

## Fact Sheet: Jesus and Women

“To be rejected...is every attempt...set in a direction contrary to evangelical justice and charity, such as, for example the use of the Bible to justify segregation, anti-Semitism or sexism...[and it is necessary] to avoid absolutely any actualization of certain texts of the New Testament which could provoke or reinforce unfavorable attitudes to the Jewish people.”<sup>1</sup> Describing Jesus as dealing with women in ways that are contrary to Jewish customs is one of those themes that “reinforce unfavorable attitudes to the Jewish people.” Unfortunately, that theme appears often in contemporary Christian writing<sup>2</sup> and is expressed in several common misrepresentations of the state of Jewish women and of Jesus’ interaction with them.

	<b>Misrepresentation</b>	<b>Correction</b>
1	At the time of Jesus, Jewish women had few roles apart from their homes and families.	Both the historical and the biblical record indicate that Jewish women participated in the economic, cultural, and religious aspects of life.
2	Jesus’ response to, and association with, women would have been considered scandalous by the Jewish standards of the time.	Jesus’ interactions with women follows what is known about the usual social interactions of that time and place. There is nothing unusual or revolutionary about them.
3	Women were restricted to the home and could not be seen in public.	Women were regularly present in synagogues and the Temple, in the marketplaces and the homes of friends.
4	Men were not allowed to talk with women.	They were and they did. Jesus’ speaking to women was not a cultural violation.
5	Women were not allowed to own property.	Women could and did own property.
6	Women were treated like chattel.	Women owned businesses, had freedom of travel, and had access to their own funds.
7	Jesus forbade divorce to protect women from simply being tossed out onto the street as Jewish law permitted.	Jewish women had marriage contracts ( <i>ketubot</i> ) to protect them financially in case of divorce. Forbidding divorce does not protect women in a violent situation.
8	Women were restricted because of purity laws regarding menstruation and childbirth.	Impurity prevented both women and men from entering the Jerusalem Temple, which would be a hardship only during the pilgrimage festivals.
9	Women were married at twelve years of age.	Most Jewish women in Judea and Galilee married in their late teens or early twenties.
10	Women could not serve as witnesses in court or teach Torah.	Women did both.
11	Pharisees marginalized women.	To the contrary, women served as patrons of Pharisees. The Mishnah mentions a woman who may be a “Pharisee.”

<sup>1</sup> *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Pontifical Biblical Commission, April 1993, IV,A,3.

<sup>2</sup> A quick internet search for terms such as “Jesus and women” yields such statements as “In His treatment of women, as in many other areas, Jesus of Nazareth was a radical contrast to the standards of His times,” “Jesus’s regard for women was much different from that of his contemporaries,” and, referring to the woman with the hemorrhage, “In her cultural context, the idea of someone unclean touching a holy rabbi like Jesus would have been scandalous and risky. According to the tradition of the day, Jesus would have had every right to react harshly toward her and dismiss her, maybe even kill her.”

## **Supplemental notes regarding these misrepresentations and their corrections:**

1. The status of Jewish women in Jesus' time: Despite living in a patriarchal society, Jewish women did have substantial agency. The Gospels name women who traveled with Jesus and his followers to Jerusalem and "provided for them out of their resources" (Mk 15:41, Mt 27:55, Lk 8:2-3), resources which were theirs to use as they chose. Martha and Mary hosted Jesus and apparently owned their home, nor were they reliant on their brother (Lk 10:38, Jn 11:1-3). The hemorrhaging woman, healed by touching the fringe of Jesus' cloak, used her own money to consult healers (Mk 5:25-26, Lk 8:43, Mt 9:20). Archaeological evidence, such as building structures and business documents, indicate that Jewish women inherited and managed property, ran businesses, and were not segregated from men in their synagogues. Like their counterparts in the rest of the Greco-Roman world, Jewish women participated in the economic, cultural and religious life.

2. Jesus's interaction with women was not unusual: Matthew's description of the crowd that Jesus fed in the wilderness (5000 men, not counting women and children – Mt 14:21) indicates that men and women were not segregated. When asked about the greatest in the Kingdom, Jesus calls a child over (Mt 18:2, Mk 9:36, Lk 9:47). Children, and their mothers, were not kept at a distance, but were part of those who surrounded Jesus (Mt 19:13, Lk 18:16). Jesus' parable of the lost coin assumes a woman has money and can invite friends and neighbors to celebrate (Lk 15:8-10). Women in Jesus' time were not confined to their houses, but worked in agriculture, textiles, pottery, cared for livestock, etc., as well as interacted with their neighbors and friends. Jesus' interaction with individual women (the Samaritan woman at the well, the woman with the hemorrhage, the Canaanite woman whose daughter Jesus cured, Martha and Mary, Mary Magdalen, etc.) follows what is known about the usual social interactions of that time and place. There is nothing unusual or revolutionary about their conversations.

