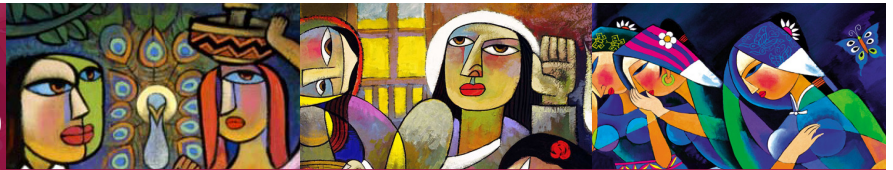


## WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP



# Jesus and Women



Martha & Mary. He Qi. Used with Permission.

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### Background

Scholars seeking to discover women's roles in late antiquity face formidable challenges. All history until the mid-20th century was written by men with preconceived notions about women. Philosophic treatises viewed females as created subordinate to males. Since women's primary roles were believed to belong to the household and to reproduction, they were often forbidden active roles in economic, cultural and religious life. In evaluating historical data, feminist biblical scholars and church historians now recognize the importance of differentiating between "gender ideology" and "the reality of women's lives." [Ute Eisen, p.3]

In seeking "the reality of women's lives," care must be taken to avoid portraying Jesus as liberating women from a Judaism that restricted and subordinated them any more than was the lot of all women in late antiquity. Patriarchy restricted both Jewish and Gentile women, but the extent of that restriction depended more on a woman's socioeconomic status, cultural context and geography than her religious affiliation. Jesus was an observant Jew. His movement arose from faith that just as God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, so God would act to remove Roman oppression and bring about a new time of justice and right relationship among nations and among people. Jesus' inclusive practice should be viewed as emerging from his Judaism, not apart from it.

This brochure seeks to make available in an "at-a-glance" format materials that fill many books written by renowned scholars. You are encouraged to peruse these for a more comprehensive treatment of this fascinating topic.

### Women in the Gentile World

All cultures of Jesus' time were patriarchal. Women were subordinated first to their fathers, then to their husbands. However, their socioeconomic status could vary markedly according to the degree of civil and inheritance rights each of their Mediterranean cultures permitted them.

Greece and Macedonia In 340 BCE, Demosthenes wrote: "Keep mistresses for the sake of pleasure, concubines for daily care of our person, wives to bear legitimate children and be faithful guardians of households." Only Greek wives were citizens with the right to vote. They had a limited right to own property apart from their dowry. Concubines and mistresses had no civil rights, though mistresses

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were educated to be the pleasurable soul-companions of their lovers. As in Rome, unwanted daughters and sons could be left on the hillside to die. Macedonian women fared better. They built temples, founded cities, engaged armies, and held fortresses. They were regents and co-rulers. Men admired their wives and named cities after them. Thessalonika was such a city, and here women were given inheritable civic rights. A Macedonian businesswoman, Lydia, founded the church at Phillipi after her conversion by Paul.

Egypt and Rome Egyptian women were juridically equal to men. They were buyers, sellers, borrowers, and lenders. They paid taxes, could initiate a divorce, and petition the government for support. The eldest daughter was permitted to be a legitimate heir. In Rome, the authority of the father was paramount. A Roman girl was "sold" in name into the hands of her future husband. Both daughters and sons were educated, boys until the age of seventeen, girls until thirteen when their marriage was normally arranged by their parents. A Roman woman could not conduct business in her own name, but she could enlist the help of a male relative or friend to serve as her agent. Women had inheritance rights and the right to divorce though they were not permitted to vote or hold public office. Nevertheless, wealthy Roman matrons had considerable power and influence because they were the de facto heads of households and business managers while their spouses were off fighting Caesar's wars or otherwise engaged in matters of state.

Christianity did not flourish among Palestinian Jews. Instead, it expanded rapidly in the Hellenist cultures surrounding the Mediterranean. This was due in no small part to the influence of wealthy Gentile women. Women's roles in Hellenist cultures influenced women's roles in the early church. Generally speaking, women had greater socioeconomic status in cultures with strong female deities (Aphrodite in Corinth, Artemis in Ephesus and Isis in Egypt). In virtually all Gentile cultures both women and men exercised leadership in religious worship.

## Women in Palestinian Judaism

Discovering the "realities of women's lives" in Palestine is fraught with complexity largely because until recently, much of the historical data about first century Judaism derived from later Rabbinic sources from the 2-4 century. However, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts and the Dead Sea Scrolls expanded our understanding of both early Christianity and first century Palestinian Judaism. The following summary portrait is derived from multiple sources.

Palestinian Hebrew women were among the poorest in the world in Jesus' day. This was due in no small part to Roman agricultural practices that divested the Israelites (particularly Galileans) of their ancestral lands and increasingly impoverished the population. Hebrew women were not allowed to divorce their husbands, but could be divorced for anything from burning the dinner (Hillel) to adultery (Shammai). In a culture in which women did not survive unless they were linked to the patriarchal household, it was disastrous to be divorced. Seen in this light, Jesus' proscription of divorce is markedly protective of women. The raising of the son of the widow of Nain is another example of Jesus' compassion for the poverty of a woman whose survival was threatened by the loss of her link to the patriarchal household. Most Hebrew women had minimal property rights. Theoretically women could inherit land, but in practice male heirs had precedence. Even if a woman did inherit property, her husband had the right to its use and its fruits.

