergon kalon*] to me (26:10). This evokes Jesus' own teaching in his last great parable: whatever is done to the least is done to me (25:40). The woman's action recognizes in Jesus, the one facing imminent death at the hands of politico-religious opponents, the least one to whom *diakonia* ought to be done. Such action places her among the new fictive kinship, named as "brothers" and created by the work of *diakonia* (25:40). Jesus' words also affirm the woman's prophetic recognition of the time or the *kairos* that was upon Jesus. This was the moment when he most needed the strengthening power of the poured-out expensive ointment. It was the woman who recognized this and acted upon her knowledge, not the named disciples. Finally, the words of Jesus interpret the woman's action as the anointing of Jesus for burial, a role normally carried out by women but acknowledged as the responsibility of disciples earlier in the gospel (14:12). This interpretation is affirmed later in the gospel when the journey of the women to the tomb is not to anoint the body since this has already been done. They go to "see" the tomb.

The closing verse of Matt 26:6-13 has been preserved in the shaping of the Matthean tradition. It is of extraordinary significance in women's traditioning in

⁷See note 3 above.

that it renders the memory of this woman's action at a "last supper" of Jesus, constitutive of the preaching of the gospel just as is the memory of another "last supper" where Jesus acts to break bread and drink wine with the gathered disciples. In the Matthean account of the second supper, however, there is no evocation of memory, just the account of the supper. For contemporary readers, it is important to note how one memory has become central to the Christian tradition while the other has almost been lost; it certainly has not been given the central significance that the words of Jesus give to it in the Matthean story.

Three other women—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee—appear in the closing scenes of the passion of Jesus (27:55-56). This tradition, which is also common to the Markan Gospel, may not have been formed by the Matthean community but has been preserved among its households in a particular way. The three women are "there" at the crucifixion of Jesus (27:55). There has been much speculation about the subsequent phrase "from afar" that characterizes their point of witness. One factor, often overlooked, is that this same phrase is used of Peter who follows the arrested Jesus "from afar" into the courtyard of the high priest (26:58). Peter's following from a distance leads to subsequent denial of Jesus (26:69-75); the women's looking on from a distance is followed by acts of fidelity by two of the named women—they keep watch over the tomb (27:61) and they go to see or witness the tomb on the first day of the week (28:1). The phrase "from afar" seems, therefore, to contrast Peter and the women at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, highlighting the women's fidelity.

The three women are also characterized as having "followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him" (27:55), two aspects that signify disciples of Jesus. Of these three discipleship women, the one who does not re-appear at the tomb is "the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (27:56). Her inclusion here is particular to the Matthean traditioning and may therefore have been the result of Matthean women's traditioning. Earlier in the gospel (20:20) it is "the mother of the sons of Zebedee" who asks Jesus for a place for her sons and who is asked by Jesus together with her sons if they can "drink the cup" (20:22). Together they answer "we can" (v. 23) but the two sons, James and John, forsake Jesus and flee with the other disciples (26:56) while the mother remains faithful with the faithful women at the place of crucifixion of their companion and friend Jesus.

Women of the Matthean egalitarian households visibly shaped the resurrection tradition of the empty tomb (see 28:1-10, especially vv. 9-10 in which Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who went to the tomb witnessed the earthquake, encountered the angel, and were commissioned to proclaim that Jesus had been raised [28:1-7] now encounter the risen Jesus). These women are commissioned by Jesus to undertake a mission of reconciliation to the male disciples who foresook Jesus—"go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me" (28:10). The women, as proclaimers of the resurrection and reconcilers of the eleven, begin the circular process that incorporates the commissioning of the eleven from a mountain in Galilee to make disciples of all nations, baptizing and

teaching. One wonders whether these combined traditions of resurrection in the closing chapter of the gospel were the outcome of male and female traditions in conflict, used to authorize or legitimate an elite male ministry, or whether they were seen as part of a circular process that underscored the ministries of women and men—all functioning in different ways as proclaimers of the resurrection, reconcilers, baptizers, and teachers of all that Jesus had commanded.

VI. CONCLUSION

In light of the above analysis of the text, it seems appropriate to evoke the Christian paschal imagination in an alternative mode to that which has shaped the analysis and to listen to the voice of some of the women tradition makers and tradition shapers of the Matthean community.

We are the voices of the women of the Matthean community who discovered that the reign-of-God movement changed our lives and that we were empowered to keep alive that change in the making and shaping of gospel traditions, especially those of our foresisters in the movement.

We weep now as we see your contemporary communities interpreting our community's story of Jesus through the kyriarchal lens of the final narrator/redactor. This perspective gradually replaced the more egalitarian spirit and praxis of our *collegia*-type gatherings in the homes of the women and men who emerged as our leaders.

Look how the story of *Mary* has been silenced! We had chosen those powerful foremothers—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba—to foreshadow the way that *Mary's* participation in the birth of Jesus subverted patriarchal familial structures. The impact of her story, however, was lost in the patrilineage and centrality of Joseph in the birth narrative. Imagine if her story had been told as we so often told it, how it could have lead to centuries of women's leadership rather than submission.

And our beacon of leadership, *Mary Magdalene*, whom we know as a leader among the apostles—why was she not named among the apostles included in the final commissioning to preach and teach? But some of our memories have not been blotted out. She is still remembered as among the first to witness the empty tomb, to be commissioned to proclaim that Jesus has been raised, and to encounter the risen Jesus.

Our voices, our traditions are also still inscribed in *Justa's* story. In her voice, our own is raised as she names Jesus, even with the dominant names. We too participated in the ongoing naming but ours has been all but lost. It is, however, her voice of struggle that mirrors most precisely our struggle, our struggle to maintain our place in the community's theologizing or naming of Jesus, to maintain our place in its emerging tradition of celebration in which the words of pleading of the psalms find expression. Her story was very significant for us. We invite you to listen to it anew amid women's struggles in your world and to add your voice to its re-telling in your world.

The story of *Christa*, the anointing woman, also captures many of our tradi-

tions and those of our Palestinian foresisters. We re-membered her as a woman of action, a woman of passion at the heart of and participating in the passion of Jesus. She was a woman of passion become compassion, and the very intimacy of her action placed us at the heart of the story of Jesus and empowered us to continue her *diakonia* of friendship and compassion. But you have not remembered her, have not remembered them, our foresisters. You have not always told the gospel story in memory of her and her sisters. And it is for this that we weep and have wept painfully down through the centuries. But now we see a glimmer of hope. Our stories are being reclaimed, brought to the foreground. You cannot again proclaim the gospel only through a kyriarchal lens. You must allow our voices to be heard, our names to be proclaimed, and our traditioning of Jesus and the reign-of-God movement to find a voice. You must tell our stories to our memory so that they contribute to the memory of Jesus just as we contributed to the making and shaping of that memory. If you continue to tell her tale in memory of her, their tales in memory of them, then we no longer need weep. We can rejoice that biblical communities into the twenty-first century will be communities of justice and freedom for all and that the stories and traditions which they make and shape will be told, in turn, in memory of them. ⊕