3. The use of early rabbinic texts for understanding Jesus' attitude toward women: References to the later rabbinic corpus can provide useful background information, if used carefully. Christian commentators readily cite negative comments about women made by one or two rabbis, ignore all positive remarks, and then retroject the negative opinions into the earlier first-century context, and in the process make them normative for all Judaism. This practice is comparable to selecting anti-women phrases from the church fathers, ignoring the positive patristic evidence for women's agency, and then interpreting the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels through that negative patristic material.

## Women and the Jesus Movement

Although scholars differ regarding the precise form of women's roles in Jesus' ministry,<sup>3</sup> it is no longer possible to ignore the fact that women were an integral part of Jesus' proclamation that the Kingdom of God is at hand. The New Testament provides the best picture we have of Jewish women and Jewish life in the First Century.<sup>4</sup> The works of Josephus and Philo, as well as recent archeological findings, corroborate what can be gleaned from the New Testament. Dr. Amy-Jill Levine summarizes the picture of Jewish women in the Gospels in an article available on the Jewish Women's Archive:

The stories [of the New Testament] provide information about women's lives. Jewish women owned their own homes, were not restricted to 'women's quarters' but appear in public gatherings and had freedom to travel. They had access to their own funds, sought health care from physicians, participated in public rituals such as funerals, and worshiped in synagogues and in the Jerusalem Temple. They served as patrons, worked at baking and in the textile industry as well as in the sex industry, and purchased goods in the market. Jewish women chose to follow Jesus when their husbands did not.<sup>5</sup>

Today, it is also commonly accepted that the women who had supported Jesus in his public ministry were part of the early community. Furthermore, just as men who had not encountered Jesus in his public ministry joined the early movement, so, too, did women who heard and accepted the Gospel preached by Jesus' followers after the Resurrection. Initially these were women of the Jewish diaspora, where archeological evidence indicates that women were sometimes leaders of synagogues. As with all new social movements, as it grew larger, male leaders of the Christian communities rediscovered and enforced patriarchal mores. We see this in differences between the undisputed letters of Paul and those later Pauline letters of disputed authorship. Paul teaches that "there is not male and female" (Gal 3:28) and acknowledges the existence of women prophets (1 Cor 11:5), while household codes that limit women's, children's and slaves' activity have a prominent place in the disputed letters to the Colossians (3:18-4:1) and to the Ephesians (5:22-6:9). I Corinthians 14:33-34 commands that "women should keep silent in the church" and appears to contradict the reality of women prophets, but these verses are believed to be a gloss stemming from the tradition of I Timothy 2:11-15, one of the most disputed Pauline letters.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, John P. Meier claims women travelled about with Jesus and his male companions, but says they do not meet his definition of 'disciple': a preemptive call from Jesus, leaving home and family in response to that call, and staying despite the threat of persecution. He also says such a practice would have been scandalous in Jesus' time. (John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Volume III Companions and Competitors. New York, Doubleday, 2001, 73-80, 115-120.) On the other hand, Barbara Reid insists that service, hospitality, hearing and acting on the word are the defining qualities of discipleship; hence the women who followed Jesus do merit the title of disciple. ("The Happy Few Plus a Few More" in *The Figure of Jesus in History and Theology: Essays in Honor of John Meier*, ed. By Vincent T. M. Skemp and Kelley Coblenz. Washington, D.C. Catholic Biblical Association Quarterly Imprints, 1, 2020, p. 115-123.) Still another take comes from Amy-Jill Levine who rejects Meier's claim that women traveled as itinerants; she finds no hint of scandal in the Gospel texts. She does, however, agree that women did not experience a call to leave home or to anticipate hostility. "Women Itinerancy and Criteria of Authenticity," *The Figure of Jesus in History and Theology: Essays in Honor of John Meier*, 90-113.

<sup>4</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, video conference for Future Church, August 4, 2022. Recording available:

<https://futurechurch.org/women-in-church-leadership/second-temple-judaism/>

<sup>5</sup> Levine, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jewish-women-in-the-new-testament>.

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