A child was held to be Jewish only if the mother was Jewish. Most Jewish girls were betrothed by their fathers at a young age. Jewish women were ritually unclean while menstruating, a reality detailed at length in Leviticus. If she inadvertently touched a man while having her menses, he was obliged to undergo a purification ritual before worshipping at the temple. In Mark's gospel, the woman afflicted with a twelve-year hemorrhage could have been a social outcast, depending upon how strictly her co-religionists interpreted the purity laws. We see Jesus' lack of concern about ritual impurity in his healing of her after she courageously touched him despite the taboo.

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(Mk:25)

Women and men were segregated for worship in the Jerusalem Temple, which was destroyed by Rome in 70 AD. While women attended synagogue, we have no evidence that first century Palestinian Jewish women led worship. Whether a woman should be educated in the Torah was hotly debated. As a rule, only the Rabbis' wives were so educated. Women were not normally accepted as witnesses in Jewish law. A woman's primary sphere was in the home where they led table prayers and festival candle lighting ceremonies.

There are exceptions to the restrictions experienced by women in antiquity. Ross S. Kraemer's study of epigraphic, papyrological and archaeological sources found that in the second century, both women and men in the Jewish Diaspora (Jews who had their homes outside of Israel) held synagogal office. Women were not segregated in Diaspora synagogues and some had economic and religious independence.

### Women in the Gospels

Jesus' behavior toward women, even viewed through the androcentric lens of the Gospel texts, is remarkable. Jesus welcomed women into his closest discipleship: "After this he journeyed through towns and villages preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve accompanied him, and also some women... Mary called the Magdalene... Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who were assisting them out of their means." (Lk 8:1-5). Women were not named in ancient texts unless they had social prominence. Scholars believe the implication in this text is that wealthy women underwrote the Galilean mission. Jesus welcomed female disciples into his entourage to learn the ways of God, along with the male disciples. This was unusual since Jewish men did not normally speak in public to women outside their kinship circle, much less travel around the countryside with them.

The story of Martha and Mary is illustrative. Luke shows us Mary at Jesus' feet. One interpretation is that Mary has taken the place traditionally

reserved for male rabbinical students. Martha, as often happens even today among women when the rules of patriarchy are challenged, protests. But Jesus praises Mary's thirst to learn more about God: "It is Mary who has chosen the better part; it is not to be taken from her." (Luke 10:38-42). Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus challenge deep seated patriarchal assumptions: that only women bear the burden of sexual sin; that Samaritan and Canaanite women are to be shunned and discounted; and that prodigal sons are to be disowned. Instead, men are challenged to own their complicity in adultery; the Samaritan woman becomes a missionary bringing her whole town to belief in Jesus; the Canaanite woman's fierce love for her daughter succeeds in broadening Jesus' own understanding of to whom the Good News is sent; and the wayward son is welcomed home with a huge party thrown by a prodigal father.

Women's equal call to discipleship with their brothers is most evident in the Resurrection accounts, for it is upon the testimony of women that the proclamation of the Resurrection depends. All four Gospels show Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the Mother of James and Joseph, Salome and the other women disciples accompanying Jesus to his death; anointing and burying his body; viewing the empty tomb; and experiencing his risen presence. That the message of the Resurrection was first given to women is regarded by biblical scholars as compelling evidence for the historicity of the Resurrection accounts. Had these texts been fabricated by overzealous male disciples, they would not have included the witness of women in a society that rejected their legal witness.

### Women in the Earliest Churches

The early female disciples of Jesus assumed leadership in the earliest Christian Churches alongside their brothers. This is reflected in Paul's letters, the Acts of the Apostles, and other early Christian writings. In the last chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, ten of the 29 church leaders whose favor he seeks, are women. Phoebe, Paul's patroness at Cenchreae, and Prisca, (who, with her husband Aquila, was a prominent missionary)

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head the list. Paul's letters (excepting Timothy and Titus which were not written by him) are the earliest Christian manuscripts we have, and constitute strong historical evidence for gender balanced leadership in the infant church. This equality is reflected in the Galatian baptismal hymn: "There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28).



Fractio Panis. Fresco. Early 2nd Century.  
Catacombs of Priscilla.

The Book of Acts refers to "Phillip's prophetic daughters" (Acts 21:9-10). The early church historian Eusebius, attributes the apostolic origins of the provincial Asian churches to their ministry, thereby acknowledging that at least some women

were transmitters of apostolic tradition. What a pity that their names are lost to us! The Didache, an early worship manual, names prophets as the normal leaders of Eucharistic celebrations, which were often held in the homes of prominent women. The catacombs of Priscilla in Rome contain a second century fresco portraying such a Eucharist.

By the end of the first century the leadership of women was already meeting resistance: "A woman must learn in silence and be completely submissive. I do not permit a woman to act as teacher, or in any way to have authority over a man; she must be quiet.." (1:Tim). Nevertheless, archaeological, literary and epigraphical evidence confirm that female leaders flourished alongside male leaders well into the fourth century. By this time, Constantine had succeeded in using Christianity to unify the crumbling Roman empire. As Christianity became more mainstream, worship moved from the private space of house churches to public spaces. The leadership of women in public spheres violated honor-shame cultural customs of the Greco-Roman world. The inclusive, charismatic discipleship of equals which enhanced Christianity's rapid early growth slowly disappeared, only to re-emerge in the rise of religious communities which continued the prophetic tradition in Catholicism for over 2000 years. It is in this tradition that church reform organizations walk today.

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